

# Reading Beyond the Book: Examining a Critical Social Educator's Race & Equity Read-Aloud in an Early Childhood Classroom

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## Abstract

In this paper, the authors specifically consider what it means to engage as a critical white social educator of young, racially diverse children. They document how one third-grade teacher—Ms. Honey, a thirty-something white woman—used diverse books as a springboard to cultivate a more critical curriculum. The authors demonstrate how, as the focal teacher centered on pressing and historical social issues—including systemic racism—in her curriculum, classroom, and community, she also re-learned (hi)stories herself. In the findings, the authors demonstrate how Ms. Honey carefully led children through a read-aloud within an integrated social studies and literacy unit. The authors frame Ms. Honey's actions as a critical social educator and, in doing so, they highlight the messy, seemingly imperfect work required to engage as a critical social educator.

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## Introduction

In this paper, we specifically consider what it means to engage as a critical white social educator of young, racially diverse children. We document how one third-grade teacher—Ms. Honey<sup>1</sup>, a thirty-something white woman—used diverse books as a springboard to cultivate a more critical curriculum. As a critical social educator, Ms. Honey did this because she understood classrooms are not neutral spaces, nor are teachers (or their actions) apolitical

(Vasquez et al., 2013). As we describe, Ms. Honey not only centered on pressing and historical social issues—including systemic racism alongside class and gender—in her curriculum, classroom, and community, but she also re-learned (hi)stories herself. Like other critical social educators, Ms. Honey sought to be a teacher activist and practice what she was teaching (Picower, 2012). In this paper, we frame Ms. Honey's actions as a critical social educator. We demonstrate how she carefully led children through a read-aloud within an

integrated social studies and literacy unit. In doing so, we considered the following question: How did a critical social educator use children's literature as a vehicle to discuss race and equity?

We first detail the research we see our work in conversation with and, in turn, how such scholars informed our approach. We next provide in-depth details about the research site and participants because we understand the context of classrooms as vital to the work of critical social education. Then, we turn more fully to a shared read-aloud, which exemplifies the ubiquity of politics in classrooms and our understanding of teaching and learning as value-laden tasks (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005). Simultaneously, we use the class's discussion about the book to emphasize some of the messy, seemingly imperfect work required to engage as a critical social educator.

### Literature Review

Nearly sixty years of research encourages teachers to read diverse communities' stories and engage young children in critical discussions about racial justice and equity (Bishop, 1990; Larrick, 1965). However, too often, "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) depict whole communities as monoliths. Many stories depicted in children's literature perpetuate misinformed stereotypes (Tschida et al., 2014). Contemporary critical scholars provide explicit examples of how children's texts can reinscribe inaccuracies. For instance, Zapata et al. (2019) detailed how two picture books fell short in providing a 'real' portrayal of how enslaved Black individuals lived. Because the books glossed over hardships enslaved Black persons faced, the books did little "to counter the predominant depictions of the smiling, happy slaves" but instead typified stereotypes (Zapata et al., 2019, p. 27).

Other scholars have also questioned the happy endings and racial unity depicted in picture books (Fontanella-Nothom, 2019; Kohl, 1994; Rodriguez & Braden, 2018). For instance, Kohl (1994) suggested too few children's texts take up racism as a critical issue and how those that do, conclude with a happy ending. Similarly, in their discussion of immigration-themed texts, Rodriguez & Braden (2018) argued that happy endings misinform children because they do not address issues like immigration as persistent, ongoing, or challenging to resolve. The researchers described how one text oversimplified the immigration journey and naturalization process, leaving the children who read the text unaware of the difficulties involved in this lengthy and complicated process. Contrastingly, Rodriguez & Braden (2018) argued that certain texts have the ability to discuss the realities of immigration and hardships faced by Latinx children and families. Specifically, in their analysis of the text *Somos Como las Nubes/ We Are Like the Clouds* (Argueta, 2016), they argued the text opened opportunities for children to discuss the realities of immigration, in part, because it captured the emotions experienced by children who made the treacherous journey along the border. For example, in this text, one child described sadness over missing their family, stating, "I remembered my mother, my brothers, my sisters. Who knows when I will see them again. I look at the sky and think, we are like the clouds" (Argueta, 2016). This picturebook demonstrated the power of diverse texts to accurately discuss the immigration journeys and experiences of Latinx children and families (Rodriguez & Braden, 2018).

Like these scholars, we argue early childhood educators must incorporate historically accurate literature about racism. We suggest this is especially important because

these books can provide space for young children to share their knowledge, their experiences, and their questions (Rodriguez & Braden, 2018). As we argue, we see diverse picture books as one tool critical social educators can use to begin conversations with children that reflect marginalized persons' experiences in meaningful ways. Consequently, critical social educators are responsible for carefully selecting texts and ensuring children's understanding of social issues is not static or superficial, but, like the status of the critical social educators themselves, they are ever evolving.

### Methods & Modes of Inquiry

Drawing on data Cassie generated during the 2016-2017 academic year as a part of a year-long ethnographic case study, for this paper, we initially examined a series of 15 read aloud discussions in a public elementary school in the Midwestern US. Annually, 350 children in grades 1 through 4 from the neighborhood attended Community School J (CSJ). Many spoke languages other than English. The official school reports identified nearly 48% of students as Children of Color (36% African American, 9% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Other). These same reports identified the remaining 52% of children as white. CSJ's student body, in many ways, paralleled broader national demographics (Taylor, 2014). Likewise, the 22 children in Ms. Honey's class represented various backgrounds as seven children self-identified as white, five as Black/African American, four as mixed/bi-racial, two as Asian American, one as Asian, one as Latino, one as Mexican American, one as Mexican, and one as Muslim.

With 12 years of teaching experience, Ms. Honey was a recognized leader in CSJ and the district. Her sustained success on standardized measures provided her curricular freedom.

Thus, after the 2016 presidential election—in which Republican Donald J. Trump sparked “hate violence, bullying, before and after the election” (Potok, 2017, n.p.), Ms. Honey questioned what she could do to support the children in her class. Ms. Honey—as a 30-something, white, cisgender, monolingual, US-born woman—opted to deviate from the shared grade-level plans for teaching persuasive writing to tackle more pressing social issues with her students (Wessel-Powell et al., 2019).

Cassie cultivated a relationship with the CSJ community over her five years as a researcher in the school. Cassie's identity as a cisgender, white, monolingual, US-born woman in her early 30s allowed her to easily integrate into the professional community because her physical appearance mirrored the majority of faculty. Although Cassie generated data in the larger study, she asked Anam, an undergraduate research assistant, to help transcribe the read-aloud conversations. In doing so, Anam—a trilingual, Pakistani-Canadian, and Muslim cisgender woman in her early 20s—became especially interested in Ms. Honey's facilitation of the discussions, noting they were mostly absent from her own schooling experiences.

Cassie used ethnographic methods (Emerson et al., 2011) to generate data. She engaged the 22 children in multiple, semi-structured interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). She audio-/video-recorded daily lessons on the four days she visited CSJ each week and collected lesson artifacts produced during the unit. Working with Anam, Cassie transcribed the daily lesson recordings and read across the transcripts to identify salient themes (Miles et al., 2014). We synthesized how Ms. Honey engaged the children using read-alouds. We noted particular instances wherein we interpreted Ms. Honey's actions as those of a critical social educator.

### About the Integrated Unit

One of Ms. Honey's goals for the unit was to ensure children knew they had a voice and could participate in conversations about social issues. She wanted them to be activists and empathists. Thus, lesson plans centered around an idea promoted online that #kidscanteachus, or put simply, that children have much they can teach adults and the teaching role must not only reside with grown-ups. In practice, this meant that Ms. Honey incorporated stories about child activists from across the globe into the daily morning meeting. Some of the books she read aloud told stories about activists of all ages and from across time. For instance, children who were part of larger social movements within the US like Claudette Colvin, a 12-year-old Black girl who famously participated in the Civil Rights Movement, were discussed alongside more recent leaders like 10-year-old Alanna J. Wall, a Black girl from Atlanta, who spearheaded the non-profit Polished Girlz as a means to uplift chronically ill children. Across such stories, Ms. Honey encouraged learners to understand the overall idea that children are valuable members of society. She emphasized that children can influence the world through their actions, and, on large and small scales, they can bring about change in their communities.

It seemed to us that, as much as possible, Ms. Honey drew children's attention to issues of race and equity and the rationale as to why such changes were necessary. We did not see Ms. Honey shy away from conversations related to systemic racism. Instead, we noted that she called children's attention to such issues through the books she read. Yet, Ms. Honey's actions as a teacher committed to critical social education were still evolving—her words were imperfect, and her framing of issues was

sometimes even messy. In choosing to share the story of Ms. Honey, we hope to showcase the discomfort that frequently accompanies race discussions with young children, particularly for white teachers.

### About the Read Aloud

Levinson's (2017) book, *The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist*, detailed how a young Black girl named Audrey Faye Hendricks became the youngest known child to be arrested at the Birmingham Children's Crusade.<sup>2</sup> The Crusade occurred on two consecutive days (May 2 and 3) in 1963—an event in which a thousand children opted out of class to march from the Sixth Street Baptist Church to the city's downtown center. Levinson's (2017) story depicted some of the injustices faced by Black Americans due to segregation laws by highlighting the actions of Audrey and her Black peers who took to the streets. Whereas the vibrant illustrations in the story shed light on children's inspiring and heroic actions during the Civil Rights Movement, they did not fully account for the violent ways white adults (e.g., police officers and others) assaulted the community's youth. Instead of accounting for the brutal force white adults used against children to stop them in their tracks, the book forwarded a more triumphant message of why children landed in juvenile hall in their effort to fight racism, inequality, and injustice.

### Complicating (Hi)Stories of "Right" and "Wrong"

Early in the read-aloud, Ms. Honey strategically focused the third-grade children's attention on the historical role children in the Birmingham Children's Crusade played in fighting against racial injustices. For example, Ms. Honey highlighted that Audrey, like other

children at the march, persisted in calls for change to systematically racist laws, even as the police arrested children. Ms. Honey illuminated for children that Audrey and her peers did not wish to go to jail, but—as Ms. Honey stated—“It’s that she [Audrey] wants to stand up for what’s right.”

Continuing with her explanation, Ms. Honey clarified children’s preconceived notions about why police arrest people (i.e., for breaking laws) and who goes to jail (in the children’s minds, adults). For instance, Ms. Honey challenged children in her class to think differently by telling them that Audrey’s parents, much like the children’s own caretakers, “wouldn’t want her to get arrested for doing a bad thing.” After asking children to empathize with Audrey’s familial relations, Ms. Honey disrupted common understandings about the rationale for getting arrested. She reframed the action Audrey and her peers took while also contextualizing the situation. Ms. Honey remarked, “But her [Audrey] marching for her rights isn’t a bad thing. She was doing a brave thing. Of course, no parent wants their kid to go to jail for breaking the law, or stealing, but right now, in this time [1963], it was illegal for a Black person to go places, to do many things.” As highlighted here, Ms. Honey was deliberate in ensuring children understood that, by protesting and, consequently, being arrested, Audrey and her peers in the Birmingham Children’s Crusade were actively working against racist laws of segregation.

Ms. Honey emphasized particular moments by asking her class questions or offering additional contextualization or details. One example of how Ms. Honey extended the discussion was about why the parents might allow their children to participate in an event when they were likely to get injured or go to jail. After a bit of questioning and thinking aloud

from the children, Ms. Honey paused and asked them to consider if it was fair how police and white people treated Audrey, her family, and other Black community members. As the children’s resounding exclamation of “No!” echoed in the classroom, Ms. Honey extended her initial question by providing the children with more information.

“That because of the color of your skin, you [Black people] can’t touch what we [white people] touch? That’s what people believed. Not all people, but some,” Ms. Honey explained. In her comments, Ms. Honey reiterated the basic premise of segregation. She highlighted how society’s structure could dictate what a person could do, even what he/she/they could touch, based on someone’s skin color. In our reflection, we wondered what might have been possible if Ms. Honey had paused the discussion to share primary source materials with the children. For example, how might the children have considered Ms. Honey’s comments differently if she had shown images of “whites only” signs at places and on objects children often come into contact with, such as on public swimming pools or over water fountains? In what ways might this concretize the wretchedness of white supremacy for the children? What alternative avenues for conversation might an examination of primary sources such as these have provoked?

### *Challenging Grand Narratives*

In our (Cassie and Anam) iterative conversations about Ms. Honey’s responses to the children and the text, we recognized another instance wherein we wondered whether drawing children’s attention to specifics might have changed classroom interactions. As Ms. Honey continued in the book discussion, for example, she stated, “And there were these laws. And they [Civil Rights

activists] were trying to come up with ways that would make people change. And they were getting desperate because things weren't getting better...they would have to do something big. Because things aren't changing." While the grand narrative Ms. Honey presented alluded to Jim Crow laws and notable challenges to them, Ms. Honey did not dive deep into the historical period's specifics. Instead, she seemingly glossed over the ways white people literally and explicitly wrote white supremacy into law. Together, we (Cassie and Anam) wondered what might have been different if Ms. Honey had more fully unpacked Jim Crow-era laws with the children. What might have been possible if Ms. Honey had more deeply discussed the laws, how the police enforced them, and even how these laws' sentiments linger still today?

In pausing our retelling of the class event here, we do not wish to criticize the in-the-moment actions of Ms. Honey. Instead, we offer this scenario as a teachable moment for other critical social educators to understand the necessity of discussing racism and segregation with young learners. Ms. Honey wanted to trouble children's initial notions about what it means for some individuals to "break" the law by emphasizing that some people sacrificed their freedom, and even their lives, to work toward a more equitable and racially just society. While she encouraged children to think critically about the implications of "following" the law without question (e.g., being "good") and what they might gain from considering the arrest of Audrey and the other children as an activist action, she stopped short from going into specifics with the children.

Even though Ms. Honey did not always take a deep dive into the historical context or make specific connections herself to events related to the Civil Rights Movement in this read-aloud

discussion, there were instances wherein children made connections of their own without her prompting. Sometimes, these connections were to other (hi)stories with which they were familiar, as when a child suggested Audrey and the other children's activist stances were similar to that of Ruby Bridges, whom they had learned about earlier in the academic year.

### Unpacking (Hi)Stories of Hate

As we listened to the young learners' comments, we noted how children made sense of Audrey's importance and her peers' actions to fight against unfair segregation laws. This theme became more apparent as the children continued to read about how children and adults alike protested in the streets. In the post-reading discussion, children questioned how white people could be so full of hate. Following up on a child's comment about a previous day's reading that discussed segregation in California schools, another child called attention to the books' mention of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Taking heed of the child's noticing, Ms. Honey agreed that "the Ku Klux Klan are very hateful people." When another child queried where KKK members learned to hate like this, Ms. Honey responded by recalling her encounters with learning about the white supremacist group, stating,

Honestly, I can't even tell you because when I learned about them [KKK] in my history classes in high school, I just couldn't even understand how anyone could be that hateful and do the things that they did. Yeah, and I still feel like there's no good reason for what they did. All their actions are so bad that there is never a good reason.

Here, Ms. Honey intentionally shared her personal experiences and perspectives of the KKK as a hateful and violent group. At the same time, our distance from the "in-the-momentness" of this conversation also allowed us to offer insights into ways she could have





handled the conversation differently. Some of the shifts are perhaps minor adjustments to her language, like naming the KKK as a terrorist organization rather than only describing the group as hateful. For some educators, these minor shifts in language may require a great deal of self-education about historical events and groups to prepare for teaching about racism and how white people seek to maintain power.

Other changes would require a more radical approach than the one she initially took in this read-aloud. For instance, we wondered how this conversation may have shifted course if Ms. Honey had intentionally called children's attention to how issues of racism, white supremacy, and hate presented in the text endure still today. How might the conversation have developed if Ms. Honey had shared signs or symbols of such groups (historically and in the contemporary era)? How might sharing such images have alerted children to how white supremacist groups like the KKK or far-right organizations like the Proud Boys continue to impose violence on Communities of Color? In turn, how could Ms. Honey have complicated the happy ending presented in the Levinson (2017) text and false notion that the US is a 'post-racial' society through her instruction? Because we finalized this article in the early days of 2021 after white supremacists stormed the US Capitol, the need to discuss less blatant acts of racism alongside those that are more explicit feels all the more imperative.

### *Questioning Actions of Community "Helpers"*

Together, we (Cassie and Anam) have brainstormed several ways Ms. Honey could have extended her work with her young learners to recognize explicit parties or laws as racist. Simultaneously, however, in Ms. Honey's read-aloud of the Levinson (2017) text as in

other discussions, children seemed to be doing some of this work on their own. One notable theme that arose throughout the read-aloud sessions related to children's complicating the role and definition of 'community helpers.' Typically, in early childhood education, police and firefighters are framed as 'community helpers' alongside medical professionals and, often, teachers. In standardized curriculum and across early childhood broadcast programs, children learn these are professionals they can go to when they need assistance, like when someone is hurt or if the child is lost.

However, the perspective of community helpers mentioned above remains undergirded by notions of whiteness and, in turn, limits understanding about the risk posed by these 'community helpers' to particular populations, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. While Ms. Honey did not call attention to this paradox, throughout the post-reading discussion, the children in Ms. Honey's class foregrounded how white adults physically harmed the Black children in the story. Specifically, children noted how police arrested and jailed children and how firefighters turned on the children at the march.

For instance, at the close of the reading, Ms. Honey asked what actions white people took in the text. George—a white boy—raised his hand and shared, "the policemen hit them [Black persons]." Adding to this noticing, Katie—a white girl, stated that she noticed the police also arrested children "just for marching in the streets." The children's observations of the physical assault by white police on Black lives depicted in the story mirrored more contemporary images broadcast on television. Children related the book's protests to news images in spring 2017 of demonstrators demanding more equitable (im)migration policies. Many of the children in Ms. Honey's

class expressed frustration and disbelief about racism facilitated by legislative policy (i.e., Jim Crow laws). Others noted that what they read about resembled similar race-based hate and related counter-protests they witnessed on the news (i.e., Black Lives Matter marches, demonstrations against Republican policies like the border wall with Mexico, and the #MuslimBan).

The focal text highlighted the dual-roles police officers often take up as they ‘serve and protect’ communities using whatever force they feel is justified at the moment. Additionally, the images and words from Levinson (2017) seemed to draw children’s attention to another set of community helpers. Here, we turn to the words of Gabe, a Mexican American boy, as his comments drew attention to one such example.

**Gabe:** I was surprised that the firemen, like, used the hoses to blow...

**Ms. Honey:** Yeah, to blow children away.

**Gabe:** Exactly! Used them [firehose] to blow them [Black children] away.

Firefighters appear less frequently on the news for race-based acts of violence in our contemporary era than do police officers. Thus, the ‘news’ that firefighters also intentionally inflicted harm upon Audrey and her peers was perhaps even more striking for the children in Ms. Honey’s class. Moreover, we contend that the excessive force in the illustration stood in stark contrast to what children understood the role of firefighters to be. We suggest this, in part, because the firefighters’ ‘tool’ issued to them to ‘serve and protect’ children and their families from fire (i.e., high-pressured fire hose) is the very tool they used against Black members of the community.

In later moments of the same conversation, Ms. Honey called children’s attention to this juxtaposition. As she inquired about what “we think a firefighter’s job is,” the children shouted with confidence that it was to keep people safe

and, specifically, “away from fire.” Similarly, Ms. Honey then prompted the children to discuss what police do as part of their job. Again, children noted that these community helpers are supposed to “keep people SAFE!”

In connecting the conflicting archetype of firefighters to that of police, Ms. Honey then tried to emphasize how the children’s understanding of what community helpers ‘do’ contrasted with their portrayal in the Levinson (2017) text. In particular, Ms. Honey called attention to how the class’s collective understanding was that firefighters and police were, in many respects, to be on the side of the most vulnerable members of a community. Thus, reading about an instance wherein these parties deliberately turned against the children could be, as Ms. Honey stated, “really surprising to hear.”

“Who does that?!” Gabe cried out in response just before Ian—a white boy—exclaimed, “They [firefighters and police] were hurting and hitting people!” A series of children then chimed into the conversation, questioning the firefighters’ actions and the police. Likely, for some children, and in particular, Children of Color, the cautionary tales about ‘community helpers’ may be one that was not, as Ms. Honey remarked, “surprising.” Still, as we noted, many children from varied racial backgrounds expressed disbelief in the preceding moments about how white ‘community helpers’ harmed their Black constituents.

In sharing this brief glimpse of the conversation, we wish to highlight three ideas for our readers about what it means to be a critical social educator. First, we applaud Ms. Honey for not shying away from the children’s desire to complicate the intersection of ‘community helpers’ and race. Critically discussing ‘community helpers’ was not an element of her original ‘plan’ for her lesson.



Still, she readily followed the children's noticings and line of questioning. Second, we share these moments to offer additional questions about whether and how 'planning' for this part of the conversation may have altered the discussion itself. How might children's noticings have been expanded if Ms. Honey incorporated primary source materials such as photographs? What other questions might children have posed if secondary source materials, such as interviews with participants from the 1963 event, had been introduced? With time and space from the original lesson and informed by more recent events, we (Cassie and Anam) think such considerations are likely to have garnered even richer understandings for both Ms. Honey and her students.

Our final reason for detailing how Ms. Honey and the children critically considered 'community helpers' is because such constructions are rarely troubled, especially in early childhood education. We find this issue unsettling, particularly because, in more recent decades, numerous historians and scholars have called attention to the fact that police first evolved from slave patrols. As US society grew, police remained tasked with ensuring "social order" was maintained, often through aggressive and violent force (i.e., white, wealthy parties were untouchable while poor white and enslaved Black communities remained controlled). Across time and still today, many non-Black police frequently use whatever means they feel are necessary against Black bodies, including against Black children. For instance, in our home community of Toronto, a 6-year-old Black girl said to be 'acting violently' was wrestled to her school floor by police. The police then cuffed her hands and ankles. She was kept in this position for nearly 30 minutes until paramedics arrived on the scene (CBC News, 2020). How might expanding our

understanding of the purpose of police shift paradigms about who 'community helpers' are and how they help? How might we then begin to reconsider how we present such discussions to children so that, as critical social educators, we can ensure they critically examine the world around them?

In our iterative listening of the class discussions, we began to see some of the children's comments as evidence of their emerging understanding of Black people's enduring lack of freedoms and the undermining of their personhood. In an informal conversation with Cassie near the end of the unit, Ms. Honey wondered aloud what might have been possible if the Black Lives Matter movement had been the unit's focus. Mainly, Ms. Honey's query was because of the connections children made between the historical stories they read about the Civil Rights Movement (like the Levinson text) and present-day happenings. We understood Ms. Honey's reflective stance as a practitioner to be an essential characteristic of what it meant for her to evolve as a critical social educator—she desired to continuously cultivate her racial awareness and practices to benefit the children she taught.

### *Cultivating Critical Thinking and Reflection as a Critical Social Educator*

Ms. Honey's work as a critical social educator evolved throughout the integrated unit. As the read-alouds progressed, we noticed how Ms. Honey developed new ways of thinking and initiating conversation amongst her students. She thought critically about how specific prompts would start critical conversations amongst her students. Moreover, she was motivated by the desire to foster a classroom community where children would feel comfortable sharing their experiences and

perspectives on critical issues around race. Thus, she was reflective in developing her practices.

Ms. Honey seemed to engage in the process of *unlearning*, as she attempted to interrogate her assumptions about issues of race, racism, and social justice. A term coined by Kohl (1994), the theory of unlearning is a technique that supports individuals in developing more positive ways of thinking and supports changes of consciousness in opposition to dominant forms of oppression. A fundamental tenet of unlearning is becoming aware of certain understandings or practices that have previously gone unquestioned (Kohl, 1994). Ms. Honey actively engaged in this unlearning process as the read-alouds progressed, which involved her being mindful of her own identity as a white, cis-gendered woman working with a classroom of racially diverse students.

As a critical social educator, she understood that teachers must create space for children to engage in critical conversations because racial injustice issues are ongoing. In our review of the data, we viewed picture books as an essential vehicle for children to discuss critical social issues such as race. Much of this was possible because of Ms. Honey's commitment and ability to foster a safe classroom community and cultivate a critical curriculum. Less explicit, however, were the instructional choices Ms. Honey made about what to do when children related conversations to the present-day realities many individuals and communities face.

Behind the scenes, Ms. Honey did a great deal of homework to read about the issues encapsulated in the picture books she shared, evidence of her unlearning process. She knew she needed to be well-versed in the topics to facilitate a meaningful conversation. Her ultimate goal in the integrated unit was to

connect the read-aloud stories to contemporary social issues and white supremacist policies that flooded the airwaves in late spring 2017. At the time, both Ms. Honey and Cassie were trying to stay abreast of the numerous problems (i.e., police brutality, immigration policies, various protests in response to executive orders). They often discussed these issues as they saw each other daily. From the early stages of planning the unit through to the final debriefs with Cassie, Ms. Honey consistently reflected on how to best share stories of suffering and injustice meaningfully rather than superficially. She understood that children *can* reflect on literature in critical ways. She deeply believed that stories could cultivate children's understanding that their lives were part of the larger human experience (Bishop, 1990).

As critical scholars, we must acknowledge that *The Youngest Marcher* (Levinson, 2017) is by no means a perfect text to use when discussing the Civil Rights Movement or issues of anti-Black racism. In many ways, the text's emphasis on happy endings keeps children ignorant of the harsh realities of sustained white supremacy in the US. As Rodriguez & Vickery (2020) noted, the text promotes a false narrative of integration as the solution to segregation. For example, Levinson's (2017) emphasis on a happy ending depicting Black and white children eating together in the same restaurant flattened the experiences of racial violence and danger faced by Black communities (Rodriguez & Vickery, 2020).

We agree with such critiques of the text, and they informed our interpretation of the data. Still, we focused on the book here for two reasons. First, the book was new and received much acclaim on the national level at the time of the study. Because Ms. Honey and Cassie trusted these awarding bodies, they opted to use the text without considering critiques.

However, this oversight on their behalf is also why we find it essential to discuss the text in this paper. Because the book was not read in isolation (i.e., Ms. Honey read the book with the children), Ms. Honey could address children's misconceptions and questions. Importantly, because she read it alongside many other books about marginalized communities and the Civil Rights Movement, we wanted to highlight how an imperfect book can still forward essential conversations about inequitable systems of oppression. In recognition of this, we explore how Ms. Honey sought critically to discuss racial violence experiences with her students.

Ms. Honey probed students to think deeper about the inequalities faced by children worldwide and throughout history, especially Black and Brown children in the US. Often, she encouraged children to critically consider the implications of racist laws on historical protagonists in their shared read-alouds while also relating these to present-day politics. As the 2021 attack on the Capitol and racial justice protests across the globe in summer 2020 demonstrated, racial inequities (and related reforms) are rooted historically. Therefore, conversations must be ongoing.

## Conclusion

We entered this study with the understanding that critical social educators play

a vital role in helping children understand the complexity of their world. When Ms. Honey engaged children in her class with read-alouds about critical issues, she also positioned herself as a learner. Being a critical social educator involves being vulnerable with others, including children. In doing so, critical social educators will simultaneously foster a space to facilitate dialogue with children that validates their thoughts and experiences. Boler & Zembylas (2003) noted that engaging in critical inquiry often means encouraging children to reevaluate their perceptions and worldviews. Their notion of the "pedagogy of discomfort" is an approach that engages students in critical reflection about their assumptions and emotional responses to reveal complicity and privilege with the dominant ideology (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p.111). However, as evident through Ms. Honey's teaching and learning methods, critical social educators must first engage in critical reflection to create and hold a space for children to tackle these nuanced conversations about racism and discrimination (Fontanella-Nothom, 2019). *This*, we argue, exemplifies what a critical social educator is and what they can do.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. For additional information about the event, we encourage readers to visit the Smithsonian website for the National Museum of African American History & Culture (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/>) or, for classroom resources, visit the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/film-kits/mighty-times-the-childrens-march>).

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