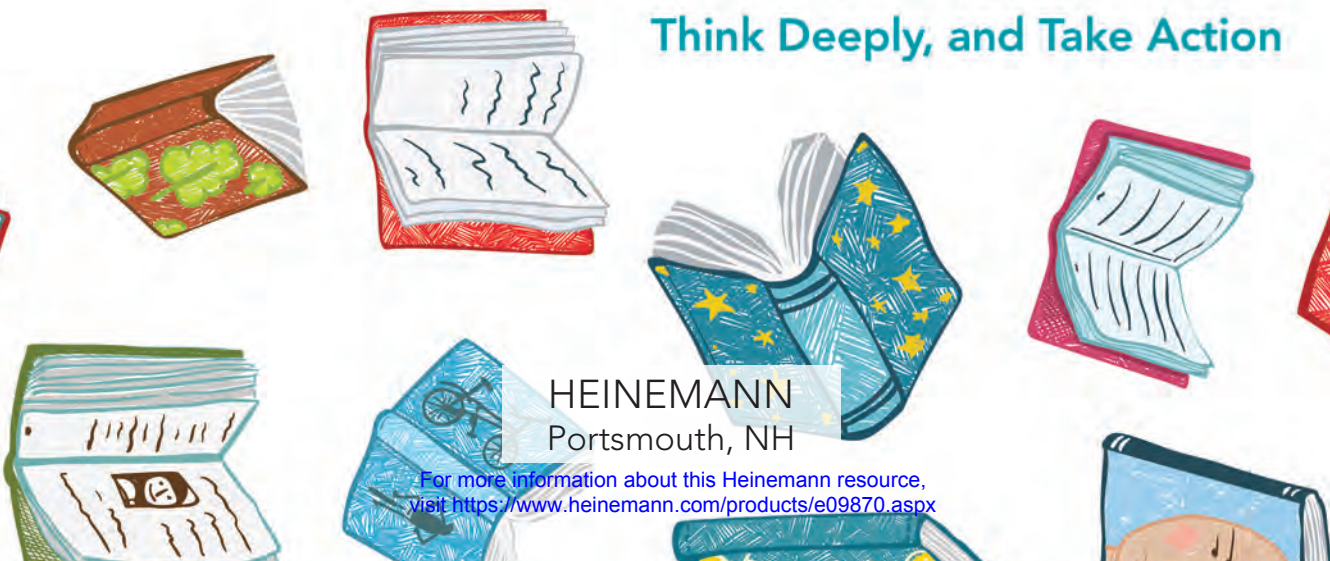


LESTER L. LAMINACK    KATIE KELLY



# Reading to Make a Difference

Using Literature to  
Help Students Speak Freely,  
Think Deeply, and Take Action



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This book is dedicated to those individuals who make a difference every day by taking an active stance to question the world as it is and work toward more just images of what it can be.

Thank you for making this world a kind, caring, supportive community for our one human family.

**Lester L. Laminack  
and Katie Kelly**

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## INTRODUCTION

# Bridging Understanding of Ourselves and Others

**W**hen the reader stands in his own worldview, unable to see or conceive of any other perspective, a book can be a bridge. The right book, at the right time, can span the divide between where the reader stands in this moment and alternate views, new ideas, and options not yet considered. As a bridge, the book enables a reader to span the divide between his current thoughts, views, beliefs, or attitudes and new ideas or insights that may lead to critical thought and new ways of thinking about and living in the world. As with any bridge, we can cross over and never return, or we can move back and forth from one side to the other at will. A bridge enables us to move freely between two perspectives. To cross over does not mean we leave all behind, but it does give us new insights and new ways of thinking, when we return to our point of origin. A bridge gives us the ability to gain new perspectives, the freedom to think for ourselves, and the power to choose what to do with our new insights.

Books as bridges enable the reader to speak freely, think deeply, and take action as a change agent. As bridges, books offer the reader an opportunity to connect to distant places, different views, unique people, and new experiences. In doing so, the reader develops a deeper understanding of himself, of others, and of the world around him.





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Our students are at the heart of our classroom and instructional decisions. Think about each of your students. How do you make their experiences in the classroom comfortable and safe based on your knowledge of them?

Can they see themselves reflected in the literature included in your classroom library?

Do they find characters that look like them? Talk like them? Act like them?

Do they find characters that struggle with similar issues and share similar joys?

Do they meet characters that live in similar neighborhoods or dwellings?

Are the family dynamics in the books similar to their own?

Can they recognize the communities, customs, and lived experiences?

When readers find reflections of themselves in literature, they are more likely to feel both visible and valued and are therefore more engaged in the reading experience. When students have these experiences with literature, Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) refers to those books as mirrors.

## Books as Mirrors

*The more choices we have the more we are able to be our authentic selves.*

—Lesléa Newman

Bella, a first-grade student, became increasingly frustrated when she noticed that most of the female characters in the books she read were princesses or conformed to traditional gender stereotypes such as dancing, playing with dolls, or simply loving the color pink. "Why can't there be more girl characters like me?" Bella wondered. With the help of her family, Bella soon began to discover books that broke gender stereotypes. For instance, Bella connected with books like *Isabella: Girl in Charge* by Jennifer Fosberry; *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, by Andrea Beaty; and *Not Every Princess* by Jeffrey Bone and Lisa Bone, all of which depict females as individuals capable of

taking a stand and making changes in the world. These books became mirrors for Bella as she saw characters more like herself who stray from traditional gender roles.

Perhaps our first mirrors, the ones that first influence our identity, are the faces of our caregivers. Our sense of self and our notions of who we are and what is right and just are shaped throughout our lives. Those early mirrors may also include the foods we eat, the music we hear, or the ways we and those around us speak. They show what is valued and cherished, what is undesirable and rejected, and whom we can trust and whom we cannot. Our early mirrors reflect and help form our emerging sense of justice and equity, fairness and equality, responsibility and integrity. These first mirrors establish a child's sense of what is normal within their world. For some children whose identities are not represented by the Eurocentric, heteronormative, cisgender-dominant culture, these mirrors may be absent or limited at school and in the books they find there. This sends a message defining what is important and what is not important at school (Boyd, Causey, and Galda 2015). As educators, we must value all students' voices, concerns, and lived experiences if they are to thrive in our care.

A child's emerging notion of her place in the world may be challenged when she walks down the long corridors of school and crosses the threshold of her first classroom. She may find herself away from the safety net of family and familiar people, sitting among new faces and attempting to make sense of new procedures and freedoms and limits. School may be the place where a child first encounters faces, stories, beliefs, foods, music, rituals, routines, and celebrations that stretch beyond her sense of what is "normal." She may struggle with that idea. She may search for the familiar. She may be challenged by the notion that what she knows as truth is not what she experiences in the classroom. As children leave the known and step into school, they naturally look for the familiar in the new setting.

When a reader is unable to find a reflection of herself in the books in her classroom, the experience sends a message that readers like her are not valued (Bishop 1990; Boyd, Causey, and Galda 2015). According to Bishop, "When the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (1990). Authors Walter Dean Myers (2014) and Nikki Grimes (2016) have shared how books did not reflect their realities growing up. Those childhood experiences led both Myers and Grimes to represent their realities in their own writing to provide mirrors for young readers who have been underrepresented in literature. Children need to be able to see their race, culture, family dynamics, neighborhoods, and experiences, as well as their triumphs and tribulations, represented in books.

As educators, it is our responsibility to draft policy and implement practice that creates an environment where children feel welcome, valued, and respected.

Children are more engaged in reading when their stories are honored and they are able to identify with the characters in the books they read (Au 1980). Engagement in reading is essential and, as John T. Guthrie and Allan Wigfield (2000) point out, it is “strongly associated with reading achievement” (404). A key aspect of engagement is motivation (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You 2012). Without motivation, students fail to engage and develop as effective readers (Gambrell 2011). One way we can motivate students as readers is to include diverse books in our classroom libraries. The use of culturally relevant texts improves motivation and increases students’ abilities to make connections and interpret text (Christ and Sharma 2018; Garth-McCullough 2008; Keene and Zimmermann 2007; Tatum and Muhammad 2012).

When we read books with characters similar to ourselves, we envision connections to the world, come to feel secure and valued in our own right, and enhance our sense of belonging and self-affirmation (Botelho and Rudman 2009; Pennell, Wollak, and Kopenhagen 2017). When readers see reflections of similar thoughts, feelings, and experiences, they can begin to envision connections to the world and its possibilities. Therefore, it is equally important for readers to broaden their sense of the world through literature. We want readers to see themselves and other perspectives as they share vicariously in experiences in the texts they read.

Exposure to characters that open the blinds in those windows lets a reader see a bigger, broader world and view a reality beyond what is known through personal experience. It doesn’t pressure the reader to abandon her current notions of the world; it merely makes her aware that there is more out there than she knew.



## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Consider all you know about the students you teach. How does that insight help you select texts that can be windows for them?

Does your classroom library have books that will introduce them to new ways of being?

Will individual students have an opportunity to explore neighborhoods and dwellings unlike their own?

Will they meet characters that have family structures different from what they experience?

Will they experience new religious or cultural traditions and/or celebrations?

Will they meet characters who face new challenges and different obstacles than those they know?

Will they find characters that approach problems in ways they have not considered?

As you reflect on your insights about your students and the books in your classroom library, which topics, settings, characters, and situations are missing? ■

## Books as Windows

When a male student in Daniel Hoilett's second-grade class was reading the book *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, one of his classmates laughed and proclaimed that book was for girls. Capitalizing on this teachable moment, Daniel read aloud *My Princess Boy* to the class. After reading, they discussed how this book created a window into an identity that defies gender norms. They explored how individuals are often bullied based on appearances. Students shared connections including a boy who is made fun of for dressing fancy at church and a girl at school who dresses like a boy. One student shared that his sister also dresses like a boy but "she can be who she wants to be and that's okay." Using this comment as a springboard, Daniel asked students to consider the author's message of *My Princess Boy*. "Boys and girls can wear whatever they want," one student shared. "Imagine how that kid must feel when people make fun of him about what he is wearing," another added. A boy agreed and said that anyone can read *My Princess Boy* and that people should always stand up for someone who is being bullied because "there's nothing wrong with anyone wearing a dress." Collectively, they decided that the author aimed to show readers that someone will always love them no matter what.

Some texts affirm our lives based on similarities and connections, while others provide us a window into the unfamiliar. Literature as windows allows a reader to stand safely in her own identity while exploring a world beyond her current view. When books serve as windows, readers have the opportunity to consider new ideas and new ways of thinking and to see themselves as part of a larger community.

As seen in the example from Daniel's classroom, literature as windows can also serve as counternarratives, allowing us to contest stereotypes and bias (Boutte 2008). This is vital for children of privileged groups as they explore their place within a larger, more pluralistic world. If the only characters that children are exposed to look like, sound like, and act like them, they are at risk of developing ethnocentric notions of themselves and the world around them as well as notions of otherness that can lead to devaluing anyone who is different. Reading texts with diverse perspectives allows us to explore the multidimensions of humanity and create more inclusive classrooms

reflective of our broader society (Boutte 2008). Furthermore, in an uncertain world where inequality pervades society, reading books with characters and settings different from their own can help children build empathy and cultivate compassion, by allowing them to imagine life beyond the one they live. Literature enhances our understanding of one another and promotes respect for other ways of being as we explore how humanity connects us (Kurkjian and Livingston 2007).

As Bishop (1990) has noted, “Literacy transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience.” When books are read as both windows and mirrors, they become sliding glass doors between two worlds celebrating similarities and differences of the common human experience. Sue Mankiw and Janis Strasser (2013) point out that literature provides readers with opportunities to interact with “characters they have yet to meet in real life, but with whom they have much in common” (85).

## Books as Doors

After reading the book *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park, fifth graders in Lindsay Yearta’s class were inspired to learn more about the main character, Salva Dut. Knowing that the novel was based on a true story, one student Googled Salva Dut to learn more about his life. She quickly found his website, Water for South Sudan ([www.waterforsouthsudan.org](http://www.waterforsouthsudan.org)), and began reading about the nonprofit’s efforts to build wells to bring clean drinking water to South Sudan. Reading the book *A Long Walk to Water* opened a door for this student as she expanded her interests in learning more about the geography, the issues that affect the area, and ways to help. As she read about Salva’s nonprofit, she was energized to organize a fund-raiser. She encouraged her classmates to join her in creating posters to advertise a penny drive at the school. After a couple of weeks, they proudly collected and donated the funds to Water for South Sudan.

Literature can serve as a window to give the reader a different view. That new view can open a door to facilitate action and change. We want readers to explore both the connections between their own worlds and those they read about and how they see themselves and others in new ways as a result. We want them to be moved into action. We want them to move beyond believing that donating money to causes is the only action they can take. The power of literature is that it can build schemata, background knowledge, and vocabulary that enable readers to question why the problems exist in the first place. Those insights scaffold thinking to expand readers’ understanding and give them voices to communicate with others to advocate for change.



We believe that children’s literature offers a shared experience for all students in a classroom community to consider how ways of being can be a mirror, a window, and ultimately a sliding glass door connecting their lives with the lives of others as they move between worlds. When children see themselves and see others, they can see similarities as well as differences and move beyond a one-dimensional view of themselves and the world. “By offering students positive, diverse experiences that open their minds to new and different worlds,” Melissa J. St. Amour (2003) writes, “educators are allowing children the opportunity to expand their own minds within the realm of the classroom and the world at large” (48).

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

—Nelson Mandela

## Getting Started

The responsibility to gather a collection of texts with both breadth and depth sufficient to avoid a one-dimensional view of any topic is challenging. Therefore, we suggest a variety of authentic literature to help readers shape their views of themselves and the world around them (Boyd, Causey, and Galda 2015). Exposing children to authentic literature allows them to experience life through characters that are similar to themselves as well as those that are different from themselves, thus disrupting what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) refers to as the “single story.” We consider a broad definition of diversity that mirrors society and includes race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, family structure, social status, homes, language, and abilities.

**SUPPRESSED MATERIAL**

We are aware that you will need to tailor the book selection and direction of the conversations and activities based on the needs, interests, and backgrounds of the students you teach. We suggest you begin by simply getting to know your students. Armed with an understanding of who your students are, where they come from, and what matters to them, you can consider seven dimensions to assess the cultural relevance of text (Sharma and Christ 2017; Tatum 2000):

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1. Does the book portray culture accurately without perpetuating stereotypes?
2. Is the book written by and illustrated by someone who shares the culture represented in the book?
3. Does the reader share cultural markers with the characters such as race, ethnicity, or religion?
4. Is the reader the same age and gender as the main character?
5. Does the reader talk in similar ways as the main character?
6. Does the reader live in a place similar to the setting of the book?
7. Does the reader have experiences similar to those in the book?

(Adapted from Sims [1983], Bishop [1990], and Ebe [2010])

## Creating Spaces to Speak Freely

In addition to the inclusion of diverse literature in our classroom libraries, we believe that we must create safe spaces where students can engage in critical conversations about topics that arise in literature and in life. We position the read-aloud as a shared experience and a springboard for discussion that builds a community where children feel comfortable to take risks, ask questions, and dig deeper into topics relevant to their lives and the world around them.

The books are the beginning, not the end. Louise M. Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory emphasizes the role of dynamic interaction between a reader and text

To create a space inside your classroom that is both physically and emotionally safe for your students, Souto-Manning and her coauthors (2018) suggest we embrace the following commitments:

1. recognize the wealth of knowledge and resources that each family and community has, and help students develop multicultural competence, becoming knowledgeable about and competent in their own culture(s) and at least one other culture
2. make students' histories and identities a central and integral part of the curriculum
3. see and celebrate what students *can* do instead of focusing on their perceived deficits (as defined by society)
4. invite students to name and question injustices in society
5. critically supplement the curriculum, making it not only rigorous, but also more inclusive and culturally relevant. (53)

and the unique meaning-making process that results from the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, and understandings. And Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell (2016) write, "The meaning a child makes of a text is influenced by her identity, culture, experiences, and communities. Reading is influenced by who the child is" (82). As L. S. Vygotsky (1978) reminds us, learning is a social process, and when readers share their meaning with others, they

deepen their understanding and expand their thinking. There is a give and take that leaves each with a more robust understanding than either would have had alone. Reading helps us identify with characters or situations to foster understanding, unity, and empathy. We all have stories. We must create spaces where all stories are valued. Shared stories can serve as common ground, a starting point for reflection and conversation. Once we hear someone's story, we are less likely to judge and more likely to consider kindness.

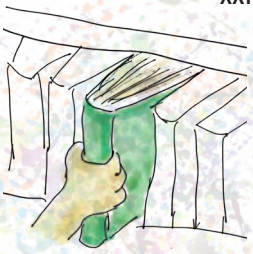
The power is not in the book itself, but rather in the readers who create meaning or co-construct meaning through dialogue, develop empathy, and are inspired as change agents. Exposing children to diverse literature without guidance can result in few to no benefits (Morgan and York 2009). Because children deepen their understanding of themselves and the world through text, it is our responsibility as educators to not only expose them to authentic literature but also strategically guide conversations that lead to deeper meaning, critical examination of stereotypes, and, ultimately, action for change. Reading is a pathway to civic engagement. As Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman (2009) note, "Literature can become a conduit—a door—to engage children in social practices that function for social justice" (1). Books open doors of possibility for a better world.

The learning that comes from an opportunity to converse, to engage in the give and take of ideas to deepen one's own insights, cannot be overstated. When we read and explore authentic literature, we create spaces in our classrooms where children can question norms, challenge stereotypes, and expand their understanding of the unfamiliar, leading to greater tolerance, acceptance, and equity. To scaffold this learning as children confront a variety of issues, we recommend an implementation model, or framework, to help teachers enrich the read-aloud through robust discussion and extended reading experiences.

## Framework

We believe in the power of reading, writing, and conversation to stretch the known and expand the heart and mind toward a more inclusive and empathic way of being. We offer a framework that can both deepen and broaden students' understandings, insights, and empathy for the greater human family and world we all share.

The framework involves five phases: selection, connection, reflection, action, and next steps.

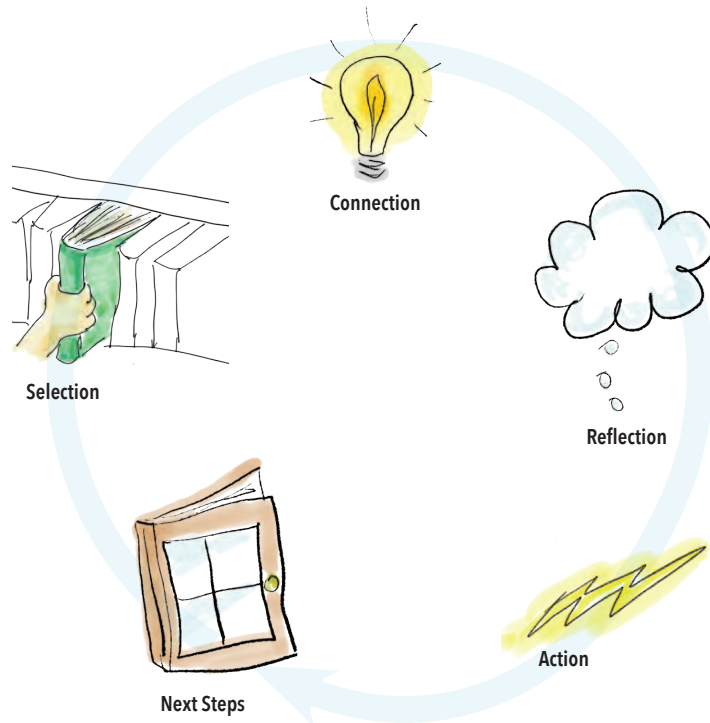


# Selection

Here we identify the issue and carefully select texts that will offer students multiple points of entry for gaining insight and evoking reflection.

Here are some questions to consider when you select texts:

- How will the collection of texts expand students' understanding of the issue?
- What is the intended goal for reading these texts?
- How will reading these texts leave readers curious? Inspired? Changed?
- Will individual students have an opportunity to explore landscapes, neighborhoods, and dwellings unlike their own?
- Will they meet characters that have family structures different from what they experience?
- Will they see and hear language and speech patterns that differ from their own?
- Will they experience new cultural ways of being and lifestyles?
- Will they meet characters that face new challenges and different obstacles than those they know?



Framework: Selection, Connection, Reflection, Action, Next Steps

## Connection

In this phase, we create a scaffold for students to share their connections with a character, situation, issue, or topic. In each selected text, consider the following questions:

- How will students make connections across texts to build their understanding of the issue?
- When students have an opportunity to explore landscapes, neighborhoods, and dwellings unlike their own, how can I help them make connections to their own environment?
- When students meet characters that have experiences or family structures different from their own, how can I draw connections so that these don't seem so different?
- When students are exposed to language and speech patterns that differ from their own, how will I help them find value in all language?
- When students read about new cultural ways of being and lifestyles, how will I connect these to what is familiar to them?
- When students meet characters that face challenges and obstacles different from their own, how will I help them build on what they already know?

## Reflection

Here we ask students to pause and revisit texts and segments of texts with an introspective approach. We guide students to reflect on their connections and notice ways they are similar to and different from the character(s) in other related texts. Students reflect on the situation, the setting, and the problem, challenge, or obstacle faced by the character(s) and consider how they would feel in that situation. Based on student connections, we move them toward reflection with these guiding questions:

- Which landscapes, neighborhoods, and homes are you still thinking about? Why?
- Which character or situation are you still thinking about? Why?
- Do any of the characters remind you of yourself? How?
- Which character would you want to have a conversation with? What would it be about?
- Which character or situation puzzles you? How?
- What culture, lifestyle, or situation reminds you of your own life?
- What culture, lifestyle, or situation do you want to know more about? Why?
- What situations or obstacles do you find yourself still thinking about? Why?





## Action

Now is the time for students to react individually or collectively in a way that can make a difference. Actions may be pursued individually, such as a student's search for further information on the topic/issue, or they may be collective efforts that involve the class, grade level, school, and/or community. Examples of collaborative efforts include starting clothing or food drives for local shelters, participating in rallies for a number of causes, planting a garden, organizing a card campaign for military personnel away from home, organizing a campaign to encourage neighbors to plant flowers and vegetables that attract honeybees, and partnering with senior citizens to knit or crochet scarves for the homeless. The possibilities are endless because the actions are determined by your students and begin to emerge in the reflection phase of the process. Based on student reflections, we can move them to think about taking action with these guiding questions:

- So what?
- Why does this matter?
- Now that you have read these books, how are you changed?
- In what ways are you inspired to take action?
- What might this action look like?
- What can you do to make a difference in your life? The lives of others? The community? The world?



## Next Steps

If we are changed by what we read and the experiences that broaden our worldview, one action does not bring this to closure. We want to cultivate students as thoughtful, caring citizens and lifelong agents of change. We believe this work should be ongoing and organically embedded into the classroom routines, instruction, classroom culture, and lives of students. Therefore, although students may take a specific course of action related to the texts and the themes being explored, this work should not end here.

Based on student action, we can move students to think about next steps with these guiding questions:

- Now that you've taken action, how are you changed? How are others changed?
- Why is taking action important in our lives? The lives of others? The community? The world?

- In what ways are you inspired to continue to take action in your everyday life?
- How will this action lead you toward living a better life?
- How will your action lead others to becoming change agents?

#### A LOOK INTO THE CLASSROOM



Lester and Katie talk with teachers who have used the implementation framework in their own classrooms.



## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Consider a time you were moved to action. It is almost certain that you have been moved deeply by, or felt tension or confusion from, some experience. It may have been a personal event, something you observed, or something you read. It could have been a movie, the lyrics of a song, a news report, a piece of art that caught your attention, or a conversation you overheard that burrowed into your being. Perhaps that connection was deeply personal. Perhaps it took you to a bit of your past. Or maybe it was an experience that awakened something deep inside you, something you weren't even conscious of. Maybe it shocked you because it was so beyond your own experience that it led you to confusion or new insights. In any case, such an experience lingers with you and surfaces in your thinking at random times and often leads you to an overwhelming need to "do something," to take some action in an attempt to make things better or set things right. Perhaps there is something deep within you that nudges you forward, something that continues to bubble up until you simply *can't* do nothing. Pause here for a moment and think. Reflect on a time when you were moved to action. Feel free to write about that time in the margins. What prompted you? Chances are the first force was some connection with an experience, an individual, or a text (book, poem, essay, movie, song, news article, editorial, etc.). That connection likely triggered an awareness that left you with a feeling that this just wasn't right, that something about this seemed unjust, inequitable, mean-spirited, or just off somehow. It is likely that this notion bounced around in your mind a bit. You may have talked with someone about it. If this experience was prompted by a text, you may have felt compelled to revisit the text with more focus or concentrated attention, alert this time to the bit that triggered the connection. Perhaps as you revisited the text, you paused to think consciously and the text became a window, giving you a new view on the topic.

Or maybe you moved to another text, seeking more information or a different connection to the issue. However you moved forward, it is likely that you continued thinking about the issue even after you left the source text. You may have had thoughts of the issue floating through your

conscious mind throughout the day. Those thoughts may have prompted conversations with others that left you with even more to think about. So you likely found yourself reflecting on the text(s), your own connections, your conversations, and thoughts shared by others or sparked by the texts until you began to feel that you must do something, you must take some action. That feeling may have led to more conversation or more interaction with additional texts, but it is likely to have eroded the option of knowing and doing nothing. ■

## What You'll Find in This Book

We envision this book as a resource for you to explore literature to help students examine their identities and the lives of others within and beyond the classroom setting. The framework is applicable to any topic and therefore can be applied to issues that arise in your own classroom or community.

We escort you into several classrooms to see the framework in action. We share sample texts, the conversations surrounding them, and the reflection, action, and next steps springing forth as a result.

Selecting relevant texts can be challenging (Tatum 2006). Therefore, we share a collection of inclusive texts gathered around critical issues and moving topics in each chapter. The texts are intended to prompt children to read (or be read to), connect, reflect, and take action as change agents.

Throughout the book, you'll find places where we ask you to take a moment to reflect. Please jot down your thinking in a notebook or in the margins of this book.

After you finish the introduction, we suggest you read Chapter 1: Discovering Our Own Identities as a foundation for the remaining chapters. Then, read whichever chapter is most helpful at the moment. Though it is possible to read the book in the sequence presented, you can move in and out of the chapters as you see fit to meet the needs of your students and the specific nuances of your classroom community.

We recommend you share the text sets in a variety of reading experiences (read-aloud, small group, book clubs, independent reading). We suggest you begin with a whole-class read-aloud followed by a conversation to frame and scaffold thinking in a safe space. You might find it helpful to create an anchor chart as you establish group norms for this classroom ritual. Consider some of the following questions:

- What expectations should we have during whole-class conversations?
- Do we raise hands to speak?



- What does responding respectfully look and sound like?
- Should we make eye contact?
- How can we make space for many voices?
- Should we be taking notes or taking turns as note takers?

See Figure I-1 for a sample anchor chart.

What We Can Do to Support Conversations	What That Might Sound/Look Like
Use background knowledge.	"Something that I know is . . ."
Make connections.	<p>"This reminds me of a character from another book . . ."</p> <p>"This plot is similar to . . ."</p> <p>"It reminds me of when I . . ."</p>
Listen to and learn from each other.	<p>"So what you think is . . ."</p> <p>"That's interesting. I never thought of it that way . . ."</p>
Take turns.	"I think _____ has something to say."
Ask questions.	<p>"Can you say more about . . .?"</p> <p>"What do you mean by . . .?"</p> <p>"What part of the text made you think that?"</p>
Pay attention.	<p>Make eye contact.</p> <p>Take notes.</p> <p>Ask follow-up questions.</p> <p>Look for passages in the text to support what you are saying.</p>

FIGURE I-1 Whole-Class Conversation Anchor Chart

Chapters 1–8 demonstrate the framework in action, with suggested texts organized around eight topics featuring examples from kindergarten through fifth-grade classrooms.

Chapter 1: Discovering Our Own Identities

Chapter 2: Making Unlikely Friends

Chapter 3: Coping with Loss

Chapter 4: Crossing Borders

Chapter 5: Advocating for Change

Chapter 6: Sharing When You Have Little to Give

Chapter 7: Accepting Others

Chapter 8: Lending a Helping Hand

## Who We Are

In order to do this work with our students, we believe we must begin with ourselves. We hope this book will serve as a window, a mirror, and a doorway for *you* as you read, reflect, and examine *your own* identity, perspectives, and biases and the role they play in your teaching.

With that in mind, allow us to introduce ourselves and to share why this work matters to us. So here goes. We'll start with Lester:

I WAS BORN IN 1956. THOUGH I WAS BORN IN FLINT, Michigan, I had lived there only two weeks when my parents decided to pack everything and return to family in Alabama with my two-year-old brother and a newborn (me) in tow. Alabama was home to my family on both sides farther back than anyone could remember.

I was a young child living in the Jim Crow South. I lived with segregation. I saw the whites-only and colored drinking fountains on the side of the Tastee-Freez. I attended an all-white school with an all-white faculty and an all-white support staff. I attended church with only white people. I saw people of color, but I didn't know their names or the names of their children. I didn't know what their houses looked like or where their houses were. I knew my house and the house where my ma'am-maw lived, the



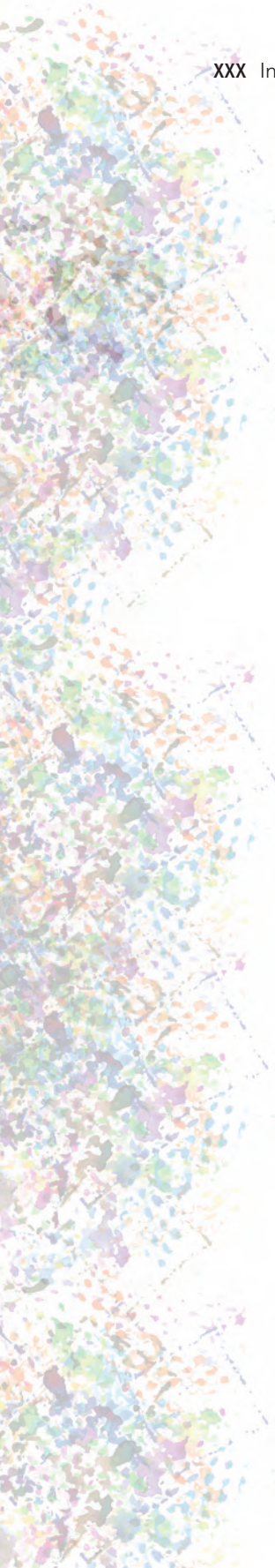
Lester at Age Four

one where my mother grew up. I knew my granny's house, the one where my father grew up. Those were two different worlds; my house and my ma'am-maw's house had electricity and gas heat, hot water, a TV, and a bathroom. My granny's house didn't have electricity until I was seven. I was eleven before that house had running water and indoor plumbing. The world of my childhood was divided between "town" and "the country."

The worlds of town and country were intertwined, and I moved between them with ease. Almost all the people I knew in town had some relative living out in the country. The worlds of black and white were not as fluid. Although the lines dividing the world between black and white were invisible, they were well established and understood. I knew people who had "help" (a black woman who looked after small children and took care of household chores). Those women came into the homes of the people I knew, but no one I knew went into the homes of black people.

I was in sixth grade when the first black children were allowed to attend the school I attended. That was in 1967, four years after the Civil Rights Act was signed on July 2, 1964, and a full thirteen years after "separate but equal" (segregation) was ruled to be illegal on May 17, 1954. I remember the talk among adults and heard echoes of their sentiments spilling from the mouths of children as well. There was tension, but I was not aware of any violence at either the elementary school or the high school in my little town.

However, the violence was visible in almost daily doses on the evening news. If not daily, at least several times each week there were reports and film of crosses burning, protestors gathered in parks, and the police using German shepherds on taut leashes to push back gatherings of black youth calling for change and equality in cities across the country. TV news brought images of firemen using their high-pressure hoses, not to extinguish threats from out-of-control flames, but rather to force black men, women, and youth off the sidewalks they dared claim the right to walk upon. I saw men covered in white robes and conical hoods hiding their faces gathered to threaten anyone representing change to the status quo. I saw buses violently rocked and burned by throngs of angry protestors. And one Sunday evening in September I saw a church severely damaged by multiple sticks of dynamite that had been strategically placed near the entrance. Those images came with the somber report of homes, stores, and cars with broken windows blocks away; the blast was that powerful. And this was followed by the news of four young girls near my age who had been killed in that blast. Killed while at church.



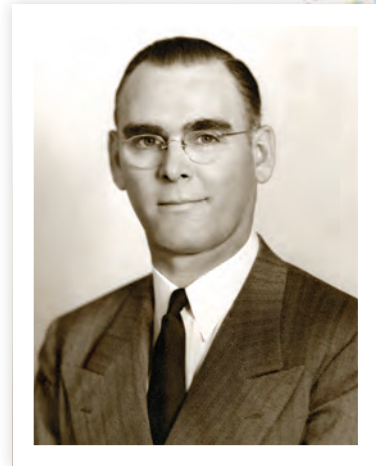
All that left me fearful. Not *of* black people, but of those who would go to such extremes in their efforts to keep the world stacked in their favor. This was bubbling up in the world as I was coming through elementary school. The confusion of it, the fear of what you can't understand, is palpable in the mind of a child. It is powerful in the mind of an adult as well. And I was one of the entitled ones: I am white. I am male. Even so, I was mightily afraid. I can't imagine the fears, the stories, the nightmares faced by black children in that time.

As much as I needed windows to the bigger world, I also needed mirrors I could not find. I grew up in the Methodist Church. Almost everyone I knew went to either a Methodist or Baptist church. I knew one family who drove twenty miles to the next town to attend their Catholic church. I knew of a few families who were known as Pentecostal, Holiness, Church of God, or Church of Christ. I did not know anyone who was Jewish. I knew no Muslims. I did not know anyone who was Hindu or Buddhist, and if I knew an atheist, I was not aware of it. I did know people who “just didn't go to church.” In short, my world was a Christian-centric, ethnocentric, heteronormative bubble. I grew up in a home with two parents, one brother, and one sister. I knew only a small number of children my age who lived in a single-parent home. At that time, in that place, divorce was still rare and somewhat scandalous. I knew absolutely no one who lived in an open and loving homosexual relationship. In fact, you would have been hard-pressed to find even the suggestion of the existence of a living gay man or woman. There were older women who lived together, but that was presented as an economic necessity for “old maid” women in my time. There were the whispers and raised eyebrows that followed the mention of an older man who lived alone. Most often, the word *odd*, if anything, would be used to describe such a person. Younger boys and adolescents who were anything short of the masculine ideal in the rural South were described as “sissies,” and that was anything but a compliment. I was one of those.

I share this here to awaken our minds to the notion that the need for diverse literature is not only about the color of our skin; it is about all the differences that exist within this one dynamic robust human family. It is about finding the roots of humanity and finding how very much we all have in common; it is about discovering the beauty of our souls and the common humanity shared by all who breathe. ■

So now you have a bit of insight about Lester's connections to this project. Let's meet Katie:

I WAS BORN AT ST. JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK, during a severe winter ice storm a few days shy of St. Patrick's Day. My maternal grandparents, Tim and Mary Elizabeth Kelly, were both proud descendants of Irish immigrants. Sadly, my grandfather passed away from bone cancer before I was born. Although I never met him, all stories about my grandfather reveal his kindness, compassion, and commitment to his family. As a young boy and the eldest of his seven siblings, he stepped up as the caretaker when his father left the family home in Brockville, Ontario, in search of gold in the Yukon, never to be heard from again. As a young man, he went on a blind date with a woman named Mary Elizabeth McNamara from Ogdensburg, New York. They eventually married, moved to Syracuse, and had two daughters—Nancy (my mom, born 1938) and Sheila (1940–2017).



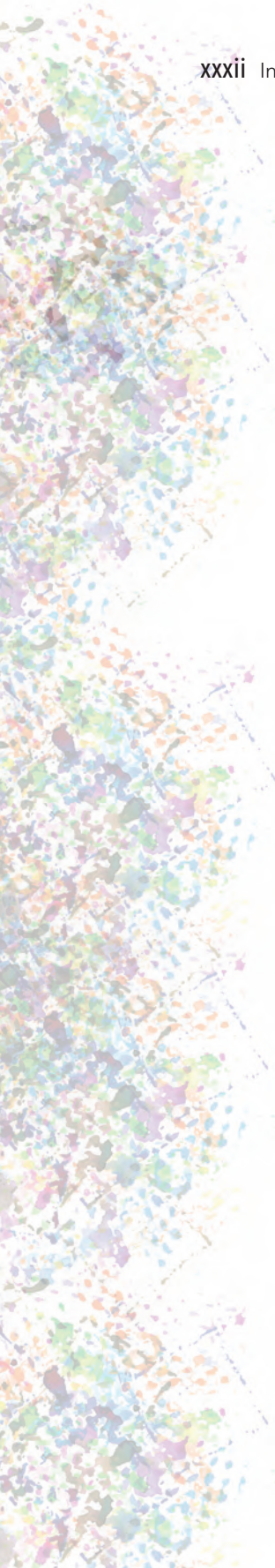
Katie's Grandfather, Tim Kelly

My mom raised us as a single parent. My sister, older by nine years, helped carry the load and took care of me and my younger brother. My mom did the best she could with what she had, but we struggled financially. At times, there was no money to pay the bills and the power was shut off. Our car was an old rust bucket plagued with mechanical problems—we were often left stranded in the unforgiving lake-effect snowstorms that are common in the winter months in Upstate New York. We had no savings and no extra cash for maintenance on the car or the house, let alone family vacations or college.

I recall checking out at the grocery store and having to put some items back because we didn't have enough money. This was



Katie and Her Mom



humiliating and I no longer wanted to feel shame because we couldn't afford groceries. At fourteen, I began working and eventually held multiple part-time jobs. I shared some of my earnings to contribute to the household expenses. I saved the rest of my paycheck to buy new clothes. As an awkward teenager striving to find her identity, I desperately wanted to fit in and desired the trendy designer clothes that the "cool" kids were wearing. We disguised our financial circumstances and kept this aspect of our identities hidden so we would be perceived as "normal."

Our family did not have financial wealth and some may have perceived us as broken, dysfunctional, or disadvantaged. But we were rich with love and support for each other. Armed with the strength of my family, I became a resilient, independent, and successful woman.

Yet I grew up in a patriarchal society where I was assigned my father's name at birth and took my husband's name at the altar. Years after my divorce, I completed a doctorate, moved to South Carolina, and began a career in academia. I found myself becoming engrossed in the renewed feminist movement, advocating for equal rights and ultimately feeling empowered to legally change my name. This time I chose my name. A name to honor my truest self. A name to honor my mom and my maternal grandfather. Katie Kelly.

My identity is complex and evolving. It shapes my experiences in the world, which in turn shape my identity. Having the power to choose my name is one of several ways in which I have come to recognize my privilege. As a cisgender white woman, I am also aware of the privilege my skin affords me. Yet as a child growing up in the 1980s, I perceived racism as a horrible part of our county's history. My school was desegregated. Most students of color were bused in from the south side of Syracuse. I was friends with all my classmates, both in and out of school, regardless of the color of their skin. As a young person, I did not think critically about race and the oppression experienced by people of color. I held a color-blind perspective. I was not aware of my white privilege.

I am grateful for those who push me to think critically in new ways and for those who continue to push against the status quo. The more I learn about ways in which some groups experience oppression and injustice, the more I am able to peel back the layers of my own privilege. I am now more conscious of how it manifests in my daily life, from the Band-Aids that match the color of my flesh to the sales associate who is most likely trying to make a sale rather than monitoring me for theft. My only fear when getting pulled over by the police is that I might receive a speeding ticket, not that I might be pulled from my car and be beaten or shot.

I acknowledge that racism, sexism, classism, and other types of discrimination exist. I will not remain silent and hide behind my privilege any longer. I invite you to join me to reject the status quo, advocate for equality, and take action. We must honor all students' identities and their lived experiences. ■



## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Consider your own complex identity. How does your identity shape you as an individual? As a reader? As a teacher? How does your identity influence the way you live your life? Jot down your thoughts in the margins of this book. ■

*Teachers make choices every day. If you only have books in your classroom that feature heterosexual people that is a choice. It is a political choice. You might think this is the norm but you are choosing to perpetuate this as the norm.*

—Lesléa Newman

*One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.*

—Malala Yousafzai



## CHAPTER 1

# Discovering Our Own Identities

*When I discover who I am, I'll be free.*

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

*Never be bullied into silence.*

*Never allow yourself to be made a victim.*

*Accept no one's definition of your life, but define yourself.*

—Harvey Fierstein







#### READING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE ONLINE RESOURCES

To access the online videos for *Reading to Make a Difference*, either scan this QR code or visit <http://hein.pub/ReadingToMakeADifference-login>. Enter your email address and password (or click "Create New Account" to set up an account). Once you have logged in, enter keycode **XXXXX** and click "Register."

In this chapter we take a close look at how identity develops. We attempt to broaden and deepen the definition of identity and the exploration of self through exposure to a set of carefully selected texts that are read aloud, revisited through subsequent read-aloud experiences and independent reading, and discussed in depth during guided conversations and writing opportunities. We believe this topic demonstrates for children how each of us brings a mix of genetics, experiences, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, understandings, biases, beliefs, and family/cultural traditions to the classroom community. At the end of the chapter we provide a list of suggested children's literature that addresses a range of topics such as physical identity, gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, diverse family structures/dynamics, and more. Each selection offers an opportunity to deepen insights about identity and ways we can support members of our one human family.



## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Imagine an infant.

Hold that image and jot down what your mind conjured. Be honest; no one will see your responses but you.

Clothing type and color: \_\_\_\_\_

Eye color: \_\_\_\_\_

Hair color: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Skin tone: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Economic status: \_\_\_\_\_

Does this infant mirror your identity in any way? Is the infant aware of any markers of identity? At what point does the child begin to think of himself or herself in these ways?

We know a toddler who is sixteen months old and beginning to walk with independence, babble in waves, and have true words in speech. She mimics the sounds of animals when asked, "What does the cow say?" or "What does the dog say?" If you ask her, "Where is Mommy?" or "Where is Daddy?" she searches the room, beams, and points to the parent. She loves her little red piano, her stuffed cuddle friends, and the two dogs in her family; in fact, she loves all dogs. It's not uncommon to find her sitting in the floor of her room holding a favorite book, turning the pages, and babbling some string of sound. Her personality is blossoming, but she does not know whether she is a boy or a girl, black or white or brown, Christian or Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat or Libertarian or Socialist or Communist. She does not know whether she is gifted or learning disabled. She does not know whether she is adopted or the biological offspring of her parents. She does not know whether she is gay or straight, cisgender or transgender. She is emerging in the world, as is her identity. Soon enough, the world will begin trying to define her within the parameters of cultural norms. The more important question is "How will she define herself?"

The goal of this reflection is to provide children with literature that validates their existence as real and worthy and beautiful, while at the same time leading them to recognize the existence of others who, though they may be different in some ways, are still very much the same. ■

## Voices from the Classroom

The teachers and students featured in this chapter learn together at Francine Delaney New School for Children (FDNSC), a public charter school located in Asheville, North Carolina. The school is a small and close-knit community of learners organized around a clear and visible mission with a stated focus on social justice:

Francine Delaney New School For Children is an inclusive community that is committed to promoting social justice and preserving the inherent worth and human dignity of every person.

As individuals and as a school we will:

- Practice fairness and equality for people of every race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, religious belief, political view and other identities.
- Analyze multiple perspectives on historical and contemporary issues.
- Build a community of critical thinkers who are active in the world.

We are committed to ongoing learning, raising awareness, and fostering dialogue around issues of social justice.

This school community is devoted to developing strong independent thinkers who are kind, civic-minded, caring, and confident. They make a concerted effort to support students in becoming aware of and committing to their best self, both as a student and as a person who is a member of the greater global community.

We join a second-grade teacher and her class to look closely at our physical features—including our eyes and hair, our skin and stature—and notice what features make us visible and known to others. Then we move inward and explore the notion that our identity also includes parts of us that cannot be seen. Through a set of books we lead an exploration of personality and character with attention to behaviors, judgment, attitudes, and beliefs. That leads us to take note of how we are like every other human and yet different and perhaps even unique in other ways.



## Selection

Second-grade teacher Jessica Roberts read *Three Hens and a Peacock* by Lester Laminack. This book affords an opportunity for open conversations about the effects of trying to be someone else and the power of simply being true to oneself. In addition, Jessica selected *Skin Again* by bell hooks to spark a conversation about aspects of identity that are inside a person, the attributes that are not visible in a photograph. She then chose *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall to take her second graders into a deeper discussion about what happens when the outside doesn't match the inside. Finally, *Sparkle Boy* by Lesléa Newman opened the conversation about societal norms and expectations as they relate to and sometimes conflict with personal identity.



## Connection

Jessica opened the study with a conversation about how we define identity. She asked students what identity means.

STUDENT: An identity is what you look like or what you're known as.

STUDENT: It's kind of like your history and your family and who you are.

STUDENT: For example, Spider-Man is a superhero, so he can do awesome stuff. Then he has an identity as Peter Parker, and you think he's two different people.

These second graders' comments reveal an understanding that an individual can have a private identity and a public identity and even a fake identity. Jessica brought the conversation to a close and then set the class up for the read-aloud. She asked them to think about how *Three Hens and a Peacock* explores identity and being who you truly are.

STUDENT: They understand that the other one is actually doing a lot of work and their job is good and they're the perfect ones for their job.

STUDENT: The peacock couldn't even lay one egg, but also it's a male, so it kind of makes sense. Also, they realize that hens aren't meant to be out there being all gussied up and trying to get cars to stop, and a peacock isn't meant to be laying eggs.

As students began to make connections between the theme of the book and the conversation they had about identity, Jessica asked them to revisit the idea of "identity."

STUDENT: Identity basically means who you are.

STUDENT: You need to have a certain identity, and only certain identities can do certain things. That's basically what they learned. Since the peacock has glamorous feathers and it's very rare you'd see it on a farm, so if you were driving by, you'd definitely stop.

STUDENT: The peacock is like Spider-Man. Spider-Man has superpowers and he has that identity, but then he is also just a person, a regular person. So the peacock could use his feathers to stop those cars. That's like one identity. But it's also just a peacock. That's like another identity.

STUDENT: They realized that they should just be who they are and do their own jobs.

Jessica brought the conversation to a close and reminded them that she would be reading other books to push their conversation.



## Reflection

After reading *Three Hens and a Peacock*, the class continued to talk about identity. Students recognized that identity is more than just what you look like, that there are parts of your identity that cannot be seen in a photograph. Jessica read aloud *Red: A Crayon's Story* to give her students more to think about as they reflected on their new learning. Notice how she gently guides the conversation from details on the page to the broader ideas.

**JESSICA:** So tell me what was happening with this book.

STUDENT: He thought he was red, but he was actually blue.

STUDENT: Everybody thought he was red because he had a red label.

STUDENT: I think he was blue on the inside . . . but on the outside he was red.

**JESSICA:** So everybody was thinking something was wrong with him, right? Why aren't you red? It says right here on your label that you are red. But you are not red. His truest self, what was on the inside, was blue.

**STUDENT:** It doesn't matter what color you are . . . They were wondering why he was coloring blue, but he was red.

As the students tested out their tentative thinking, the deeper meaning began to bubble up. Notice how as each voice presents a new layer of meaning, others build onto it as they listen, reflect, and extend meaning for the group.

**JESSICA:** How do you think Red felt when he thought he wasn't living up to his label and felt like he was doing something wrong because he wasn't able to draw red?

**STUDENTS:** Sad and frustrated. Worried, like he was broken. Like something was wrong with him. Like no one liked him.

**JESSICA:** Maybe he felt like there was something wrong with him. But in reality, was something wrong with him?

**STUDENT:** No, it's just his label. He was really blue. He just had the wrong label on the outside.

**JESSICA:** So his label was saying something that he wasn't. His outside didn't match his inside. Think of how that relates to ourselves and who we are. Do our outsides always tell what our truest self is?

**STUDENTS IN UNISON:** Nooooo.

Jessica's references such as "outside didn't match his inside" and "our truest self" build off the ideas generated from their conversation about *Three Hens and a Peacock*. Eventually, one student's reflection moved the conversation from the metaphoric (a conversation about a mislabeled crayon) to the literal (a conversation about gender identity).

STUDENT: Somebody on the outside could look like a girl, but deep inside, they could actually feel like a boy. And that kind of relates to Red; everybody thought he was trying to be red, but he was actually blue on the inside. People can feel differently than what they are on the outside.

**JESSICA:** Absolutely. So people can feel differently from what their outsides look like. When your outsides look one way and you feel different on the inside, that can make you feel sad and confused. So what is our job in making sure that everyone is safe to be his or her truest self? What do you think?

STUDENT: I think that in the book he is feeling blue, get it? Because he was *really* blue.

STUDENT: I think that he was feeling sad and, like, worried. Worried that something was wrong with him.

**JESSICA:** I see the connection you made. If someone is feeling one way on the outside but their truest self isn't matching that on the inside, that can leave them feeling really sad and confused. So what is our job as caring community members for other people? How can we make sure people feel safe to be their truest self?

Notice how again Jessica guided the conversation without taking over. She acknowledged the empathy and the insight while gently bringing the group back to center, back to the individual's responsibility as a member of a caring community. In this way the text and the conversation have the potential to serve as a mirror for any student who sees himself or herself in the plight of the peacock, the hens, or the crayon in these books. At the same time both the text and the conversation are available as windows for students who find no reflection in these stories. And those windows open our minds and hearts to the struggles of others who may need our support and care as they discover their own truest self. (*Reflection* continues on page 10.)

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE 3–6 Classroom

Although the classroom featured is second grade, the same books can be used with grades 3–6 to elicit deeper conversations and to teach proficient reading strategies. For instance, when reading the picture book *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall with fourth graders, you can explicitly teach students how to synthesize text. Here's a sample teacher think-aloud modeling stop and jots with gradual release of responsibility.

Before reading, say: *Today, we are going to practice synthesizing the book Red. Red is a short story about a crayon. Although this book may be about a crayon, I think the story is very relatable. Let me show you how I would begin synthesizing the book Red. From the front cover, I can tell that the story is about a crayon. It has a red wrapping around it, but the color looks blue. I wonder why it says he's the color red then? Below are other crayon colors. They all match their wrapping. So we already know something is different about Red than the other crayons. So before going any further, I am going to write down on a sticky note: Before reading, I think this book is about a crayon that is mislabeled red. Let's read on to see what happens.*

After reading a few pages, say: *At the beginning, we learn that "he wasn't really good" at coloring red. I wonder what will happen? I think he might attempt to color red. I am going to write on my next sticky note, At the beginning, I think that Red is going to try to be able to color red at the end.*

Read on, but close the book after the grandparents try to put him in a red coat. Then say: *Hmm, that's interesting. People in Red's life are trying to make Red color red. They even make him put on clothes that are supposed to bring out the red in him. Here, I am going to write on my sticky note about something I notice while I am reading. I am going to write that people are not accepting Red for who he is. You can write the same thing, or something similar, or something else that you see and think is important to the story.*

Continue reading. Stop after the black page with the scissors. Model writing down what you're thinking simultaneously. Invite students to also write something down. Continue reading. After the page with the new friend, invite students to write down something on their sticky notes. Say: *I like how this friend is asking Red to color an ocean. This friend seems to accept Red.* Read one more page. Ask students to write on another sticky note. Read another two pages. Invite students to

Before reading, I think this book is about a crayon that is mislabeled red.

At the beginning, I think that Red is going to try to be able to color red at the end.

People are not accepting Red for who he is.

I like how this friend is asking Red to color an ocean. This friend seems to accept Red.



write down what they think. Gradually release responsibility by continuing to read but stopping the think-alouds so students do this by themselves.

When you are done reading the story, say: *Now that we have read the story together and jotted our thinking on our sticky notes, turn to your turn and talk partner and tell them what your reactions are to the story. You can refer to the notes you took to help you think of the most important elements of the story.* Let students discuss while you listen in to student conversations. Let one or two groups share.

Provide the following sentence stems on an anchor chart to support students' synthesis of text:

Before reading, I think this book is about . . .

At the beginning . . .

Now I think . . .

After reading, I now know . . .

This is important because . . .

To extend the conversation about identity, we recommend also reading *Introducing Teddy* by Jessica Walton (picture book) with both primary- and intermediate-grade students. To see how these books were used as a text set to explore identity, read the blog post from the Journey Project at <https://thejourneyproject.us/2017/06/14/institutional-power-playing-with-fire/>.

For intermediate-grade students specifically, we would also suggest *George* by Alex Gino (chapter book). A class discussion along with sample student reflections can be found at the blog post from the Journey Project at <https://thejourneyproject.us/2017/06/25/spark-tinder-breeze-conversations-act-of-love/>. ■



## Reflection *(continued)*

The conversation that followed builds on the connections and reflections from *Three Hens and a Peacock*, ideas from *Red: A Crayon's Story*, and the new read-aloud, *Skin Again*. Notice how Jessica's students got to the heart of this text quickly.

**JESSICA:** What does the narrator mean when she says, "Skin again is one way small to see me, but not well enough to be all"? [hooks 2004] What does that mean?

**STUDENT:** I think it's saying that looking at your outside is one way to think you know who they are, but you don't know them until you take time to be their friend. It's like Red because his label was like skin.

**JESSICA:** So where is the real you? Is it on the outside?

**STUDENT:** No, the real you is on the inside. It's in your heart.

**JESSICA:** It's in your heart. It's what makes you who you are on the inside. It takes more time to get to know someone on the inside, doesn't it? But that's when you get to know the *real* person. Because your skin and how you look on the outside can only tell a little bit . . .

**STUDENT:** But it's worth it!

**JESSICA:** Yes, it is. It is worth it. We are made up of lots of different things, lots of different colors and histories and traditions and patterns that make each of us so very interesting.

It is interesting to note that this set of books moves from farm animals trying to find their place in the community (*Three Hens and a Peacock*) to a mislabeled crayon (*Red: A Crayon's Story*) to a person talking directly to the reader about knowing the real person on the inside (*Skin Again*). Moving through this small set of texts with guided conversation helps children build the understandings they need to examine the metaphoric and move outward toward the personal and human.

To build on these insights, Jessica introduced the fourth book, *Sparkle Boy*. This book presents human characters in a family situation, making the potential connections more personal, making the mirrors and windows more relevant, and opening the doorway to more robust conversations. Before reading the book, Jessica asked the students to examine the cover and quietly think about what they might expect in this story. Then she invited them to share their thinking.

**JESSICA:** What do you think this will be about? The title is *Sparkle Boy*, so that gives us a little bit of a clue. We can also look at what he is wearing. And if you feel the cover, you'll notice it has texture—it feels like glitter.

**STUDENT:** I think it's kind of telling that he likes sparkles and that not all boys don't like dresses and stuff. And a lot of boys actually like colors that people say are for girls, but I don't believe that there's colors for boys and girls.

**STUDENT:** Yeah, some people say pink is for girls, blue is for boys. But that's not true. A lot of boys like pink and purple and a lot of girls like aqua and blue.

**JESSICA:** We just get to like what we like, right? Whether we are boys or girls or whatever we are, we get to like whatever we like.

**STUDENT:** There are some colors, um, pink, purple, and things that are glittery, and there are some clothes that I like; dresses, skirts, um, a lot of people call that girl stuff.

**STUDENT:** One thing I don't like is going to the mall because they have sections for girls' clothes and one section for boys' clothes, and there are girls who like to shop in the boys' clothes and boys who like to shop in the girls' clothes.

Jessica paused a moment, allowing the students to refocus. Then she read the book aloud without stopping. As she reached the end, Jessica invited her students to pull forward the threads of conversations about the three previous books.

**JESSICA:** How does this relate to our discussions about identity and who we are?

**STUDENT:** He liked skirts. He loved them. He wanted to be like his big sister.

**JESSICA:** So, how come Jessie had such a hard time with that?

STUDENT: Because some people think that boys and girls should do different things and wear different colors and different clothes.

STUDENT: All genders can like all different things. Like, girls don't have to just like certain things and boys don't have to like certain things.

STUDENT: So I just want to say that I have a whole drawer full of dresses.

JESSICA: You do, and you enjoy wearing them sometimes because they are comfortable and you like the way you feel in them.

STUDENT: Yeah, when I do, I need to wear shorts.

JESSICA: Yeah, we all do. Whether we're boys or girls, right.

STUDENT: Some teachers say, "Today boys line up first" or "Girls line up first." You could just go first either way.

JESSICA: So we don't do a lot of that in our class. You'll notice that we don't do boys' and girls' things because I don't like to think of you that way; I like to think of you as just little humans. I don't like to divide you up by your gender because that's only part of your identity, but that's not the whole story, right? We are just people and we like what we like. We have preferences and we have dreams and we have things that make us smile and we have feelings. What's important is on the inside. I'm very careful about saying "boys" and "girls." That's why I usually just say "friends" or "students" or "second graders," because I don't want anyone to have to be concerned with feeling that what's on their inside doesn't match what's on their outside. Now, let's return to my question. Why was Jessie so mad and grumpy about her brother wearing the sparkly things, especially out in public?

STUDENT: I kind of think she got mad because when he is in public she was embarrassed. She was worried that people would think a boy shouldn't be in girl clothes.

### A LOOK INTO THE CLASSROOM



Join a group of first graders in a discussion of identity and acceptance as Lester leads a discussion of the second read of *Sparkle Boy*.

**JESSICA:** And that happened, didn't it? It happened at the library, and what did that make Jessie understand?

**STUDENT:** That it was okay. That everybody can wear what they want.

**STUDENT:** I think she was mad because at first she was one of those people who think that there is boy stuff and girl stuff. But then she came to where people started making fun of her little brother and she changed her mind.

**JESSICA:** Because she loves her little brother and she wants to make sure that he feels comfortable and is not teased. That kind of switched it for her, and she was able to see that it was important for him to be able to make his own choices and be able to do what he likes.

The conversation began to shift and students mentioned how things in public aren't as they should be. There was an extended discussion about the mall and how the marketing of clothing and hair care products is very gender specific. It was clear that these students embraced the notion that identity is more than what we see on the outside. Jessica lifted the conversation and nudged their thinking toward action.



## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

How would you respond if Sparkle Boy entered your classroom? How would you protect that child and create a space for all your students to feel safe? ■

## Action

*The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

A few days had passed when Jessica came back to the discussion and invited her students to spend some time thinking about their own outside and inside identities. These reflections led to inside/outside posters they used to introduce themselves to their peers. You can see two examples in Figures 1–1a and 1–1b. The children in this school loop through the grades as a community, so this class has been together since kindergarten. Though they know each other rather well, these posters reveal some inward feelings and thoughts they may not have shared prior to this exploration. In addition, there may be a disconnect between how one views oneself and how one is viewed by others. Each poster features a self-portrait in the center with the author's outside attributes listed on the right and his or her inside attributes listed on the left.

Taking the initiative to be reflective about one's inward identity can be enlightening. But to share those thoughts publicly can be risky. There is a certain level of vulnerability in sharing your inward self. We felt some of that vulnerability when sharing our personal stories in the introduction of this book. We believe the power here is in the practice of that reflection and laying claim to your feelings and sense of self.



FIGURES 1–1a and 1–1b Second Graders with Inside/Outside Posters



## Next Steps

To help students consider multiple identities and begin to explore representation of different identities in the books they read, Jessica introduced her students to Marley Dias, the little girl at the forefront of the Black Girl Books campaign. She wanted her students to begin to notice themselves and others in the books they read. They began by brainstorming words related to identity such as *gender*, *race*, and *religion*. Next she showed them a one-minute interview with Marley Dias, and they discussed her campaign to find one thousand books that feature women and girls of color. (See the YouTube video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoHBtRhIX-I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoHBtRhIX-I). For another interview with Marley Dias, visit [www.njtvonline.org/news/video/11-year-old-marley-dias-creates-change-through-1000blackgirlbooks-campaign/](http://www.njtvonline.org/news/video/11-year-old-marley-dias-creates-change-through-1000blackgirlbooks-campaign/).) They discussed why it is important to read books with identities similar to and different from their own. Jessica challenged her students to begin to read books through the lens of identity by asking:

- Are most of the characters similar to or different from me?
- Why does this matter?
- How does this affect me as a reader?
- How does this affect me as a person?

(This lesson was adapted from Teaching Tolerance’s “Discovering My Identity” [n.d.]. For more information, visit [www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/discovering-my-identity](http://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/discovering-my-identity).)

## ALTERNATE GRADE EXAMPLE

### Kindergarten

Jennie Robinette and her kindergarten students chose to closely examine family identity. Jennie’s students come from a variety of family structures, so she chose to read *Lilly’s Big Day* by Kevin Henkes, *The Flower Girl Wore Celery* by Meryl G. Gordon, *black is brown is tan* by Arnold Adoff, *Visiting Day* by Jacqueline Woodson, and *I Love Saturdays y domingos* by Alma Flor Ada.

*Lilly’s Big Day* and *The Flower Girl Wore Celery* allow young readers to see a family forming through a wedding ceremony, one heteronormative wedding and one same-sex wedding. *black is brown is tan* introduces us to an interracial family. *Visiting Day* allows us inside another family structure where a young girl and her

grandmother prepare for a bus trip to visit the girl's father in prison. And *I Love Saturdays y domingos* invites us to come along as the main character spends Saturdays with her European American grandparents and Sundays with her Mexican American grandparents. Each of these books contributes to the greater understanding of family identity as something deeper and more complex than what the world can see from the outside. Jennie reminded her students of previous conversations in which they explored the notion that each of us has an inside identity and an outside identity. To help her students consider family identity, she suggested that families also have an outside identity and an inside identity.

## FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

### Consider Titles That Feature Diverse Families

It is important to feature a variety of family structures, including (but not limited to) single parents, stepparents, foster parents, same-sex parents, grandparents as primary caregivers, adopted children, or homeless families. Some additional titles that feature diverse families you may want to consider for your classroom include

- *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams
- *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell
- *Counting by 7s* by Holly Goldberg Sloan (chapter book)
- *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting
- *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman
- *In Our Mothers' House* by Patricia Polacco
- *Jin Woo* by Eve Bunting
- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña
- *Maddi's Fridge* by Lois Brandt
- *The Memory String* by Eve Bunting
- *My Man Blue* by Nikki Grimes
- *The Red Blanket* by Eliza Thomas
- *A Shelter in Our Car* by Monica Gunning
- *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis
- *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts
- *Tight Times* by Barbara Shook Hazen
- *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan ■

Each year Jennie hosts a wedding between the letters Q and U (a common event in some K–1 classrooms to help children understand the use of these letters



that “stand together” in words). She decided to extend the study of family identity to include an exploration of weddings as one way to form a family. Traditionally, a male and female student perform the role-play of the wedding between *Q* and *U*. By sharing stories and creating a context in which any student can participate, regardless of his or her gender, we send the message to students that anyone can get married and can love each other, thus leading to greater acceptance of various family structures.

Jennie read aloud *Lilly’s Big Day*, which led to a conversation about all the jobs that have to be done when two people get married. The next day her read-aloud, *The Flower Girl Wore Celery*, opened up the discussion to marriage equality. When Jennie and her students reflected on the two stories, they noted that weddings are celebrations of the love between two people and these can be a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and a man, because, as one student put it, “love is love.”

Other books focused on the theme of inclusivity and love of everyone include *Donovan’s Big Day* by Lesléa Newman and *Worm Loves Worm* by J. J. Austrian.

To culminate this portion of the exploration of family identity, Jennie invited a few families of students in the class to share stories of their weddings. Following the readings and conversations, the students created “Love Is Love” signs, as seen in Figure 1–2.

Following the wedding of *Q* and *U*, Jennie and her students had a conversation about ways other than a wedding to make a family.

Jennie then read *Black Is Brown Is Tan* and extended the conversation about what makes a family. The students noted that the outside identity of this family shows

one mom and one dad and their kids. They noticed that the parents have different skin tones, and a few children commented that this reflects their own families.

To explore family identity a bit further, Jennie read *Visiting Day*, which led to an interesting conversation about prison and how families sometimes don’t live in the same house. This

#### A LOOK INTO THE CLASSROOM



Administrative support is essential to successful school initiatives. Join a conversation with Lester, Katie, Buffy Fowler, and Elana Froehlich about the importance of this work. Buffy offers great suggestions for enlisting the support of parents.



FIGURE 1–2 “Love Is Love” Sign

is an important mirror for children who have separated parents, a parent deployed in the military, or an incarcerated parent—and perhaps a more important window for children living in a more “traditional” family structure. As a result of reading this collection of books, Jennie’s students concluded that a family is not necessarily the people who live in your house; a family is the people who live in your heart.

## ALTERNATE GRADE EXAMPLE

### First Grade

First-grade teacher Britney Ross read *Thunder Boy Jr.* by Sherman Alexie to explore the pros and cons of being named after a parent and having a nickname that you may not like. The book speaks to the power of a name and personal identity. She then read *My Name Is Sangoel* by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed to get readers to think about the power of a name and how a name is an important aspect of identity. Bringing the study to a close, she selected *My Name Is Bilal* by Asma Mobin-Uddin to open the conversation about acceptance and fitting in. This title lets us explore the impact of societal norms and expectations as they relate to personal feelings about one’s name, culture, and religion as aspects of identity.

Students made the connection that in each of the first two stories the main character’s name was very important. Thunder Boy felt his name limited him in becoming his truest self. Sangoel, on the other hand, was proud of his name because it was all he had. His name was his connection to the home he had to leave. He wanted to make sure everyone knew how to say it correctly, so he made a shirt to help the kids at his new school pronounce it.

As conversations about identity and the importance of a name continued, Britney brought in the third book, *My Name Is Bilal*. She asked students to think about the main character, Bilal, and how he was his truest self.

**STUDENT:** He was standing up for the person who was bullied.

**BRITNEY:** He did stand up for his sister. Remember, the book says, “Bilal took a deep breath. ‘My name is not Bill. It’s Bilal. My sister and I are Muslims,’ he said stepping between Scott and Ayesha. ‘And America *is* our country. We were born here” [Mobin-Uddin 2005]. So how was he his truest self?