



Waikato Journal of Education

ISSN 2382-0373
Website: <https://wje.org.nz>



Volume 27, Issue 1 2022: Special Issue: Disrupting hegemonies using picturebooks

A picturebook reveals the nature of bias
Cynthia K. Ryman

Editors: Nicola Daly and Janette Kelly-Ware

Cite this article: Ryman, C. K. (2022). A picturebook reveals the nature of bias. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 27(1), 67–78. <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.895>

Link to this volume: <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.893>

Copyright of articles

Authors retain copyright of their publications.

Articles are subject to the Creative commons license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/legalcode>

Summary of the Creative Commons license.

Author and users are free to

Share—copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt—remix, transform, and build upon the material

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms

Attribution—You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use

Non-Commercial—You may not use the material for commercial purposes

ShareAlike—If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original

No additional restrictions – You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Open Access Policy

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.



A picturebook reveals the nature of bias

Cynthia K. Ryman

University of Arizona

United States of America

Abstract

In order to disrupt hegemonic thinking, the foundation of biases on which this thinking is built must first be confronted. I became increasingly aware of the detrimental impact of implicit bias during a research project I conducted in a children's literature course with preservice teachers. In this research project, I analysed the responses of the preservice teachers to a cosmopolitan approach to reading children's literature. A cosmopolitan approach in literacy invites a reflexive consideration of personal perspectives and an opening towards learning from the perspectives of others (Hansen, 2017). In encouraging the ideals of a cosmopolitan approach to literacy, I encountered areas of resistance from the preservice teachers. These instances of resistance were often rooted in implicit bias. During the final stages of completing my research, the picturebook Milo Imagines the World by Matt de la Peña (2021) was released. Milo Imagines the World reveals how deeply held ideologies and biases impact perceptions of reality. An awareness of how biases impact one's perception of reality is an important factor in developing greater self-awareness and combating hegemonic thinking. In this article, I provide a critical analysis of the various forms of bias encountered during my research along with a reflective exploration of the picturebook Milo Imagines the World. This picturebook and analysis provide a context for better understanding the subtle pervasiveness of biases that often contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic thinking.

Keywords

Implicit bias; cosmopolitanism; critical content analysis

Introduction

I was in the midst of analysing data from a research study when the picturebook *Milo Imagines the World* by Matt de la Peña and illustrated by Christian Robinson (2021) was released (see Figure 1). As I read through this picturebook for the first time, I was struck by how it provided an insightful commentary on the limitations and innate biases of personal perspectives. This picturebook enabled me to look at my data through a new lens and begin to recognise the nature of bias.



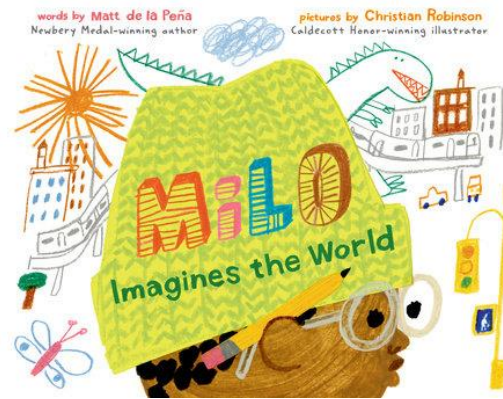


Figure 1. Milo Imagines the World. (de la Peña, 2021)

The research study I was conducting explored a cosmopolitan-minded approach to literacy in an undergraduate children's literature course for preservice teachers. This approach to reading literature is based on Hansen's (2017) conceptualisation of cosmopolitanism as a reflective understanding of one's own perspectives and an openness to learning from the perspectives of others. This research took place during a period of polarisation in political viewpoints in the United States. Part of the impetus for this research was to seek a way to counter the fear of diversity and the dismissal of those with differing viewpoints. This fear was evidenced in the building of a wall to physically separate the United States (US) from Mexico, which in turn created a psychosocial separation for immigrants living within the US (Casey & Watkins, 2014). It was also clearly evidenced in the proliferation of strict voting requirements, various forms of intimidation, and accusations of voting fraud at polls (Daniels, 2020). It was and continues to be manifested in state legislative policies enacted to create barriers for transgender and gender diverse individuals to access healthcare (Walch et al., 2021). I wanted to provide opportunity for the preservice teachers to actively engage with these issues and consider new perspectives.

Throughout my research, I continually asked myself what these societal events meant for educators and how children's literature along with literacy practices might be used to invite a more compassionate and inclusive future. *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) provided me with valuable insights as I considered the issues surrounding divisive ideologies that manifest in hegemonic thinking and the data from my research into cosmopolitan literacy practices.

Overview of *Milo Imagines the World*

Milo Imagines the World (de la Peña, 2021) begins with Milo, a young African American boy, boarding the subway train with his sister. Both Milo and his sister are nervous as they begin their journey to visit their incarcerated mother. As Milo travels, he draws in his notebook his imaginings of the lives of the people surrounding him on the subway. His perceptions align with his own experiences and biases about the world in which he lives. When a white boy dressed meticulously with perfectly combed blond hair boards the subway train, Milo imagines that this boy lives an idyllic life in a castle surrounded by servants. However, Milo's perceptions and imaginings become incongruent with reality when this boy and his father get off at the same stop as he and his sister. Milo then sees the boy join the visitation line at the prison to spend time with his mother who is also incarcerated. Once this disruption to Milo's imaginings occurs, Milo reimagines the lives of all the people he had previously drawn in a totally new light. He reflects on how his perception of the world may not be as complete as he first imagined.

The illustrations in *Milo Imagines the World*, created by Christian Robinson, provide the reader with the opportunity to reflect deeply on personal perspectives and perceptions of the world. The

pictures broaden the meaning of the written text by encouraging the reader to actively explore the story and engage with how Milo interprets the lives of the people around him. By providing both an external focalisation of the people surrounding Milo on his journey and an internal focalisation on Milo's interpretation of these individual's lives through his sketches, the reader is dynamically included in considering how Milo's imaginings are impacted by his life experiences and biases (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). The reader becomes a participant in viewing the world around Milo as well as a critical observer of Milo's biases through his interpretation of that world.

Overview of research study

As an introduction to the process of analysis and methodology used in comparing the content of *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) to the data from my research, it is important to first provide a brief overview of this research study. My research study questions focused on how the preservice teachers responded to a cosmopolitan approach to literacy and a critical inquiry into my own practices. Data for this study was collected across two semesters, beginning in the fall of 2019 and ending in the spring of 2020 in three different children's literature courses for preservice teachers. In keeping with the protocol of university research policies, the preservice teachers provided informed consent to participate.

Since the term cosmopolitanism carries many connotations, I decided to use a different term when I introduced this approach. I wanted a term that would capture the intent and provide a language for explicitly applying cosmopolitan ideals to the reading of multicultural and global children's literature. I decided to use the term *critical reflexive literacy*. This terminology highlighted the meaningful and active components of cosmopolitanism as applied to literacy practices. Paulo Freire refers to critical literacy as "reading the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. x). Reflexivity is defined as the ability to examine one's own feelings, reactions, and motives and how this influences what one does or thinks in a given situation (Cambridge.org, 2021). A critical reflexive approach to literacy encourages evaluating how one's own values and beliefs impact the interpretation of a text along with maintaining an openness to learning from the ideas, perspectives, values and beliefs of others presented in the text (Hansen, 2017).

The first objective in the syllabus for the children's literature courses in which this research took place was for the preservice teachers to gain a better understanding of themselves as a reader, their cultural identities, and how to engage in a personal and critical response to literature. It was within this course objective that the approach of critical reflexive literacy was introduced. I asked the preservice teachers to continually consider the following questions as they encountered and read books set outside their own cultural locations throughout the course:

- What cultural aspects of my identity impact my interpretation of this story? (Critical reflexivity)
- How do the beliefs and identity of characters in the story impact their actions? (Critical reflection)
- What can I learn from the character's perspectives in this story? (Reflective openness)
- What ethical action might I take in response to this story? (Critical reflexive action)

The data collected across the three classes provided many avenues to consider how the preservice teachers had made meaning out of a critical reflexive approach to literacy. The dialogue in literature circles, written reflections on the novels and my teaching journal contained the most productive data for considering the impact of this approach. In analysing the responses of the preservice teachers, I began to see how many readily grasped Bishop's (1990) concept of books being a window into other worlds and at times a mirror into their own experiences but often failed to fully grasp the concept of literature as a sliding glass door inviting them to step in and learn from new perspectives. This realisation underscored the greatest struggle I faced in this study, how to deal with deeply ingrained biases. It seemed that areas of implicit bias evaded reflexivity. Reflexivity requires the recognition that one's own

perspective is innately biased and thus flawed. I struggled throughout the research study in finding ways to adequately address this issue. It was after the completion of my research that *Milo Imagines the World* provided me with the sliding glass door into the nature of implicit bias and a potential key for exposing it.

Process of analysis and methodology

In comparing *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) to my research data, I employed the research methodology of critical content analysis. Content analysis as a research methodology began in the field of communication studies and uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Short, 2019b). There are many types of content analysis, but generally, each looks for patterns of language use in text and/or images and the implied thematic meanings within those patterns (Neuendorf, 2017). The word “critical” signals that the focus of the content analysis is to reveal social, political and institutional problems and at the same time seek possible solutions for these problems (Fairclough, 2013). In critical content analysis, the researcher selects a particular theoretical lens that guides the research questions, the selection of texts, the data analysis and the discussion of findings (Short, 2019b).

This critical content analysis is guided by the question: What representations of implicit bias are present within *Milo Imagines the World*? The composition of images and text in this picturebook provide invaluable insight into various forms of bias. To analyse the images and text, I applied the theory of implicit social cognition (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and examined how the illustrations and text worked to reveal the nature of bias. The theory of social cognition recognises that social judgements are based on attitudes and stereotypes rather than conscious decisions (Greenwald & Lai, 2020).

As I examined the text and illustrations in *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021), I carefully considered various forms of implicit bias and determined that four forms were most evident. These four forms of bias became the theoretical tenets that guided my analysis of *Milo Imagines the World* and the comparison of this picturebook to my data. These tenets included confirmation bias, reciprocity bias, consciousness bias and contact bias (McLaren, 2019). With the picturebook in hand, I began to reflect on my collected data and connected it to Milo’s journey. This constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) between the picturebook and data led to the coding of themes related to implicit bias seen within the picturebook and evidenced in the data. In the following section, I analyse each of these themes of bias, consider the data in my research, and the lessons learned from *Milo Imagines the World*.

Findings on the nature of bias from a picturebook

Everyone has biases. According to research, implicit bias and attitudes that stereotype others begin very early, even before a child begins to speak. Implicit biases “affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Staats, 2016, p. 29). These implicit biases develop through physical experiences, emotional experiences, cultural surroundings and consistent cognitive influences (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). These biases are problematic and often lead to attitudes of distrust, prejudice against others and hegemonic thinking. While many forms of bias have been identified within implicit social cognition (Greenfield & Banaji, 1995), in this analysis, I focus on four forms of bias revealed in *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) and evidenced in the data from my research. The first of these biases is confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias comes from the field of psychology and was first named by Mynatt, Doherty, and Tweney in 1977. Confirmation bias occurs when individuals look for or interpret information in a way that supports or confirms what they already believe (McLaren, 2019). This is similar to what Adichie

(2009) terms, “the danger of a single story”. This bias is revealed in *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) when Milo draws how he imagines the lives of three multiracial break dancers after they leave the subway train. He imagines how the eyes of a store clerk continue to follow these three girls when they go shopping in the electronics aisle of the store. He imagines how the eyes of the doorman and a woman walking her poodle outside a fancy apartment building suspiciously follow them. Milo begins to question confirmation bias when he looks at his own reflection in the window and wonders what others see when they look at his face. He wonders if those who see his face are able to see beyond his racial identity to the richness of his personal experiences and life. He wonders if they know he writes poetry, has a mother who calls to tell him bedtime stories at night and has an aunt who cooks delicious meals for him. He wonders if others see him through the lens of confirmation bias and if he too is racially and socially stereotyped by those who look at him.

Confirmation bias was prevalent in my research data when the preservice teachers responded with sympathetic statements that left little space for fully understanding the complexity of characters’ lives from the novels. These sentiments are seen in the following quotes taken from the written reflections of several preservice teachers after reading *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2013), a novel based upon the author’s childhood experience of fleeing with her family from war-torn Vietnam in 1975 and immigrating to the state of Alabama in the United States.

- I just really reflected on things that I was gifted in my life that other people would not be fortunate enough to have.
- This book made me reflect on my life and how grateful I am for where we live. Even though some things are screwed up, it could be worse.
- I had sympathy for the main character and what she was going through. I took a step back from my life and realized how lucky I am.

This bias can have a definite impact on the ability to learn from others in a critical reflexive approach to literacy. Short (2019a) speaks about cultural mismatches that occur between readers and books set outside their cultural experiences. She contends that when readers experience a cultural mismatch, they either reject that the experiences in the book are possible or take pity and have a sense of superiority. Short states that as readers “we are responsible for examining and owning our cultural locations and recognizing when we are reading a book through our location and thus judging the actions of characters from that positionality” (p. 8). This becomes the challenge of critical reflexive literacy, helping preservice teachers to recognise their responsibility as a reader in having a critical reflexive understanding of their own experiences and consciously opening to learning from the experiences of others (Hansen, 2017).

As Milo reflected on his own image, he realised the bias of others might cause them to judge his life and experiences through a racially tinted lens. A critical reflexive approach to literacy requires recognising this tendency and explicitly confronting it. In order to confront this bias, direct dialogue around stereotypes that can potentially taint a reader’s response to new ideas is necessary. It requires consciously considering the preconceived judgements made about cultural and racial identities represented within multicultural and global literature. Conversations need to occur that bring the overlooked into the light of dialogue. This might mean having the preservice teachers carefully consider their current thinking through questions like: Who comes to mind when I consider this racial/cultural group? What do I know or believe about this group? Where do my perspectives come from? This bias will want to avoid dealing with new ideas and will resist considering new perspectives. A direct dialogue on how new perspectives can enhance one’s own understanding of the world might provide the needed catalyst for disrupting confirmation bias and, like Milo, the ability to consider new perspectives.

Reciprocity bias

The next form of bias that needs consideration in a critical reflexive approach to literacy is reciprocity bias. McLaren (2019) terms this bias complementarity bias. This bias is based on how one perceives the attitude and feelings projected by others through their words and actions. Reciprocity bias has been researched in behavioural economics and social psychology (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This bias is created as a response to others' words and actions. Kindness is reciprocated with kindness and hostility with hostility. Reciprocity bias appears in Milo's imaginings as he reacts to his own drawing of how the store clerk and the doorman of a prestigious apartment house respond to the three multiracial break dancers. In Milo's imaginings, these girls were watched with suspicious and distrustful eyes. Milo immediately scratches out his drawing due to the discomfort and anger that these attitudes cause him. Milo's sketch reveals the type of attitudes and actions that bring about reciprocity bias.

I encountered reciprocity bias during my research and wrote about the experience in my teacher journal. At the time I did not have a name for what I was experiencing. It began with a discussion around a poem entitled, *The Border: A Double Sonnet* by Alberto Rios (2015). This poem describes feelings of the poet towards the border wall between Mexico and the United States. The preservice teachers were asked to select a section of the poem that resonated or spoke deeply to them. One preservice teacher read the line, "The border is a brand, the 'Double-X' of barbed wire scarred into the skin of so many" (line 8). She then commented that this line had touched her heart in thinking about the people who have tried to cross the border. Another preservice teacher read the line, "The border is an equation in search of an equals sign" (line 18). She explained that she felt this line spoke to the point that too many people are focused on themselves instead of the pain of others. Then another preservice teacher spoke up and said that she sees the other side of this story. She did not choose a line from the poem, but simply spoke her mind. She condemned those who cross the border and vocalised her perspective that many of these individuals are criminals, rapists and drug traffickers. The discussion around the poem came to an abrupt ending.

During the time of this research, the anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States had become increasingly heightened. The perspectives that halted the dialogue on this poem closely mirrored the hegemonic political rhetoric in the news. After this class, I emailed the preservice teacher who had spoken these words and asked if I could talk to her about the perspectives she had voiced. I asked her to consider how her words may have impacted fellow classmates who have family members living on the border or have recently immigrated and may be undocumented. Unfortunately, the email triggered reciprocity bias. She felt that she was being judged, scolded and silenced for her perspectives.

This preservice teacher interpreted the statements I made in my email as hostility towards her, and so when we met, she responded in kind. Recognition of this bias is important for all teachers at all levels, elementary through university. After this encounter, I questioned how I had approached this situation. I reflected on how stating the purpose of the meeting in the email had immediately sent a message of hostility and judgement rather than kindness and openness. I had activated a reciprocity bias.

I realised later that I had also encountered reciprocity bias when I introduced the novel *George* by Alex Gino (2015) to the preservice teachers. *George* is the fictional story of a fourth-grade transgender girl. As I introduced this novel, I stated that according to the American Library Association, *George* was the most challenged book in 2018 and 2019 in the United States. I also stated that the topic of transgender identity may cause some of them tension but as they read the book to consider what they can learn from this perspective. This statement initiated an immediate response from a preservice teacher who asked if she could read a different novel. The perceived attitude towards the book was that it is a "fearful" topic, and so she responded with fear.

In a critical reflexive approach to literacy, conversations do need to occur around statements and actions that are discriminatory and convey hegemonic thinking. Milo's anger-driven scratching and marking out of his drawing, reveals the emotional load that this bias carries. The approach to addressing

this bias needs to be in a way that lowers the intensity of emotion. In the case of the email to the preservice teacher, I could have simply asked her to stop by to talk. This would have created a friendly environment for our dialogue and avoided setting off a negative reciprocity bias prior to our meeting. During our conversation, I could have asked her more about her interpretation of the poem and led her to consider as Milo did how negative stereotypes can cause others to feel judged unfairly.

In the case of the book introduction, it would have been better to simply allow the preservice teachers the space to transact with the novel devoid of preestablished bias against it. It may not always be possible to avoid negative reciprocity bias when dealing with strong ideologies. However, being aware of this bias should impact when and how conversations are approached. Recognising and learning how to avoid reciprocity bias will hopefully create greater openness and ability to discuss how stereotypes cloud perspectives and prevent others from being fully understood.

Consciousness bias

The third bias that is essential to recognise in a critical reflexive approach to literacy is consciousness bias (McLaren, 2019). Paulo Freire (1993) was the first to use the term “conscientisation”. “Conscientization, like education, is specifically and exclusively a human process” (Freire, 1998, p. 499). Conscientisation is a process of critically reflecting on the realities of the world and seeking to transform the world through humanising acts. A consciousness bias occurs when an individual has not had the opportunity to consider or has not reached a point of consciousness on a reality that is dehumanising to another.

When Milo reimagines the lives of the people on the subway in the picturebook *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) it shows how his consciousness is evolving. Milo’s journey on the subway is a journey of conscientisation. He realises his own interpretations of the lives around him are not necessarily correct. When the meticulously dressed, white boy is seen going into the prison visitation room to meet his mother just like Milo and his sister, Milo’s consciousness is raised. In his mind, he redraws each life through a different understanding, showing an openness to new perspectives. He now sees that the solitary man going home to a small rat-filled apartment could instead have gone to a cosy home and been warmly greeted by his wife and children. He thinks back to his drawing of the woman wearing a wedding dress and going off in a hot air balloon with her new husband as possibly joining hands with her new wife instead. Milo then imagines the multiracial break dancers being warmly welcomed home instead of suspiciously stared at by the doorman at the fancy apartment building.

I noticed consciousness bias several times in written reflections and in transcripts of literature circle dialogues in my research. Consciousness bias was often evident in the choice of vocabulary used to describe the characters in stories. For instance, when referring to the Bangladeshi immigrants in the novel *Ask Me No Questions* by Marina Budhos (2006), one preservice teacher wrote, “This book gave me insight into how being *illegal* impacts students.” Another preservice teacher in referencing the characters in the same novel also wrote, “It’s scary to me to think about living *illegally*, like the characters in this book are used to doing.” Using the term “illegal” criminalises people. Cacho (2012) discusses the danger of this term in permanently criminalising groups and making them “ineligible for personhood” (p. 6). I am sure neither preservice teacher used the term “illegal” as a way to dehumanise the characters from this novel. Their use of the term “illegal” came from consciousness bias.

I also noticed consciousness bias in some of the written reflections and literature circle transcripts for *George* by Alex Gino (2015). Even though Gino uses the pronoun “she” throughout the novel in reference to the character whose birth name is George and preferred name is Melissa, some preservice teachers referred to George as “he”. In the following exchange from the literature circle discussion on the novel, three different preservice teachers refer to George/Melissa as “he”. In this exchange, the group is discussing when Melissa’s friend Kelly let Melissa take the role of Charlotte in the school play without the teacher’s permission or knowledge.

Nora: The fact that *he* [emphasis added] did that and there was no punishment for it. Like wouldn't it make all the other kids upset. Like you couldn't do that.

Myra: Yeah, with no consequence when *he* [emphasis added] took over the part.

Ariana: *He* [emphasis added] should have gotten the part in the first place.

Another preservice teacher in her reflection on *George* also used the incorrect pronoun, writing, "I am very happy that George was accepted by the people *he* cares most about." According to Yarbrough (2018), pronoun usage is extremely important and using the correct pronoun conveys that "you have heard them and recognise them for who they are" (p. 23). Once again, I do not think any of these preservice teachers intended to ignore the pronoun usage in the novel *George* and chose to instead assign a male pronoun to Melissa. Each of these preservice teachers were displaying consciousness bias.

As seen with Milo, conscientisation is a reflexive process. This bias might seem quite easy to confront. Why not just call out the offence to make the preservice teachers conscious of their implicit ideologies and biases? Again, the approach to this bias needs to be carefully considered. Calling-out someone for consciousness bias could be interpreted as hostility, and then consciousness bias would be replaced by reciprocity bias. This bias may best be confronted by what is termed "calling-in" (Woods & Ruscher, 2021). Calling-in is a way to sensitively assist in conscientisation. "Calling-in involves taking people aside ... and addressing them in a patient, caring, and human way to help them grow" (Woods & Ruscher, 2021, p. 55). This can be just a gentle observation written about terminology in response to a written reflection, or a private nonconfrontational conversation discussing proper terminology with the individual. The intent is to allow a growth in consciousness that humanises both the offender and the one who would be offended by the unconscious bias. The ultimate goal is to reveal hegemonic implicit bias and develop an expanded mindset.

Contact bias

The final form of bias that *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) reveals and is important to recognise and address in promoting critical reflexive literacy practices is contact bias. Contact bias is an implicit prejudice towards other races and ethnicities due to limited contact (Chiroro & Valentine, 1995). In *Milo Imagines the World*, contact bias is seen when Milo locks eyes with the white boy who entered the subway train with perfectly combed hair and dressed in fancy clothes. As they lock eyes, Milo feels intense discomfort. The illustration shows Milo with his eyes wide and a look of stunned silence. The white boy stares back with the same frightened look. The text reads, "They lock eyes for a few long seconds, and suddenly it feels like the walls are closing in around Milo" (de la Peña, 2021, p. 18).

The goal of my teacher research was to provide opportunity to come into contact and learn from the perspectives of others through diverse literature. However, I wondered if the introduction to these perspectives was too limited to overcome contact bias. Many of the responses of the preservice teachers towards the characters in the books were based on sympathetic reactions or pity. The contact they had through reading diverse literature may not have been enough to break through implicit prejudice and feelings of indifference or superiority and may have had the unanticipated consequence of affirming stereotypes. Rather than growing in understanding of the other, they only "locked eyes for a few long seconds" (de la Peña, 2021, p. 18). This potential consequence of just being uncomfortable for a brief time is antithetical to a critical reflexive mindset.

Research has shown that when individuals meet and form a personal connection to someone from a previously devalued outgroup, their implicit attitude towards that group changes (Greenwald & Kreiger, 2006). This made me wonder how it might be possible to develop this type of connection in a critical reflexive approach to literacy. Short (2019a) discusses the importance of an empathetic rather than sympathetic connection to characters whose cultural locations and experiences differ greatly from

the reader. “Considering when they have felt loneliness or fear and connecting at a deeper emotional level can fuel a sense of connection with characters” (p. 9). Short also points out the need for intertextuality, bringing in other texts and media that extend the preservice teachers’ exposure to the diversity within various cultural, racial, social and religious groups.

I considered how one of the major projects in the course might be adapted to address contact bias. The preservice teachers could be asked to rank order their familiarity and understanding of various cultural and ethnic groups encountered through multicultural and global literature. For their final project, they would be asked to prepare a text set of books around their least understood group and to conduct an interview with someone from that cultural or ethnic group. The text set would provide the opportunity for more extensive understanding of experiences. The interview would provide a personal encounter. Through transacting with a variety of texts and making a personal connection, contact bias could be addressed and potentially replaced by a critical reflexive mindset of learning from others.

Discussion and implications

Bourdieu (1979) points out that symbolic social systems that create power imbalances are actively constructed. If we reflexively consider what we believe to be true, then we can potentially transform our world by transforming our representation of the symbolic structures. Bourdieu believed in the importance of reflexive sociology as an opportunity to step back and recognise the ways in which we are personally manipulated by the society in which we evolved. “When you apply reflexive sociology to yourself, you open up the possibility of identifying true sites of freedom, and thus of building small-scale, modest, practical morals in keeping with the scope of human freedom” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 215).

Milo Imagines the World (de la Peña, 2021) reveals how reflexivity can lead to broadened perspectives. Milo is able to recognise his own biases and take a step back to reimagine and reframe his own beliefs. He is able to consciously recognise how the experiences of others may be far different than his personal perceptions. Developing a cosmopolitan disposition requires reflexivity. This was the reason I chose to refer to cosmopolitan literacy as critical reflexive literacy. The function of reflexivity is to expose the underlying values and assumptions on which one’s perspectives and worldviews are constructed (Holland, 2016). *Milo Imagines the World* is the perfect tool to begin dialogue on the importance of reflexivity in overcoming implicit bias and hegemonic thinking. The story and pictures provide a metalanguage for various types of implicit bias and the importance of recognising these areas of bias in order to develop a hospitable and ever-expanding worldview.

As I consider future work in developing and encouraging a critical reflexive approach to literacy, I take inspiration from *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021). *Milo Imagines the World* can be used as an important tool for opening dialogue around the nature of implicit bias. While each individual sees the world through their own perspective, it is possible to reimagine and embrace a more diverse and inclusive world. It requires a reflexive critique of personal biases and an empathetic openness to new perspectives.

The essential question in literacy education is whose world is being presented and whose world is being dismissed in the classroom. Luke (2018) points out that texts used in curriculums are seen as imparting truth:

Precisely because we are so steeped in dominant cultural traditions because we have been successful at learning and assimilating these traditions, it is difficult to see those discourses and versions of culture, voices, experiences, and images that are silenced or excluded. (p. 42)

Recognising the exclusion of these voices and perspectives is the goal of critical literacy. Critical reflexive literacy focuses on ways to not only include these voices and perspectives, but to also learn from them.

The most obvious way that critical reflexive literacy practices are included in reading education is through the selection of texts. The texts that teachers select to include in their literacy classrooms matter. Literacy education should awaken a consciousness of the stories being told and what these stories express about identity. Books and texts should highlight the variety of life experiences of students in the classroom, community, nation and around the globe. Learning how to locate texts that validate marginalised groups' cultural experiences and broaden understandings of global cultural experience are part of developing a critical reflexive approach to literacy. In locating these texts, Short (2019a) points out that a variety of texts need to be included to avoid stereotyping cultures as well as encouraging dialogic inquiry around the literature. Choo (2014) also discusses the importance of intertextuality in literacy practices:

Intertextuality functions as a form of ethical interruption since the aim is to guide students to move beyond their own interpretive judgments of the other in order to expand their imaginative capacity to perceive multiple value systems in the world. (p. 81).

In recognising how literacy practices impact perspectives, it has become all the more necessary in our diverse global society to carefully consider approaches to teaching literacy. Locating books like *Milo Imagines the World* (de la Peña, 2021) and using these books in the classroom to confront hegemonic thinking provides a way for literacy to become a tool for awakening consciousness. I believe that a very important key to reconnecting literacy to expanding consciousness and ethos is a recognition of the power of language and story. Stories provide a context to question our world and our view of that world. Stories “remind us that we have to live with complicated truths” (Frank, 2010, p. 5). We have to learn to live with each other and with the diversity that living with each other demands. I believe that a critical reflexive approach to literacy is the next step in the evolution of literacy practices bridging the gap across the complexities of a diverse and global society through a reflective and critical understanding of self and others.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TEDGlobal.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
- Bishop, R. S. (1990, March 5). *Windows and mirrors: Children's books and parallel cultures* [Presentation]. Reading Conference. California State University, San Bernardino, CA, United States.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). Symbolic power. *Critique of anthropology*, 4(13–14), 77–85.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X7900401307>
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Budhos, M. (2006). *Ask me no questions* (1st ed.). Atheneum Books for Young Readers.
- Cacho, L. M. (2012). *Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*. New York University Press.
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2021). Reflexivity. In *Cambridge English dictionary*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/>
- Casey, E. S., & Watkins, M. (2014). *Up against the wall: Re-imagining the U.S.-Mexico border*. University of Texas Press.

- Chiroro, P., & Valentine, T. (1995). An investigation of the contact hypothesis of the own-race bias in face recognition. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 48(4), 879–894. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14640749508401421>
- Choo, S. S. (2014). Cultivating a hospitable imagination: Re-envisioning the world literature curriculum through a cosmopolitan lens. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(1), 68–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12037>
- Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55(1), 591–621. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55090902.142015>
- Daniels, G. (2020). *Uncounted: The crisis of voter suppression in the United States*. University Press.
- de la Peña, M. (2021). *Milo imagines the world*. (C. Robinson, Illus.). G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Frank, A. W. (2010). *Letting stories breathe: A socio-narratology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). Cultural action and conscientization. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 499.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Bergin and Garvey.
- Gino, A. (2015). *George*. Scholastic.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine.
- Greenwald, A. G., & Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological Review*, 102(1), 4–27. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.102.1.4>
- Greenwald, A. G., & Krieger, L. H. (2006). Implicit bias: Scientific foundations. *California Law Review*, 94(4), 945–967.
- Greenwald, A.G., & Lai, C.K. (2020). Implicit social cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 71(1), 419–445. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010419-050837>
- Hansen, D. T. (2017). Cosmopolitanism as education: A philosophy for educators in our time. *Religious Education*, 112(3), 207–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2017.1308180>
- Holland, R. (2016). Reflexivity. *Human Relations (New York)*, 52(4), 463–484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679905200403>
- Lai, T. (2013). *Inside out and back again*. Harper Collins.
- Luke, A. (2018). *Critical literacy, schooling, and social justice: The selected works of Allan Luke*. Routledge.
- McLaren, B. D. (2019). *Why don't they get it? Overcoming bias*. Brianmclaren.net
- Mynatt, C. R., Doherty, M. E., & Tweney, R. D. (1977). Confirmation bias in a simulated research environment: An experimental study of scientific inference. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 29(1), 85–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335557743000053>
- Neuendorf, K. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2006). *How picturebooks work*. Routledge.
- Rios, A. (2015). "The border: A double sonnet". *A small story about the sky*. Copper Canyon Press.
- Short, K. G. (2019a). The dangers of reading globally. *Bookbird*, 57(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2019.0025>
- Short, K. (2019b). Critical content analysis of visual images. In H. Johnson, J. Mathis, & K. G. Short (Eds.), *Critical content analysis of visual images in books for young people: Reading images* (pp. 4–22). Routledge.
- Staats, C. (2016). Understanding implicit bias: What educators should know. *The Education Digest*, 82(1), 29.
- Walch, A., Davidge-Pitts, C., Safer, J. D., Lopez, X., Tangpricha, V., & Iwamoto, S. J. (2021). Proper care of transgender and gender diverse persons in the setting of proposed discrimination: A

policy perspective. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 106(2), 305–308.
<https://doi.org/10.1210/clinem/dgaa816>

Woods, F. A. & Ruscher, J. B. (2021). Calling-out vs. calling-in prejudice: Confrontation style affects inferred motive and expected outcomes. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60, 50–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12405>

Yarbrough, E. (2018). *Transgender mental health*. American Psychiatric Association.