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Dorinda J. Carter

Georgina M. Montgomery

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# The Social Justice Reading Group: Helping Youth Explore Culture, Difference, and (In)Equity through Children’s Literature

by Dorinda J. Carter Andrews  
and Georgina M. Montgomery



## Introduction

Young children have a keen awareness of and passion for fairness at an early age. Whether at home, on the playground, or in the classroom, children often demand what is right and shun what is wrong. Although they might not understand the difference between equality (sameness) and equity (providing individuals and groups what they *need*, although that might not be the same for all groups), children want to be treated the same as their peers (equally) and have their needs met (equitably). However, through intentional and unintentional mechanisms, children are socialized very early in life to place value judgments on cultural differences. This socialization begins at home with parents and guardians and continues through interactions with various individuals and institutions in society (Harro, 2000). School is one of the socializing agents that helps children develop their ideas and understandings of various markers of social difference: race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, etc. Through curriculum, policies, procedures, and classroom norms, children begin to understand their world in ways that illuminate issues of power, privilege, and disadvantage. These understandings are often misinformed by singular and/or oppressive dominant narratives and discourses *in schools* that further privilege some children and marginalize others.

We have witnessed the manifestation of these harmful narratives post- the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In the context of societal hate speech and violence against immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, Jews, and LGBTQ individuals, schools have been sites of violent acts against individuals who identify as members of these communities. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reported that during the first five weeks after the election, more than 1,000 bias-related incidents were documented. The majority of these incidents



**Dorinda J.  
Carter Andrews**



**Georgina M.  
Montgomery**

occurred in K-12 schools.<sup>i</sup> Michigan schools have not been immune to the effects of violent speech and acts against students of marginalized groups post-election. The Michigan Department of Civil Rights monitored 71 reported incidents of bullying and harassment—more than half of which originated at K-12 schools, colleges, and universities—between November 8, 2016 and December 2, 2016.<sup>ii</sup> Yet, schools are often unresponsive to the pressing need to cultivate skills in youth for respecting cultural differences and having effective cross-cultural communication and interactions. As parents of young children ranging in age from six months to nine years, we understand that we can't rely

on schools to be the sole entity responsible for teaching children about cultural difference, equity, and how to be change agents in their communities and the world.

Literature is a historical and contemporary medium through which children learn to read and name their world (Freire, 1970), “see” themselves in social justice dialogue, learn how to advocate for what is just, and understand how to resist the unjust. We believe our children’s local schools do an effective job of promoting children’s ability to read. They encourage our children to read for at least 20 minutes each night; this could include reading to someone else, reading by themselves, or being read to by an adult. However, given the high-stakes accountability era in which teaching and learning currently occur, there is very little room for teachers to utilize the curriculum to meaningfully engage youth in robust discussions about diversity and social justice topics. Despite the availability of books providing a gateway through which to explore social justice issues, communities often lack forums where children can hear *and* discuss books about discrimination and (in) equity. We wanted to create an out-of-school learning space where parents of young children could see their children engaged in a literacy activity that promoted cultural awareness and explicitly addressed issues of social justice. Out-of-school learning spaces are additional resources where this enhanced dialogue and critical consciousness-raising can occur.

In this essay, we discuss the origins of our social justice reading group and the form it has taken with the hope that other communities will consider similar collaborations between their universities, public libraries, and broader community to create safe spaces for children, parents, and educators to explore culture, difference, and (in)equity through children’s literature. Our hope was that this university-community partnership would promote children’s ability to learn about social justice using a critical literacy approach (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) whereby they could explore how and why historical and contemporaneous privileging of and exclusion of specific social and cultural groups occurs and what they might do at micro (local school and community) and macro (state and beyond) levels.

## Inspiration for the Social Justice Reading Group

Georgina. As a white woman with white children, I wanted to expand my discussions of race with my oldest daughter beyond a “we are all equal and the same” approach to include historical examples and contemporary realities of racial prejudice and the need to understand that sometimes rules, norms, or individual’s choices or actions may be unjust and require scrutiny. One day, my daughter and I engaged in a conversation about race and racial justice as we walked hand in hand from the school to the park. The following day, my daughter came up to me holding a book about Jackie Robinson (Meltzer 2015). She said excitedly, “I want to share this at Share Day today.” When asked why that book, she said, “Because people were mean to Jackie Robinson and treated him unfairly because of the color of his skin. But he stood up for what is right, even though that was hard for him to do, and I want to stand up for what is right, too!” Here, a six-year-old pieced together a complex puzzle by drawing on the history of civil rights in the United States and the ongoing development of her own views of social justice. In order to put the puzzle together, she turned to *books*.

Dorinda. I am a former K-12 teacher and an African American woman raising three African American daughters who embody three different beautiful shades of brown skin. Around the age of 2 or 3, my oldest daughter (who is now nine) told me, “Mommy, my skin is pink like Uncle Dwayne’s.” My daughter’s skin is a very light shade of brown, and because her eyes are greyish-green and her hair is sandy brown, some might racialize her as biracial (having one Black parent and one white parent). Uncle Dwayne (my brother-in-law) is indeed a white male. My daughter’s announcement began a conversation in our kitchen about the difference between racial categories and skin tone. I utilized the book *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children* (2006) to help my daughters understand that people in the racial category “Black/African American” have skin that represents a variety of shades of brown, and that people’s skin color does not always match their racial category. (They couldn’t understand why our racial

category was “Black,” but our skin tone wasn’t.) This early discussion of race and skin tone led to subsequent discussions about racial discrimination based on skin tone. These are regular conversations in our home, and children’s books have been a resource for exploring not only race and racism, but also other forms of (in)equity related to social identity markers.

As scholars whose research centers equity and social justice—one of us with a focus in education and the other with a focus in science—and as parents of young children, our professional and personal worlds often overlap and inform one another. For example, when Georgina felt it was time to begin more complex and meaningful discussions of race, racism, and racial justice with her six-year old, she was informed by scholarship in her field of the history of science, but also knew that Dorinda would be a great person to ask for help within her social and professional circle. Even as professors who have published on issues of gender and race, such conversations over the dinner table with our children do not come easily. However, as other parents may often find themselves telling their children, the most worthwhile and important things in life tend to involve some difficulty and hard work.

## Format and Best Practices

We formed the Social Justice Reading Group (SJRG) as a collaboration between Michigan State University (MSU), MSU sponsors, and the East Lansing (MI) Public Library. Youth in the East Lansing and Greater Lansing area are surrounded by MSU faculty who research and write issues related to racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of bias. The SJRG provides a forum for educating children about social justice issues related to topics such as gender, race, ethnicity, Indigenous rights, protest, and social class. The reading group also offers a safe space for a diverse group of children and their parents to engage in dialogue about social justice topics with MSU faculty and graduate students, as well as community volunteers. Further, the SJRG provides MSU pre-service teachers with experience engaging children in critical literacy activities prior to assuming their own classrooms. Through the SJRG, youth between the ages of

4 and 11 have increased exposure to a variety of children’s book on cultural diversity and (in)equity.

We also wanted the SJRG to be a space where parents could see dialogue modeled on how to start important conversations with their children about topics that are often difficult for adults to engage in with critical care and cultural humility. Children began attending monthly meetings in January 2017 with their parents/guardians. Each month, they are split into three reading groups according to age (4-5, 6-8, and 9-11) and are read two books selected by MSU faculty and students related to the month’s theme (see Table 1). After the books are read, children engage in dialogue about the texts through the facilitation of MSU pre-service teachers and library volunteers. We collaboratively construct discussion questions with MSU pre-service teachers, focusing on three areas: 1) comprehension questions about the story; 2) how the story relates to children’s own experiences; and 3) how children may apply what they have learned from the stories to their local communities and thinking about justice in the world. After discussion, the children are invited to take part in a craft activity designed to complement the month’s topic. For example, in March when we covered Indigenous rights, children were able to make Native American bone chokers and were provided a small handout on the purpose of the choker in tribes. When parents and children leave the event, parents take a book list composed by the children’s librarians that provides additional titles that can be used to continue conversation on the month’s topic at home.

Because we want to provide an inclusive space, we identify book readers we know who represent the cultural diversity of the local community. Our readers have included faculty and other adults who cross boundaries related to race, ethnicity, social class, religion, and gender. In February, when the topic was racial justice, all of our readers were people of color (e.g., African American, Latinx, African, Asian Indian). In March, when the topic was Indigenous rights, five of the six readers were from various tribal communities, and all the featured authors that month were Indigenous. Diversity has also been evident each month in the audience with children

**Table 1** - Monthly topics and book selections<sup>iii</sup>

Month (2017)	Topic	Books (by age group)
January	Being a welcoming and inclusive community	<p><u>Ages 4-5</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Welcome</i> by Barroux</li> <li>• <i>Two White Rabbits</i> by Jairo Buitrago</li> </ul> <p><u>Ages 6-11</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Amelia's Road</i> by Linda Jacobs Altman</li> <li>• <i>The Colour of Home</i> by Mary Hoffman</li> </ul>
February	Race and Racial Justice	<p><u>Ages 4-5</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Other Side</i> by Jacqueline Woodson</li> <li>• <i>Whoever You Are</i> by Mem Fox</li> </ul> <p><u>Ages 6-8</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ron's Big Mission</i> by Rose Blue</li> <li>• <i>Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i> by Duncan Tonatiuh</li> </ul>
		<p><u>Ages 9-11</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez</i> by Kathleen Krull</li> <li>• <i>Fifty Cents and a Dream: Young Booker T. Washington</i> by Jabari Asim</li> </ul>
March	Indigenous Rights	<p><u>Ages 4-5</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Raven and the Loon</i> by Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley</li> <li>• <i>The Thundermaker</i> by Alan Syliboy</li> </ul> <p><u>Ages 6-8</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Jingle Dancer</i> by Cynthia Leitich Smith</li> <li>• <i>Thunderboy Jr.</i> by Sherman Alexie</li> </ul> <p><u>Ages 9-11</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Copper Heart" in <i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> (by Hope Nicholson and various)</li> <li>• "Coyote and the Pebbles" in <i>Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection</i> (by Hope Nicholson and various)</li> </ul>
April	Gender Diversity and Gender Stereotypes	To Be Decided

from a wide range of races, ethnicities, family structures, and socioeconomic backgrounds in attendance.

Feminist scholar bell hooks states, "What we do is more important than what we say or what we say we believe." We see the initiation of this reading group as one way that we, as mother-scholars, can actually *live* what we research, theorize, and believe. The reading group is a praxis project (Freire, 1970), bridging theory and action using a critical literacy approach. We have also seen praxis modeled in the group itself. During the February event, one of the books read was *Ron's Big Mission*. This book is about an African American boy standing up to demand the right to check out books at his local library. At this meeting, Kristin Shelley, the East Lansing Public Library director, publicly announced that the library should be a resource for *all* children and families and declared that non-East Lansing residents could have free library cards. This was a bold stance, given that most city libraries only allow free library cards to their residents and charge a fee or do not allow access to check out resources to non-residents. At an institutional level, Kristin put her social justice beliefs into action, and the Greater Lansing community will be positively affected by this. The children were also able to see this action as a way to enact positive change in one's community.

We are still compiling data regarding the impact of the Social Justice Reading Group on children, parents, pre-service teachers, and the library volunteers. However, preliminary feedback clearly indicates that families find great value in a community forum for discussing issues of (in)equity with their children, the guidance provided by the faculty-selected texts, and the lists for further reading compiled by the East Lansing Public Library's children's librarians. This is partly evidenced by the fact that, though we anticipated approximately 30 children would register to attend, we have had an average of 150 children attend each month. Collectively, the readers, texts, crafts, volunteers, and reading lists provide families with directions for continuing their exploration of social justice issues at home.

The program has also been embraced across the state, with East Lansing Library being contacted for guidance

about how other libraries can implement similar initiatives. We hope to inspire other faculty and public libraries to partner in creating safe, inclusive, critical environments where young people can engage with the many important and complex issues concerning culture, difference, and (in)equity that they encounter through books and in their everyday lived experiences.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-1094-bias-related-incidents-month-following-election>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2016/12/state\\_monitoring\\_71\\_incidents.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2016/12/state_monitoring_71_incidents.html)

<sup>iii</sup> For more information, including the further reading lists compiled by East Lansing Public Library, see here: [https://www.elpl.org/browse\\_program/social-justice-reading-group/](https://www.elpl.org/browse_program/social-justice-reading-group/)

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## Author Biographies

**Dorinda J. Carter Andrews** is Assistant Dean for Equity Outreach Initiatives and Associate Professor of Teacher Education in the College of Education at Michigan State University. Her research focuses broadly on race and racism in education. [dcarterandrews@gmail.com](mailto:dcarterandrews@gmail.com)

**Georgina M. Montgomery** is Associate Professor of the History of Science at Michigan State University with a joint appointment in Lyman Briggs College and the Department of History. She is co-editor of *Making Animal Meaning* (2011) and *A Companion to the History of Science* (2016), and author of *Primates in the Real World: Escaping Primate Folklore and Creating Primate Science* (2015). [montg165@msu.edu](mailto:montg165@msu.edu)