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## Welcoming Counterstory in the Primary Literacy Classroom

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*Counterstories are a tool used by minoritized communities to tell stories that reflect their experiences and knowledge. Counterstories challenge the stock stories and grand narratives accepted by the majority and put forth in school curriculum. As young children tend to speak openly and share their responses to literature candidly, counterstory can be a powerful tool for empowering children in the primary literacy classroom. The author reflects on her experience in primary literacy classrooms engaging children in telling their counterstories in response to children's literature. The pedagogical promise of counterstory and ways of eliciting and welcoming counterstory in the primary literacy classroom are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry

Stories build consensus, create bonds, and establish a common culture of shared understanding (Delgado, 2013). Critical race theory employs the concept of *counterstories*, or unofficial stories that challenge the master narrative of those in power (Chapman, 2007). Although people from dominant groups often fail to explore counterstories and may reject them as extreme or implausible, counterstories challenge the status quo, confront exclusion, highlight widely-held unjust beliefs, and call for a reallocation of power (Delgado, 2013). In elementary literacy classrooms, young children often speak honestly and forthrightly about their beliefs and experiences. When they share these beliefs and experiences in reactions to children's literature, they can provide opportunities to explore counterstory in the primary literacy classroom.

In this reflective essay, I explain counterstory as a tool of critical race theory. I reflect on my experience (as a White, female teacher and researcher) in primary literacy classrooms as students respond to children's literature in ways that contradict dominant narratives. I analyze my own responses to these moments and consider how teachers might approach welcoming students' counterstories as an everyday practice of social justice. I explore the pedagogical possibilities of counterstories and provide examples of how some educators have welcomed counterstories in their classrooms.

Throughout this essay, I use the terms "dominant" and "marginalized" or "minoritized" to refer to different groups. This language choice (instead of "majority" and "minority") reflects the changing demographics in the United States and the lacking empirical basis for socially constructed distinctions between racial groups (Darder & Torres, 2003). By "dominant," I refer to the historical power structure in the United States, which has

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typically been filled by White, Protestant males. By “marginalized” or “minoritized,” I refer to people of color who have often not had access to power in the United States.

### **Counterstory**

All societies have official, master, or meta narratives that are told by those in power to give themselves legitimacy and to attempt to put forth a common set of cultural ideals (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 2013; Gramsci, 1999). Elementary teachers are familiar with components of these master narratives as themes that comprise part of the hidden curriculum of schools (Giroux, 1984). Examples include (a) teaching the Civil Rights Movement as an “unambiguous narrative of triumph” (Driver, 2011, p. 157), leaving students with the idea that racism is in the past; (b) positioning the United States as a land of freedom and opportunity for all throughout its history and in its present; or (c) teaching that police officers are community helpers who always protect citizens. Many students, from their lived experiences and funds of knowledge accumulated within their communities (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), know that these narratives are not applicable to all people. Students push back against these ideas by telling counterstories, which challenge the master narrative by bringing in their own life experience to tell a different story, a story not subsumed by and that challenges society’s master narrative.

Critical theory holds that power permeates all relationships; certain groups have privilege that others do not; oppression exists in many forms; and mainstream practices, including classroom practices, often reinforce oppressive systems organized around class, race, and gender (DeCuir-Gunby, Walker-DeVose, Lynn, & Dixon, 2013). These mainstream practices buttress the master narrative and do not always create space for the experiences and knowledge of marginalized populations. In contrast, critical race theorists assume the “experiential knowledge of people of color” to be valid and valuable (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). For this reason, the counterstories told by people in marginalized groups offer valuable data for researchers working in the critical race tradition and teachers who work with students from communities rich with counterstories.

The theoretical literature about counterstories proposes the transformative power of telling a story that reflects one’s own experiences even though it challenges the master narrative. Writers have indicated that counterstories have great potential and attributed many lofty outcomes to them. For example, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) suggested that counterstories help minoritized groups to unify their communities, analyze the arguments made against these communities in the dominant narrative, and defend themselves from such claims. Solórzano and Yosso explained that counterstories are a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” that can “shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 27). Counterstories function to challenge the “perceived wisdom of those at society’s center,” reveal new possibilities beyond the current reality, and teach “that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 36). Other writers have added nurturing community wealth, supporting collective memory, deconstructing the dominant discourse, exposing White privilege and other oppressive systems, and deconstructing deficit views of people of color as potential

outcomes of counterstorytelling (Alemán, Jr & Alemán, 2010). Delgado (2013) echoed many of these benefits of counterstorytelling, adding that counterstories can expose dominant beliefs that reinforce hegemony as “ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel,” “show ... the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion,” and even show communities (of both dominant and minoritized people) “when it is time to reallocate power” (p. 72).

Lynne and Dixon (2013) explained that in critical race theory, narratives “reveal that racism and racial discrimination are neither aberrant nor occasional parts of the lives of people of color” (p. 19). Thus, counterstories serve to legitimize the everyday experience of minoritized communities, an experience often denied by dominant groups and the hidden curriculum of schools. Counterstories allow students to challenge the stock stories in the curriculum, and put forth new, contextualized stories that reflect their own experiences. Cook (2013) explained that counterstorytelling employs “the grounded everyday experiences of marginalized people...to generate knowledge...thus epistemologically centering those most often rendered invisible and silent...” (p. 186).

Given the promise of counterstory, it makes sense to employ it as a powerful tool for elementary literacy teaching. As children progress through elementary school, they often become increasingly disassociated and dissatisfied with school when they observe the cultural mismatch between their home life and the institutional expectations of school. This realization can take the form of noticing that their teachers do not look or talk like them, that the characters in the books they read do not share their backgrounds, or that the norms and goals of school do not mesh with their own. Welcoming counterstory encourages students to develop and strengthen community among themselves, exercise agency as they push back against the stock stories of school, and allows the teacher to communicate that the students’ knowledge and experiences are legitimate and valued in the school setting. It also allows students to deconstruct power in their local settings and imagine alternate realities. This realization and discussion forms the foundation for students taking action to transform their local contexts.

Welcoming counterstory is not unlike the general tenets of culturally responsive teaching. In culturally responsive teaching, teachers utilize the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of their students as a means to teach knowledge and skills. In this way of teaching, teachers and students explore unequal distributions of power and privilege (Gay, 2010). Embracing students’ counterstories provides one way for teachers to employ culturally relevant strategies. It allows them to know and legitimize their students’ knowledge, which they can then connect to the curriculum, and it provides an opening to discuss issues of power and privilege.

Similarly, teachers actively working to cultivate critical literacy among their students welcome counterstories in their reading and writing instruction. Critical literacy involves helping students to uncover the assumptions behind a text, consider multiple points of view, approach texts with a sociopolitical focus, and consider how the text and associated discussion might spark social justice action (Lewison, Leland, Harste, & Christensen, 2007). Critically literate students use literacy, including digital literacies to “reposition themselves, gather information, change perspective, re-theorize issues, and take thoughtful social action” through writing and in response to reading (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, p. 94). For example, teachers have worked with young White students to have critical discussions about race in response to books selected for guided reading (Labadie, Wetzel,

& Rogers, 2012). They have encouraged students with immigrant backgrounds to write their own stories of immigration in an effort to “complicate dominant narratives of American national identity—narratives of facile assimilation, meritocracy, and linear trajectories” (Ghiso & Low, 2013, p. 26). An Australian teacher invited her second and third grade students to write about issues in their local community, and then used student writing as a point from which to rearrange the curriculum in order to explore social issues of importance to the students (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001). While those naming their work as “critical literacy” do not often use the language of counterstory, the similar goals of these two traditions make it worth putting them in conversation with each other.

Welcoming counterstory in the classroom is of course no silver bullet. Williams (2004) explained, “No one envisions counterstorytelling as a magic solution to inequities constructed around race” (p. 188). Counterstories may produce tension and frustration for the teacher, other students, and the student sharing the story before they produce transformation. Counterstories also raise messy questions concerning truth. The goal of counterstorytelling is not to determine that one person’s experience or story is more valid than another story. As Atwood and López (2014) explained, “Counterstories do not aim to provide a truer understanding of truth, but rather, to complicate our understanding of ‘truth’” (p. 1145). No doubt teachers and students from dominant groups will initially object to some counterstories; such is the nature of counterstory. However, the process of welcoming counterstory in the primary classroom is important for both groups: the minoritized group and the dominant group.

While counterstories are no panacea, they serve as an important catalyst in the classroom for discussing issues that teachers often ignore, but that their students are quite well aware of. Counterstories introduce resistance to the dominant culture. They then require an acknowledgement and response from the community, hopefully leading to dialogue and communication (Williams, 2004). I now turn to some examples of counterstory in the primary literacy classroom.

### **Classroom Experience and Reflection**

Like most teachers, I have been surprised by the connections to texts made and shared by students. When planning literacy lessons, it is hard to imagine where the text will take the students, and most teachers have had the experience of a seemingly innocuous text raising unexpected controversial issues and perhaps eliciting counterstories from students. Here I share two examples from my own classroom experience and reflect on the strengths and missed opportunities in the way I responded. I approach these descriptions and analysis from my own position as a White female educator working in diverse public schools. In the first case, I was the classroom teacher in my last year of teaching before returning to graduate school. In the second case, I was a research assistant conducting a study in another teacher’s class. At both times, I would have described myself as committed to social justice and believed myself sensitive to racial issues. However, as the analysis shows, I had (and certainly still have) considerable room to grow in these areas.

### **Harris and “People like You”**

In my final year of teaching, I worked at a diverse, bilingual, public school. The students in my class mostly self-identified as Black. Our class also had Asian-American, Latin@, and White students. One morning in my third grade classroom, a group of students gathered on the rug with me to peruse their National Geographic readers. These magazine-style readers presented a variety of nonfiction articles organized around a theme. The topic of the issue that morning was the efforts of slaves to educate themselves before the Civil War. It detailed the sacrifice and effort that many Black people went through to procure access to literacy at a time when the power structure denied them reading and writing instruction.

I asked the students to share their background knowledge about the topic to explain why it was significant. One of the students on the rug that morning, Harris, looked at me and said, “Because people like you didn’t want people like me to learn to read.” In this one sentence, Harris articulated a powerful counterstory that hit me forcefully. The official narrative of the curriculum was that lack of access to formal and informal education for Black people occurred in the past. Despite some notable heroes who surmounted this obstacle, it was no longer a problem. By situating educational inequity as part of a history that made no connections to the present, the book supported the notion of the hidden curriculum that racism and injustices towards Black people are regrettable parts of our history, but thankfully they have been overcome.

The official story of the school and my classroom would have said: Your teachers care about you. They want you to have the best education. They want you to learn to read and have the power that literacy affords. Your teachers expend great efforts to make this opportunity available to you. Many teachers at the school, like myself, would have thought of ourselves as working for modern day civil rights and social justice by providing quality education to minoritized students. However, Harris did not buy into this stock story. When Harris said, “people like you,” he did not mean people who go into teaching because they care about making a difference in the lives of students. He did not mean people who seek out professional development opportunities to improve the cultural relevance and overall effectiveness of their instruction for minoritized students. He did not mean people who spend their weekends planning and refining lessons to make literacy accessible for everyone. When Harris said, “people like you,” he meant *oppressor*.

I perceived myself as someone dedicated to social justice because I thought I worked hard to make good and culturally relevant literacy instruction available to my students. Harris did not see it that way. When Harris said, “people like you,” he meant White people in power who have historically made life for his community arduous, unfair, dangerous, and limited. His comment showed me that not only did he view this oppression as an artifact of history, but that in the present he considered people like me still in the role of oppressor.

When Harris made his comment, I stared at him in stunned silence for a moment. I self-righteously thought, “People like me? Does he have any idea what people like me do? People like me read the research and scholarship of educators of color to better understand how to serve our students! People like me pay for degrees out of our own pockets to learn how to offer the best literacy education that we can! People like me spend hours online reading book reviews to find culturally relevant literature to make our literacy instruction

more engaging!” But, it did not matter because “people like me” kept people like Harris from being able to read. After a few moments, I looked at Harris and told him he was right: people like me did do exactly what he charged.

Harris’s counterstory showed me that despite my grandiose notions of myself as an educator committed to social justice, somehow this message was not coming through. Harris did not find my classroom to be a freeing place. I must have been doing, or not doing, something that undermined the culturally responsive and liberatory teaching that I wanted to do. While Harris, like all students, had many issues that affected the way he responded to school, I believe that it was most likely that my classroom management style and the types of behaviors that were socially rewarded or that I called out as unacceptable alienated Harris. Harris sometimes had difficulty conforming to the expectations of school and my firm insistence that he figure out how to align himself with classroom norms even on days when he was clearly overwhelmed by other issues in his life likely made it hard for him to view me as anything other than oppressive.

Harris showed great bravery by voicing his counterstory that day in response to the literature selection. He summoned the courage to essentially tell me that he saw me as no different from people that he knew I would not want to identify with. It was children’s literature that created the space for this conversation to occur: Our practice of sharing connections to the literature as a community allowed Harris to feel safe enough to say something that would challenge me as the teacher and raise questions about my sincerity, consistency, and motivations. While this event occurred in the context of a primary literacy activity, the counterstory had an effect on the whole school experience, not just the literacy block. It forced me to think about how I positioned myself and then how my students saw me. It challenged me to consider ways in which my actions undermined my supposed beliefs and how these actions contributed to a student viewing me as oppressive.

### **Brandi and the Police**

After I returned to graduate school, I worked as a research assistant on a year-long ethnographic project to document effective literacy instruction in a first grade classroom. In this class, the teacher encouraged students to read books of their choice and to respond to them on sticky notes that they used to record their thinking as they read. Later as a group, they would discuss their sticky notes in truly grand conversations where they shared their thinking and engaged with their peers. As a research assistant, I would confer with students while they read and ask them to share their thinking and tell me about their books.

On this particular morning, I met with Brandi. She had chosen to read a book from the *Mercy Watson* series, a series of chapter books for emergent readers. In the book, Mercy (a pig) drives a car. When she drives recklessly, a police officer pursues her. While conferring with Brandi, I saw that she had made a note about the word “officer” because she was not sure how to read it. After I helped her chunk the word to read it, I asked her if she knew what an officer was. She said yes and elaborated: “Some police officers are bad and arrest black people for no reason. Like, I’m black, so I might get arrested for no reason.” This response occurred after the high-profile deaths of unarmed black men (e.g., Eric Garner, Michael Brown Jr.) and a young boy (Tamir Rice) at the hands of police.

Brandi's response reflects the counterstory within her community, and it contradicts the dominant narrative and typical school messages about police officers (i.e., that they are our friends and are here to keep us safe). Brandi's counterstory was widely accepted within her community and continued to gain broad traction the Black Lives Matter movement. Yet, it was not a story that many first grade teachers would want to engage and certainly not part of the stock stories that we tell in elementary school.

I recall not knowing how to respond to Brandi. I knew what she said was true, but I had the common desire to sanitize the world for her and reassure her that it would be okay. Many teachers, like I did, would probably want to reassure Brandi that this would never happen to her, that police officers protect us, that she has nothing to worry about if she follows the law, and that the cases she referred to were few and far between. But, as the news that year showed, the cases were not few and far between. The high-profile cases only made clear what many in the Black community had long known: that just because you are innocent does not mean you have nothing to fear. I did not know how to explore the real issues with someone so young. I told Brandi, "You're right. There are a lot of things in the United States that aren't fair, and people in Baltimore are protesting right now to try to change it." I recorded in my research journal for that day that it still felt like an unsatisfactory answer, that it did not acknowledge the full extent of the racial injustice that pervades our criminal justice system.

Because of the environment that Brandi's teacher created, she felt free to share her connections to literature. As a young student, she seemed uninhibited in making the connection between the word "officer" and the national news. She showed her comprehension by sharing this counterstory that probably most teachers would not imagine emerging from a discussion of *Mercy Watson*, a simple chapter book for early readers that makes no claim to address issues of race or justice. Yet, young children are attuned to their worlds and often see connections that adults do not. Creating an environment where these connections are invited opens the door for students to comfortably bring their counterstories to the broader discussion.

### **Critical Reflection, Imagining Alternatives**

As many teachers know, there is never one right way to respond to a situation. Teachers often go home and mentally reconstruct classroom events, imagining what they could have said or done to allow something to turn out better for a student. In both of these classroom stories, I think in some ways I responded well and in others I missed opportunities.

I am glad that I responded to both Harris and Brandi by first saying, "You're right." As a member of a privileged dominant group, I have to guard against the tendency to reject or discount the counterstories that minoritized communities know (Delgado, 2013). It is easy for me to situate racism in the past and to minimize the continual experience of racial injustice in the present because it is not *my* daily experience. Like many primary teachers, I want to emphasize the positive with my students, and it can be an overwhelming urge to discount anything sad or oppressive and turn students' attention to happier topics. I think it was right to respond to both students by acknowledging and accepting their counterstories with the words, "You're right."



I am also glad that I resisted the urge to completely sanitize the situations. I did not tell Harris what I was thinking; I did not argue with him about who “people like me” really were, but I instead listened and heard what he said. I did not insist that racial injustice in literacy education is over or that “people like me” are different today. I did not tell Brandi that her concerns were overblown and that she had nothing to worry about from the police officers in our community. I accepted her counterstory and affirmed that much in the US is not fair today. I validated the work of the protestors in Baltimore (and other places) in my response to Brandi, although I fear that this support was also a reflection of my desire to end the conversation on a positive note.

While I heard and accepted both students’ counterstories, I did not delve into them. Several years later, I can now imagine many alternative responses. I can imagine asking Harris to elaborate on “people like me” and asking him to tell me what made me like the people in the book. I can imagine asking him and the rest of the class to discuss how things have changed and how they have not: where they see racial progress in their communities and where they still see the real face of oppression. I know that my students that year talked about these issues when they thought teachers were not listening. I know that they talked about how Black kids got in trouble on the bus for things that White kids got away with. I know they noticed that the students in the dual language program were White, and the students in the “regular” program were Black. I know they saw educational inequality. By not engaging it, I did not make it go away or protect them from it. I simply lost an opportunity to accept their stories and begin discussions that might have had some transformative power in our local context.

I can imagine my relationship with Harris might have greatly improved had I engaged him in these issues. Harris’s mother sat across from me and cried during parent teacher conferences because Trayvon Martin had just been shot and his killer acquitted; she worried about what it would mean to raise a Black son in such a world. Racial inequality was a real part of Harris’s world and the conversations that occurred in his home and community.

With Brandi, I can imagine asking her to tell me more: to tell me more of what she knew, what she had heard, what she worried about. My comment about the protestors was meant to reassure her, to suggest that surely things would turn out all right. I can imagine giving her time to think and add whatever she wanted, rather than feeling the urge to say something to tidy up the conversation. I can imagine contacting her family so that they knew she was thinking about issues in the news and they could discuss it with her to the extent they felt appropriate.

In cases like these, teachers understandably want to avoid dwelling on topics that make students upset. However, the fact remains that students are already aware of these issues, talking about them in their communities, and developing counterstories as they learn the stock stories from school do not adequately explain their experiences and community knowledge. Failing to address the issues in developmentally appropriate ways, with the support from trained school counselors, and consent from families, does not make the issues go away. Rather, it communicates to students that school is not a place for dealing with the real issues of the community, and that their counterstories are not welcome there.

To truly do the work of social justice, I should have fully engaged these students’ comments. These two examples are illustrative and powerful, but young children in

primary classrooms bring their counterstories *all the time*; these two classroom moments are not rare ones. Teachers have the opportunity to respond to counterstories frequently, and making space for counterstories can become an everyday practice of social justice in the classroom because of how it validates student knowledge and experience and opens the door to transformative conversations and then action.

### **Pedagogical Possibilities of Counterstory**

I suggest teachers embrace and even elicit counterstories as students respond to text. I recommend teachers make space to hear these stories and even invite them as they encourage students to adopt a critical stance to responding to literature. Above all, I call on teachers to acknowledge counterstories and to welcome the dialogue they create rather than dismissing them from classroom discourse (Williams, 2004).

### **Intentional Text Selection**

I encourage teachers to critically examine texts and not shy away from those that draw out students' counterstories. Many talented authors have artfully addressed issues of social justice in their writing for children, and new books that raise social justice topics and invite counterstory enter the market every year. Table 1 contains a sample of some classic and newly released books that may elicit students' counterstories in the elementary literacy classroom. Teachers can expand the list through their own searches. They might consider consulting lists of award winners such as (a) the Coretta Scott King Award, awarded to children's books by African American authors that address the African American experience; (b) the Pura Belpré Award, Tomás Rivera Award, and Américas Award, each awarded to children's books addressing Latin@ themes and experiences; (c) the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature; (d) the American Indian Youth Literature Award; (e) the Amelia Bloomer Award, awarded to books celebrating the achievements of women; and (f) the Sydney Taylor Award for Jewish children's literature. Table 1 shows books that address contemporary issues in the United States. Teachers can easily find more books that address global or historical issues of social justice.

These books and many others create opportunities to invite counterstories into the literacy block as children respond to the texts (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013). Teachers should always pre-read the texts and thoughtfully generate questions to drive the discussion. If students end up taking the conversation in another direction creating counternarratives, it all the more shows their engagement and comprehension! Teachers may want to provide a list of the texts read in class to families in order to invite the discussion to continue at home. Some parents may have personal experiences with the topic that they would like to share with the class. Welcoming these parents into the classroom forges important home and school connections and helps students see the validity of counterstory.

Teachers should plan ways for students to respond to text, and students should have the clear idea that these are safe spaces to respond with their own experiences and counterstories. For example, teachers might facilitate class discussion and/or request

**Table 1:** Books addressing social justice themes

Book	Issues raised
Beaty, D., & Collier, B. (2013). <i>Knock knock: My dad’s dream for me</i> (1st ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.	Family diversity
Boelts, M. (2009). <i>Those shoes</i> . Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick.	Poverty
Bunting, E. (1993). <i>Fly away home</i> . New York: HMH Books for Young Readers.	Homelessness
Bunting, E. (1997). <i>A day’s work</i> . New York: HMH Books for Young Readers.	Working conditions, Language barriers
Hall, M. (2015). <i>Red: A crayon’s story</i> . Missing City Greenwillow Books.	Identity
Hoffman, M. (1991). <i>Amazing Grace</i> . New York: Dial Books.	
Lewis, J., & Aydin, A. (2013). <i>March: Book one</i> . Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.	Racial bias
Martin, J. B., & Allen, W. (2013). <i>Farmer Will Allen and the growing table</i> . Bellevue, Washington: Readers to Eaters.	Food justice
Polacco, P. (2009). <i>In our mothers’ house</i> . New York: Philomel Books.	Gender identity
Polacco, P. (2012). <i>Thank you, Mr. Falker</i> . New York, NY: Philomel Books.	Learning differences
Tonatiuh, D. (2014). <i>Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez and her family’s fight for desegregation</i> . New York: Harry N. Abrams.	Linguistic discrimination
Tonatiuh, D. (2013). <i>Pancho Rabbit and the coyote: A migrant’s tale</i> . New York: Harry N. Abrams.	Immigration
Williams, K. L., & Mohammed, K. (2016). <i>Four feet, two sandals</i> . Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.	
Williams, M., & Christie, R. G. (2005). <i>Brothers in hope: The story of the lost boys of Sudan</i> . New York: Lee & Low Books.	Refugee experience

journal responses. To guarantee the discussion as a safe space, teachers must work at the beginning of the year to establish norms that students listen to each other respectfully and that all contributions are welcome. For journal entries, students need to know that they can write what they want, and that someone will read, respond to, and follow-up on their writing.

Discussions of social justice and intentions to welcome counterstory will not always go as planned. Sometimes students do not show interest in an issue. Perhaps they do not have experience with it, find it too personal, or still need time to know that their teacher is sincere in welcoming their counterstories. If students fail to respond in the grand transformative conversation that the teacher imagined during planning, the teacher may simply try again with a different text later. It is important to be consistent, to not welcome counterstory in a lesson where it was planned, but then to silence it at other times. If teachers continually work to create safe spaces for literary response, students sense the sincerity and begin to share their experiences. On the other hand, sometimes students share unexpected counterstories in response to texts that the teacher did not expect would elicit such responses as with Brandi and *Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride*. These occasions also offer important opportunities to welcome counterstory. If time constraints pose a problem for exploring these unplanned counterstories, the teacher can ask the students to remember the issue for later discussion and then make sure to return to it in the near future.

## **Listening to Students and Teaching Students to Listen**

A teacher who wishes to welcome counterstories must listen to them because students will not share counterstories for long if they find their stories ignored, minimized, or hastily moved on from. Teachers from dominant groups may at first feel threatened by counterstories, similar to how I felt after Harris's counterstory. However, learning to welcome the counterstories of minoritized students helps teachers provide safe spaces and grow in their efforts to truly provide an inclusive, multicultural classroom. Michael and Harper (2015) explained:

In an antiracist classroom, the teacher is open to feedback. They hear stories about a student's difficulty or a family's discontent and use them as data from which to make change, rather than as threatening feedback that demands an explanation. In the same vein, antiracist teachers feel comfortable raising race questions. (p. 84)

For many teachers, it takes a long time to develop a feeling of comfort raising race questions and welcoming counterstories, the stories of difficulty and discontent in the quote above. However, taking the effort to do so helps children from all groups feel comfortable at school and teaches them to value their voices and experiences.

In welcoming counterstories, teachers affirm them. The teacher cannot take on a neutral role, suggesting that everyone can tell their story, but that none of these stories require further comment or action. Some teachers may wish to let children speak while they as teachers refrain from taking a stance on any issues raised by the children's counterstories. However, Kubota (2014) helpfully suggested that the teacher as a "neutral" party "might problematically suggest that refraining from taking any position on a difficult issue is a virtue in a democratic society" (p. 234). As an everyday practice of social justice, the teacher must model to students how to explore difficult questions and how to take a difficult stance.

The teacher must also take on the difficult work of making the classroom a safe space for students to share counterstories. If the teacher welcomes the story, but the other students dismiss it, students will not want to share. This task can pose a challenge to teachers who have many students from dominant groups. Helping these students understand that their experiences are not the norm against which everyone else measures and helping them see that the counterstories of others are valid can be difficult. However, one advantage of viewing the literacy block as a space to welcome counterstories is the way in which fiction and literary response invite empathy (Bishop, 1990; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009; Naidoo, 2010). Well-crafted fiction invites the reader into the experience of the characters, and thus the reading experience may help students from dominant groups understand and respect the counterstories of their minoritized peers.

Learning from each other in diverse groups is an important benefit of public education. In reflecting on the purpose of multicultural education (education that affirms all students and includes their experiences and histories in the curriculum), Kumashiro (2000) explained that students should not simply learn,

about...the Other...to fill a gap in knowledge (as if ignorance...were the only problem), but to disrupt the knowledge that is already there since the harmful/partial knowledge that an individual already has is what needs to change...changing oppression requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge. (p. 34)

He elaborated that students should learn “that there is always more to be sought out” and that “one story, lesson, or voice can never be representative of all” (p. 34). Thus, students from all groups stand to benefit from a safe space in which they can tell and hear counterstories. Learning to tell their own stories and accept the counterstories of their peers prepares them for civil discourse in a diverse society.

### **Examples of Educational Projects Welcoming Counterstory**

For generations, activist educators have employed the everyday practice of welcoming counterstory into the classroom. Committed teachers have listened to students, rebuilt their curriculum in response to the students’ lives and counterstories, and engaged students in turning counterstory into action.

Primary teachers have written eloquently about welcoming counterstory in the classroom. In two highly readable books, Vasquez (2004) and Cowhey (2011) narrated their experiences listening to children, accepting their counterstories, and supporting children in taking action. Vasquez reflected on teaching preschool, and Cowhey taught third grade. While they did not use the language of “counterstory,” both teacher authors exemplified how a teacher would embrace counterstory from young children. They intentionally embarked on units of study designed to explore social justice topics, and they engaged children in telling their stories, writing letters of protest, registering voters, volunteering, and other forms of local activism.

Kissel and Miller (2015) described how a primary teacher used writers’ workshop to welcome counterstory. Writing provides an important way for students to respond to text and tell their own stories, and indeed counterstories that may not be told publically often emerge in students’ writing. In the case they studied, a four year old boy watched his dog die in an illegal dog fight, and then he came to write about it at school. Many teachers might have the urge to push the student to write about a less violent topic, or perhaps they would question whether the event had really occurred. However, the teacher in this case knew that,

...this was Jared's world. It was not going to disappear, whether or not there was a space for its validation in school...We teach them how to use content from their own worlds to tell stories across pages. Jared did exactly as he was taught to do, and in doing so, he exercised his power as the author of his own story. (p. 81)

These researchers showed how writing, in addition to reading, provides a way for teachers to welcome counterstory in the literacy classroom.

The teachers and activists behind the Raza Studies program in Tucson, Arizona demonstrated ways of welcoming counterstory in secondary classrooms. These teachers developed classes (such as Mexican American Studies) that allowed students to explore

the history and literature of their own ethnic groups, often not previously included in the standard curriculum. The teachers intended the curriculum to “expose the inequities, inequalities, and injustices within the lived conditions of students who have been historically labeled for exploitation and oppression” (Romero, 2013, p. 310). Researchers documented that the program supported student achievement, graduation, college enrollment, engagement in school, sense of identity, and standardized test scores (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014; Romero, 2013). Such is the power of safe classrooms that welcome (and even teach!) counterstories. Primary teachers have used similar strategies with young children by building the literacy curriculum around the literature and history of their students.

### **Conclusion**

Welcoming counterstory will not solve all the problems and tensions in any classroom, but it plants the seed for challenging power. When teachers welcome counterstory, they let students know that their voice matters and their experience is accepted. They communicate trust and worth to the students. Treating students in this way allows them to feel more comfortable in school and take the overall schooling process more seriously. As a result, students can bring their own goals to their educational experiences, and counterstory becomes a catalyst for listening to others, asking questions, writing letters, beginning petitions, staging protests, and agitating for needed change. Teachers legitimize these practices and mentor students in the strategies of activists by adopting the everyday practice of first inviting and then embracing students’ counterstories.

As a former teacher, what inspires me to work with other teachers to create spaces where counterstories are welcome is the children, the stories they tell, and the potential changes that they could bring about in their local contexts. When I reflect on my last year as a classroom teacher (the year with Harris), I know that I had come far in terms of offering an inclusive multicultural class with a focus on social justice when compared to my first year of teaching. Yet, as the Harris incident shows, I had not come far enough. Reflecting on that year motivates me to work with other teachers (and to practice in my own teacher education courses) building safe spaces for counterstories, so that we as teachers can listen to our students, validate them, learn how we need to change in response to the stories they tell us, and encourage them in turning their counterstories into transformative action.

### **Author Notes**

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