



## How to Read When the World is on Fire

SHYAM PATEL

York University, Canada

**ABSTRACT** *As Mishra Tarc (2020) does through her evocative words on engaging texts today, I contemplate how texts, specifically children's books, open pedagogical possibilities to reckon, repair, and reworld in a world that is on fire. From climate change to racial justice, it is children's books, I believe, that can serve as pedagogical interventions and responses for teachers and teacher educators who are interested in addressing and confronting these complex and sometimes ineffable issues. I offer a glimpse of this approach through my practice as an elementary school teacher, a teacher candidate, and a teacher educator. Through these experiences, I consider how children's books open up productive conversations around "difficult" and "hard" topics while also grappling with the ongoing questions that remain in my practice. Turning to children's books, I outline both the immense potential of and need for using texts in the field of education. Immersing texts pedagogically and as a site of study, I hope, animates a renewed significance in supporting students to examine and tackle the issues confronting them.*

**KEYWORDS** children's books; reading as pedagogical intervention and response; reparative curriculum; social justice education

Most days, I am troubled by the state of the world, waking up to some devastating news or another, and then restlessness follows and keeps me awake at night, when it haunts me some more. The uneasiness surfaces because I worry about what Mishra Tarc (2011) refers to as terrible human history, both in the past and the ongoing present. I am tortured by apartheid, climate change, genocide, and violence, agonizing over a world that seems to constantly be on fire, literally and metaphorically.

I am, as well, concerned by current global affairs, where fascism and neoliberal rhetoric are on the rise such that no corner of the world is untouched by its heavy machinery, wrought by powerful men. I think here about politicians with access to weapons of mass destruction, and who threaten each other to demonstrate their authority and rule over one another, while citizens watch in dismay. As they exchange insults and attempt to upstage one another,

*Correspondence Address:* Shyam Patel, Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3 ; email: patels12@yorku.ca

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the rest of us, as Lynn (2018) writes, “live in a moment of political and cultural turmoil” (p. 1).

As a former elementary school teacher and then as a student teacher, I have struggled at times to enact a pedagogy in the classroom that grapples with climate catastrophe, civil unrest, and human distress. For, when the response from state governments and global organizations is so insidious, what can a teacher do? I pose this question as I grapple with the realities that I witness – in the news, on social media, and, most of all, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life – in some of the intimate and subtle messages that are conveyed and disseminated. There is cruelty everywhere, which I find difficult to endure. What worries me the most is perhaps how those messages, of hatred and vitriol, in particular, seep into the psyche – into the innermost consciousness and unconsciousness of an individual, from our earliest years – and add to the turmoil.

My three years of teaching in an urban school in Ahmedabad, India, from June 2014 to May 2017, alerted me to the catastrophic ramifications of colonial histories in the assumptions and biases that students held. Shockingly, although they were only in the first and second grades when I first stepped into the classroom, my students confessed to me: they hated the colour of their skin (Patel, 2023). As a first-year teacher, I was destroyed, unable to register the revelations, one after the other, that several of my students professed. A few years later, as a student teacher during two years of Teacher Education at the University of Ottawa, working mostly with students of colour, I again witnessed similar heartbreaking confessions. At the same time, although my students were often open and willing to learn about others, they carried with them negative assumptions and biases about communities and individuals who were different from them. I was alarmed by how some of them mirrored the same contempt that was expressed by those in positions of power.

To this day, the ghost of my students’ admissions requires me to take seriously the pedagogical interventions and responses needed to confront the harrowing realities of hatred of self and hatred of the “other.” And like Palulis (2012), “I query my responsibility as a teacher” (p. 201), though I am unsure how to proceed. As I often do, I turn to Mishra Tarc (2020) for a way forward, and, as always, she offers something profound. I listen to her words about engaging texts, which she claims, “gift us with the language so desperately needed to articulate cruel and inhumane rhetoric, policies, acts” (p. 33). What, if anything, might reading texts, specifically children’s books, present in what this special issue asks: how might they support us to reckon, repair, and reworld? With Mishra Tarc (2020) in mind as I respond, I insist that texts can sustain readers, and as Lynn (2018) says about literary writing, for me reading is “one of the most effective means for interrogating and challenging social oppression, inequality, and injustice” (p. 1).

Against the backdrop of this assertion, my experiences in the classroom make me acutely aware of the importance of critical consciousness, and I concur with hooks (2015) that advancing it “is the most important task before

us” (p. 5). Even more so, I would argue, as European and Western demagogues and their enablers have relentlessly enacted a project of erasure and historical amnesia, especially when it comes to colonial and racial histories, including by replacing local stories and knowledge with what Peters (2015) refers to as a white curriculum that informs much of what students learn and do not learn.

When I was a student teacher from 2018-2020, I was placed in a first-grade classroom of mostly students of colour from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. I was horrified by the selection of texts we read, most of which were divorced from the lived experiences and realities of students. In passing and in whispers, some of the students disclosed intimate and troubling details of their internalized racism. One student, for example, told me how she was embarrassed to tell me how to pronounce her name in Arabic. Another insisted on not revealing his “home” name, using his “school” name instead – something I did as well at his age and until I became a teacher as a young adult. I was afraid, however, to intervene and unskilled about how to respond, especially because remarks made in the staff room about ethnic and racial names left me speechless (Patel, 2022).

In my second year, I was placed in an alternative school with a mentor teacher who invited and welcomed opportunities to immerse social justice into curriculum and pedagogy. Many of the students, like those I had met in my practicum the year before, held similar internalized negative messages about themselves, and I appreciated being in a classroom that made room for interventions and responses to those fatalistic vantages. Addressing their revelations informed the curricular attunements I made, and the texts I will discuss below became the pedagogical tools to steer the way.

In a children’s book like *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi (2003), we read about a young girl and the challenges she faced for having a Korean name in an English-speaking school. At first, when I read this story, my students were quiet and listening. Then the courage of one student to make a text-to-self connection motivated a few others to do the same. In return, I was open and upfront about the difficulties that I had experienced with my name, both as a child and as an adult. My own vulnerability, as a student teacher, generated the confidence in more students to participate. Together, exchanging stories, we started using the text as a vehicle. I then asked students to write a letter to Unhei, the main character, asking them to make connections between her story and their own lives. Reading those letters later on, I was disappointed to find out that I had been pronouncing one student’s name incorrectly, mortified that I was doing to a student what was done to me. Ashamed, I turned to Palulis (2012) to rearrange my humiliation into humility. The letters written by my students became texts of their own, requiring consideration and study. I was, like them, required to examine the story from within.

Mishra Tarc’s (2011) *reparative curriculum* posits that repair “requires our attentiveness to brokenness within, between, and across our shifting selves” (p. 354), and the above example is a minor case of what children’s books can animate: an inward reckoning (an account of oneself), repairing (an attempt to

make amends), and reworlding (changing course, even in small gestures, measures, and overtures). After engaging the text, that a student insisted on helping me pronounce their name as it should be felt like such a gift. *The Name Jar* supported a small but conscious change in the classroom. Students resonated with the character's story and viewed themselves in her story. The book became a mirror, as Bishop (1990) would suggest, and remarkably, what it reflected allowed my students and I to turn it into something even more meaningful.

But curating and engaging texts that are diverse and capable of reflecting the lives of students is not enough. There is also a need, I believe, to leverage children's books in the way hooks (1994) describes theory: as a way "to do things differently, to look at the world differently" (p. 59). After reading *The Name Jar*, students started to pronounce the names of their classmates with attention and care. They were encouraged, like Unhei, to pronounce their names in their native tongues rather than to accept an Anglicized pronunciation of their names, which they had been doing to navigate being in an English-speaking classroom. Witnessing students take back their names, this experience taught me how children's books could offer an invitation to learn about culture, identities, and lived experiences that were different from, and sometimes similar to, my own.

Even after this experience, however, I have remained concerned that diverse texts might not be enough to undo internalized racism and other forms of oppression. I have given this problem a lot of thought in the past three years, while I have worked as a teaching assistant in the Faculty of Education at the York University where I am a graduate student. I have observed how teacher candidates return from practicum taken aback, concerned by how their students have been inculcated by colonial and racial histories, as well as other oppressive forces. Though their own education had been one that left much to be desired, they had returned to the school classroom as young teachers, and then come back to the university classroom appalled that so little has changed. They expressed hurt that their mentor teachers were not challenging the status quo, and wilfully remain unengaged from matters of social justice.

Drawing from my own teaching and practicum experience, I suggest they could make use of children's books to address the challenges they face. For, as Bishop (1990) contends, "books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar and strange" (p. x). I tell these teacher candidates about how finding texts like Choi's has allowed me to peer into the fractures, ruptures, and segments of colonial histories. I explain how such texts enable me to understand something I do not know or have not well grasped. I ask teacher candidates to trust me, and to surrender to the power of such stories when they, like me, are unsure how to introduce difficult topics, to study injustices, and, most of all, to unsettle assumptions and biases.

I also offer teacher candidates this story to convince them of their capacity to challenge assumptions and biases in the classroom, through the texts they introduce. For example, I once had a fourth-grade student in practicum who

would tease another boy for wearing nail polish. Initially, I tried to discuss his remarks with the student, to no avail. A week later, I returned with a book, *The Boy & the Saree* that I had created for an integrative course on arts and math based on Vivek Shraya's (2016) *The Boy & the Bindi*, a story about an Indian boy who was interested in his mother's bindi, traditionally worn by women, which my mentor teacher had read with students the previous day. My mentor teacher and I, working in tandem, asked questions to get a discussion going among the students. I specifically encouraged them to make predictions along the way, a reading comprehension strategy commonly used by teachers, where readers draw on the text and personal experiences to discuss what might happen next. I asked questions like "how do you know?" or "what evidence reveals that your prediction is accurate?" that required students to think more deeply, and encouraged them to make meaning out of words, sentences, pictures, and what they knew of the world.

Still nothing. It was a failed intervention, at least from what I could see. The bullying student was not interested, and he seemed to be divorced from the discussion even though his peers were immersed in making predictions that provoked an exchange about gender expression and identity. The next day, however, the student, sitting one seat away from the boy he had ridiculed a week ago, did something unexpected: he complimented his nail polish. Though I had taught for three years in India, as a teacher whose lessons were immersed in social justice approaches, this was the moment that I fully began to recognize, or at least fathom, the weight of children's books as windows into other worlds.

Encouraged by this experience, during the year, I continued to read children's books to open conversations about gender and sexual diversity, patriarchal norms, and queerness, a practice I have continued ever since. One children's book that I use is *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch (1980), which I have read to all my students from the first to fourth grade. I have yet to encounter a group of students that does not feel for Elizabeth, the main character, who goes out of her way to rescue Prince Ronald from a dragon, only to be accosted by Ronald for looking untidy. Elizabeth's courage invites resounding support from students, as the text offers them a character whose behaviour they identify with and one whose behaviour they reject.

As a teacher with a commitment to bringing social justice praxis into the classroom, I further leveraged the text to probe a conversation about gender roles and stereotypes. I was pleasantly surprised by their responses as they critiqued cultural norms and traditions when asked to contemplate whether an activity or profession, such as cooking or working as a teacher, was a "boy or girl thing." Questions such as "Why do we assume that only girls can play with dolls?" or "Who decides which toys are for boys and which toys are for girls?" supported them to unpack how gender norms were reinforced both at home and in school – all with Elizabeth's help.

With the text animating a captivating discussion, I have asked students to take their responses and create another adventure for Elizabeth – with the

caveat that she should tackle a real-world issue. Previous lessons have served as references for how I set this task, and become integrated into the students' writing, supporting them to brainstorm and develop new stories. To date, through the imagination of my students, Elizabeth has rescued animals, tackled climate change, and taken up a vocation in teaching (my students knew how to win me over).

As we worked together, as students and teacher (the roles sometimes became muddled as I learn from and with them), picture books have not been the only texts we read. Scraps of newspaper became sources of close readings, allowing us to analyze and interpret texts, pay attention to details and discern something deeper. Students have been occupied with annotations, highlighting, jotting down notes and questions, and underlining as they interact with the texts.

At times, on their own volition, they demonstrated that they were acutely aware of the challenges ahead of them, and like the texts they read, my students spoke about social justice with eagerness and thoughtfulness. A fourth-grade student, reading *The Boy & the Bindi*, offered an insightful take: boys who wear clothes that are traditionally made for girls are more harshly criticized than girls who wear clothes that are traditionally made for boys. I was impressed. He was reading the world, to borrow the words of Freire (1983).

Where I have faltered is when I have sought to discuss more traumatic, sometimes destructive and irreparable, histories. My impulse to teach about grave injustices and terrible human history was initially propelled by a course with Dr. Saba Alvi in Teacher Education, where I first learned about Canadian Residential "Schools." I was embarrassed by my ignorance about the role teachers had played in enforcing the most cruel and reprehensible violence against Indigenous peoples.

I was also moved by the stories of displacement, migration, and refugeeism that I witnessed, both through my family and my students. In a desperate effort to do something to help all of us understand this issue, I was overcome with perplexity. I found myself hesitant, once again, and doubted my capacities as a novice teacher with inadequate experience or training. In the end, this self-doubt won the day, and I decided not to confront these brutal and devastating moments of history in the classroom, at least not as an elementary school teacher. Thinking about this problem now, I understand that my pedagogical thinking, when it comes to abusive and violent accounts, has still not been adequately developed.

What remains unresolved for me is the potential that children's books might afford when studying catastrophic histories. I am increasingly aware of my own responsibility to teach terrible human history, in the hope to never repeat it again, but I do not yet know the ways and means required to do so. As a teacher educator, I encourage teacher candidates to learn from my regret. I invite them to do better than I did, in other words, and I continue to trust Simons (1992) in viewing texts as a site of pedagogical possibility that hold out the possibility of us all doing better in future.

I call on the teacher candidates I work with now to rouse their students through texts when discussing terrible human history, and to support them, in turn, to not perpetuate (further) harm. It is a heavy responsibility, and so I work with them through their assignments as we confront this challenge together. For example, in Teacher Education, where lesson plans are required and are often evaluated, and, sadly, where teacher candidates disclose to me that the assignments they are given are “busy work” and the feedback they receive is unhelpful, I insist that I can support them to do something different, infused by social justice thinking. I do not provide them with a template, however. I ask them to work from scratch. In the messy unknowing of how to construct a lesson plan, and one that incorporates social justice using a text as a springboard, teacher candidates get to work. Their assignments become a text in themselves – a site of study. We go back and forth in reading and rereading the lesson plan, carefully and intentionally going through it, and helping ourselves to understand what its possible outcomes could be.

Working with teacher candidates in this way can create the conditions to critically and reflectively pose questions about the curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching strategies that are appropriate for the lesson. Calls to bring theory into practice slowly start to be put to the test. Teacher candidates often tell me that no one really gives them the support to design or think through a lesson plan, and they feel ill-prepared when going into practicum. They appreciate, however small the gesture, a teacher educator who supports them with the technical aspects of a lesson plan, and, even more so, one who leaves questions and remarks about the sensitivity presented by their assignment and how creative texts for children might guide them in tackling the issues they want to convey.

Having engaged with these lessons and texts in practicum, I have watched how teacher candidates return to the university classroom with a range of feelings: eagerness, frustration, and surprise. I anchor these emotions as provocations to motivate further pedagogical thinking. They, in turn, come back with lesson plans, scribbled with notes of personal reflections and suggestions from their mentor teachers. Their commitment becomes transferable – to each other and to me.

As first-time teachers, I do not expect them to return with all the answers. I reject such a notion anyway. Teachers, more than anyone, should know that there are no “right” answers when it comes to teaching complex and ineffable histories, and who am I, of all people, to criticize them for the risks they are willing to take when I had been afraid for so long? What I nurture, instead, is an ability to reflect on a lesson and give it a close reading. I ask open-ended questions: what responses did students provide to the text? What questions and strategies did you employ? How might you approach it differently the next time?

Teacher candidates sometimes become exasperated with this process, suggesting that I demand too much of them or claiming that they only want accessible resources to enable them to more easily plan lessons. Instead of

giving in to this, I seek to create “a condition of possibility for true learning – one which bears the risk of being dispossessed of one’s certainties” (Simon, 2005, p. 10). There is no shortage of curriculum texts for teachers to retrieve and use, but pedagogical thinking, on the other hand, cannot be as easily accessed. I insist that pedagogical thinking is a practice of innovation, reflection, and thought, which requires far more considerable work, and sometimes letting go of a prescriptive and standardized curriculum.

The soon-to-be teachers all push back, determined to get something else out of me, a way, they might imagine, to ease their path. Modelling a lesson with teacher candidates proves to be helpful in this situation. With them, I lean on a text like *I Am Not a Number* by Jenny Kay Dupuis and Kathy Kacer (2016), asking teaching candidates to bring such a book into the classroom, where the ongoing legacy of genocide in the nation-state of Canada is witnessed in one girl’s account of the Residential “School” System. Through her story, readers are confronted by the harrowing and painful realities of assimilation, isolation, and separation. One cannot read the story, told based on the life of Dupuis’ grandmother, and feel no emotions at all.

In small groups, I have teacher candidates read the children’s book, without instructions at first, and then I get them to contemplate how they might react and respond to emotional responses from the children they are teaching. What if a student expresses something harmful or hurtful? How about a student who is affected by the trauma of the story? What skills are necessary to navigate these unexpected interactions? I do not have an answer for these questions, but what I underscore, both as a former elementary school teacher and now as a teacher educator, is that there is significance and usefulness in drawing from challenging children’s books to make a difference in the classroom, and in their students’ lives.

So, what makes teachers – like me, teacher candidates, and teachers in the classroom – afraid to take up traumatic histories? In the current context, with banned books and parents who take issue with “controversial” and “difficult” topics, it can be challenging for teachers to go against the state and parental opposition. Differences of opinions, personal beliefs, and questions of appropriateness take centre stage. Teachers are required to attend to all these matters, and therein lies a difficult decision to be made – to read or not to read?

To answer these questions, as I view it, teachers should take a stand. I concur with Kelly et al. (2004), who describe taking a stand as “a useful reminder that we are embodied and called upon, by the strength of our convictions, to put our bodies on the line, to take action” (p. 40). Truth be told, I consider this a daunting proposition, but I am encouraged by the responses of the students I mentor, who are caught in the middle and who themselves are exposed to criticism. They are interested and resolved to learn about issues that impact the world. I listen to their outcry in response to gun violence and mass shootings, where signs with “Protect Kids Not Guns” are a stark contrast to the disheartening and underwhelming inaction of some of the most futile and inept leaders of our time. Their desperate plea for help, as well as their courage and

volition, instill in me a duty to support their activism and political action, so that they are prepared and not left to do the work on their own.

And, as I have insisted throughout this piece, children's books have the capacity to make a difference. I agree with Mishra Tarc (2020), who is both prescient and profound when she writes, "to those who say poetry, literature, art, knowledge, these curriculum texts can do nothing to stop injustice, intervene in racism, reunite families at the border, I say, think again" (p. 39). My own teaching life reveals that texts can alert students and teachers to some of the most challenging and pressing social justice issues of our time. The narratives found in some of the texts I have mentioned, as well as the responses that those children's books elicit among students, compels me to (re)turn to reading as a way to reckon, repair, and reworld.

Most of all, I dream of a time in which the agonizing state of the world is not so brutal and deadly, and when I read children's books, becoming immersed in words with my students, I wake up less worried. I feel less tortured, roused by a generation of children and youth who demonstrate an ability to think critically against the backdrop of devastating histories, emotional responses, internalized messages, and so much more. Children's books, I believe, have the power to mark us in ways that enable students and teachers to do what we once thought was unimaginable. Texts have the potential to give us hope, to stir us, and rile us up. That, for me, is what is needed as I am suffocated by dereliction, destruction, fear, terror, violence, and whatever else that terrible human history brings. It is children's books, I argue, that can guide me and others in profound ways, and I am willing to die on a hill for that stance.

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