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Teaching About Peace Through Children's Literature

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Overview

Historically children's literature has always been used as a teaching tool with children, but today the choices of literature has grown and the audience expanded. Teaching moral messages was an underlying foundation for making books available for children. Early children's books were often tied to religious teachings and folklore that had implied messages of staying close to home, listening to elders, caring for others over oneself, and traditional gender roles to name a few. Many adults have identified other subliminal messages as they critically analyzed some of the literature from the past. Some messages you will find are passive women needing to be rescued by a courageous prince (Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty), distrust of stepmothers or strangers (Hansel & Gretel, Cinderella), and ethnic stereotyping (Five Chinese Brothers, Little Black Sambo). As a result, adults have become more critical of the literature selected for children. Educators are expected to be more aware of stereotypes touching on ethnicity, gender, social status, religion and cultural identity. At the same time we must ask how much is too much or not enough when it comes to cultural sensitivity or more specifically, social consciousness?

This is a question I wrestle with every time I teach a class on literature for youth to college students at the undergraduate or graduate levels and in my literature work with children. There are some choices I make that influence my thinking. I recognize teaching as a political act and therefore the choices of literature I choose to present reflects my underlying agenda. I often work through literature themes as I did for the International Institute on Peace Education conference in Haifa, Israel during the summer of 2008.

I recognize that not everyone comes to class or workshops with the same knowledge base so I must provide a variety of literature within the theme that varies in complexity of text and content. An obvious variation is picture books and novels, but I must also take into account my audience. Not everyone is going to respond to the literature in the same way. I must think about the diversity of students reflected in my classroom or audience. People's thinking is influenced by their life experiences. The socio economic class you were raised in influences your view of the world. Your place of origin influences the way you think about the world around you. A person's ethnic and religious background also plays a role in their view of life. Gender is also a factor not to be overlooked. Given all of these variables I also recognize that I cannot predict the outcome of an individual's reaction to the books I choose to use in my teaching. I recognize this as a good thing and give way to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of readers bringing their own meaning to the text.[1] This means responses should not be perceived as right or wrong, but more of a way for each of us to learn more. We can deepen our understanding of a story or text when a student's response differs from our thinking or preconceived correct answer. We expand our understanding by asking more questions. How did you arrive at your answer? What caused you to think about the narrative/text in that way? By asking these questions I recognize the student's initial response to be worthy and welcomed. This inquiry approach helps everyone in the class better understand the person who responded and opens another view of the literature never considered before. The beauty of this open-ended response is the teacher or instructor also learns from the students. I don't think of the teacher as the only knowledge base. We become a community of learners when we all share the stage. This is an example of Paulo Freire's idea of a cultural circle at work. We all have an opportunity to contribute and have a voice in the discussion.[2]

Given this overview of my philosophical stance on using literature to teach about peace related social justice issues for this conference I will share the following in the remainder of this paper: why I use children's literature, some background on the literature choices, format for the workshop, questions driving the reading, and discussion results.

Why Children's Literature?

As mentioned above children's literature has the potential for teaching concepts to children and adults. Today there is even greater potential to do so with the quality and amount of children's literature accessible to teachers and parents. The choices cover all genres of literature and the topics and themes found within the body of literature is only limited by our thinking and choices. Personally, I have yet to find a social justice theme that has not be addressed through children's literature. This wide range of topics crosses picture books and novels. For this workshop I focused on using picture books because of the short amount of time allowed. You could compare this workshop time to any given school classroom period. Picture books are useful because they can be read in a short amount of time without consuming all of your teaching time. They provide visual clues along with the text for different learners. Reading them aloud

[1] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978) and Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Viewpoints: Transaction Versus Interaction--A Terminological Rescue Operation," *Research in the Teaching of English* 19 (1985): 96-107.

[2] Paulo Freire and Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

reaches many students at one time and also sends a subtle message about you as a reading role model. Picture books can appeal to a wide age range. When read aloud at first, books can act as a catalyst to a lesson on social justice themes such as peace education. And perhaps one of the best reasons I chose to use them in my workshop is the books naturally lead to dialogue and discussion. But this does not happen without careful selection of books for a focused theme.

For the past 10 years, I have been collecting and reviewing a specific type of multicultural literature that depicts the interaction of characters who represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Within the genre of multicultural literature I have kept an eye out for children's literature that reflects not just the portrayal of single ethnic groups or insight into distinct cultures, but books that depict people from multiple cultures and ethnic groups interacting with one another in various capacities. An example of this type of story would be Princess Grace by Mary Hoffman used in the workshop.[3] In this story Grace and her multiethnic classmates research and discover that many real princesses rarely wore frilly dresses and led delicate lives. The children in the story solve their problem by working together and expanding their definition of princess. Such a mosaic of characters depicts our changing world. The interaction of young people across ethnic lines is increasingly prevalent and will become commonplace as long as adults allow and encourage this interchange.

Multicultural literature offers subtle and effective ways to promote the interaction of young people across ethnic lines. Stories can generate an attitude that does not see race as a barrier, but as a natural identity contributing to the beauty of our world. Exposure to multicultural literature can encourage students to seek change that does not discriminate against any individual regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other differences.[4] Multicultural literature, both factual and fictional, is a viable medium for teaching about cultures beyond the students' own cultures. Using multicultural literature may help teachers, counselors, administrators, and policy makers gain greater understandings of the challenges children of diverse backgrounds face.[5] Steiner notes that students of all cultures will benefit from multicultural literature in the classroom for numerous reasons:

1. It provides an opportunity for all children to see themselves in literature.
2. It fosters development of positive self-esteem.
3. It prevents people from feeling isolated.
4. It cultivates respect, empathy, and acceptance of all people.[6]

With the exception of a couple of books I used for this workshop I tried to put most of my focus on multicultural peace related books that were currently available. The bibliography in this paper will reflect those books. For those who attended the workshop I also shared a larger bibliography of books within the multicultural theme mentioned earlier which I have included at

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[3] Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and Ying Hwa Hu, *Princess Grace* (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2008).

[4] Vivian Maria Vasquez, Getting Beyond I Like the Book: Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2003).

[5] Nina L. Nilsson, "How Does Hispanic Portrayal in Children's Books Measure Up After 40 Years? The Answer is "It Depends," *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 6 (2005): 534-548.

[6] Stan F. Steiner, *Promoting a Global Community Through Multicultural Children's Literature* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2001).

the end of this article. Attendees also received a copy of an article entitled, "Multicultural Literature that Brings People Together" appearing in the September 2008 issue of the Reading Teacher further discussing this theme as an example of raising awareness to the need for more multicultural literature.[7] If you choose to seek this article out and read it you will find some text excerpts included in this manuscript.

Workshop Format and Questions

When I use children's literature I cannot assume two things. First is that participants have already read some of the books and second, participants have access to these same books. Therefore I must select books that are available in the market place, include more books than participants, and provide time within the workshop/class to read books. Availability of books is crucial for participants to conduct follow-up work in their setting. Providing more books than participants insures choice, a key factor in motivating reluctant readers. One guarantee that I can count on is a rich discussion will follow if some of the books I select to use have a social consciousness theme with meaningful and thought provoking content. Time to read books is critical groundwork prior to any book discussion. Length of time for your workshop or class period should also be factored into your decisions when conducting the next steps.

With book selection ready to go I feel it is necessary to focus the reading. The best way to focus is through guiding questions. These are questions I often use for any workshop using literature. Who is your audience? What personal connections do you have to the story? What are the critical questions we should be asking? By raising the questions prior to reading participants are given a purpose to their reading.

Given this purpose for reading and the likelihood that participants are sitting at desks or tables there is one more facilitator role that I feel is important. Since there are more books than participants and the books vary in length and complexity you must keep the books circulating. As a participant finishes one book you as group facilitator bring them other books to choose from. Keeping the books flowing insures active involvement. This also wards off any non-engagement in the follow-up discussion. When participants only read one book the likelihood of not personally connecting to the story increases, potentially making it difficult for them to participate in the discussion. More books than participants, initial choice, and opportunity to read multiple books will increase the odds of total participation.

After reading time the next action to take is to begin the discussion. It is always better to work in small groups prior to the large group discussion. Multiple groups should be formed be with three to five people in a group if possible. Using the guiding questions as a framework the members of the group should sit facing each other. By doing small groups everyone will participate. You eliminate the intimidation that goes with being the only person talking in front of a group of strangers. You will also enrich the dialogue because everyone will participate in a small group. Each member of the group is given the task of sharing their thoughts on the book(s) they read. Each person is expected to have a turn in the group. I encourage the participants to not give a play by play on the book and to be conscious of not dominating the discourse. If there is a

[7] Stan F. Steiner, Claudia Peralta-Nash and Margaret Chase, "Multicultural Literature that Brings People Together," *The Reading Teacher* 62, no. 1 (2008): 88-92.

common book read among the participants others can add their comments. As facilitator you can move from group to group listening to the individual group discussion, choose to interject a comment or two, ask a question or just listen. In my listening I like to make mental notes about comments I heard from various groups or individuals. These insights can often be used in the large group discussion.

Prior to making the transition to large group discussion I like to set up some parameters. First I go around to each group and ask if everyone in the group had a chance to share a book. I ask each group to select one book that seemed to generate the most discussion that they would like to share with the large group. It is necessary to provide a little time to select the book and determine who will be the spokesperson for their group. I encourage the spokesperson to state the title and author of the book along with having the book as a visual aide as needed. Which group shares first can be at random. The spokesperson can use the initial questions as a beginning point if necessary. If there is time you can encourage one or more of the small groups to indentify another book worth sharing with the large group. In my experience there is always more to talk about than time.

Discussion Results

Earlier I stated a good discussion would ensue if some of the books were thought provoking. True to my predictions a lively discussion did take place and best of all I learned some things about the books along with the participants. When readers are allowed to bring their own life experiences and meaning to the stories we all learn. Let me try to explain this through some examples from the workshop. As mentioned I preselected the books to use in this workshop. The books varied in several ways including the amount of vocabulary, by genre from biographical to poetry, through visual representation from stick figure illustrations to intricate detail and by the book's physical size and page numbers. Fortunately I had brought more books than the number of participants. I specifically planted some books that contained thought provoking content expecting to generate some discussion. Included were: Alice Walker's, Why War is Never a Good Idea, which provided a provocative look at side effects or collateral damage from war.[8] Mary Hoffman's, Princess Grace, which confronted issues of gender.[9] Ilene Cooper's, The Golden Rule, raises a common thread through many world religions of treating others as you would like to be treated.[10] What Does Peace Feel Like by Vladimir Radunsky and Peace One Day: The Making of World Peace Day by Jeremy Gilley[11], elicits some thinking about what peace means to people around the world.[12] Louise Fitzhugh's Bang Bang You're Dead, connected readers with childhood memories of playing war games.[13] There were many other books available in the workshop that I have included in the bibliography at the end of this manuscript.

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[8] Alice Walker, and Stefano Vitale, *Why War is Never a Good Idea* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

[9] Mary Hoffman, Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu, *Princess Grace* (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2008)

[10] Ilene Cooper and Gabi Swiatkowska, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2007).

[11] Vladmir Radunsky, *What Does Peace Feel Like?*.(New York: Atheneum, 2004).

[12] Jeremy Gilley and Karen Blessen, *Peace One Day: The Making of World Peace Day* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 2005).

[13] Louise Fitzhugh and Sandra Scoppettone, *Bang Bang You're Dead* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

The response and discussions in the small groups and large group were lively. It was evident that participants enjoyed the variety of books, the opportunity to read them as part of the workshop, and talk about them with new friends attending the conference. You can expect this type of reaction when you have more books than participants, you use short length books or stories that can be read in the limited time, and most importantly you allow time for them to talk about the books in small groups. All too often we as teachers want to control the dialogue by only reading one book aloud and directing the discussion. Remember choice (more books than participants) and purpose for reading (three open ended questions posed prior to reading) will give participants a non-threatening way to participate from the beginning. As a teacher you still control the choice of books by the theme you select, but you let the participants have a lot of say over which books they choose to read among the theme. Another way to see the benefits of letting go of being the sole knowledge base as teacher is the rich discussion that will follow because multiple books have been read. Reading multiple books with one theme versus one common read will prove itself in the follow-up discussion. Everyone can participate because the book choices vary in vocabulary for a range of learners and each one brings expertise to the group from the book(s) they read in the designated time. In many cases they might be the only one in their group who read a particular book. Participants' talking about a particular book is sure to generate interest among other people in the group who often want to read the book too. On one level you go from only reading one book to multiple in the same class/workshop period. On another level you will discover that the content you may want to discuss using one book will get covered and beyond in this community of learners approach.

Our community of learners addressed points in the discussion through the critical questions they developed from their reading and small group discussion. Examples include the following: Does peace always have to be associated with war? It may be a conflict resolution in a friendship or classroom or a period after a thunderstorm to name a few. Is war always bad? Another critical question raised that caught several participants off balance. War may be necessary and good if people are freed from oppression and tyranny. Does the portrayal of war always have to be from the victim's perspective? Why do the images in the book appear to be from one side? Should these books be read to children? At one point I asked if we needed to share some critical questions generated from the small groups. A quick response by a participant passionately blurted, "we already have." Exactly! This is what comes from creating a community of learners. A safe cultural climate where input is encouraged and valued.

Conclusion

Children's literature has many applications, and one of the greatest accomplishments we can achieve is using books to bring people together regardless of culture. Books can engage readers in discussions about social consciousness, the interconnections of people on this earth and help them understand the complexity of their individual actions. Through this workshop and all of the IIEP conference we came away with a broader definition and understanding of peace. We collected new tools and ideas to use in our own setting. We discovered a new network of friends across the globe who share a passion for making this world a better place for all. We left with a renewed sense of knowing we are doing the morally right thing and a heartfelt obligation to continue our work.

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