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Reading Outside the Boundaries: Children's Literature as Pedagogy For Building Empathy and Understanding of Social Justice in the College Classroom

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Abstract

The role of children's literature in helping children make sense of themselves, their experiences and their worlds either in a classroom setting or in a more therapeutic context has been well documented. What has not been researched as far as we know is the use of children's literature in the college classroom as a means of enabling students to address difficult topics such as issues of oppression and social justice in a manner that is less overwhelming and less threatening. At one Connecticut University children's literature was used in numerous classes in both early childhood education and sociology as a means of facilitating student compassion and empathy for others. Whole group read-alouds of children's literature proved to be an effective tool to help students take the risk of confronting and knowing their own personal views and then make powerful connections to those of others.

Keywords: Children's literature, bibliotherapy, critical pedagogy, social justice, emotional intelligence, empathy.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live"
Joan Didion

The Power of Stories

In a sociology class on Deviance at a small liberal arts college in Connecticut, students were shown the film Corrections (2001) that documents the rise in the prison industrial complex and its direct effects on juveniles, and in particular juveniles who are poor and African American. After the film there was a heavy silence as the students attempted to come to terms with what they had just seen and what it all meant in relation to the view that deviance is socially constructed in accordance with levels of social, political, and economic power. It is always difficult and often near impossible to elicit responses when the information given is emotionally and intellectually intense. Students are often left feeling shocked and overwrought and expressing these feelings is challenging and a great

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risk. As Joanna Rogers Macy states in her book, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (1983) “Information by *itself* [italics in original] can create resistance, deepening a sense of apathy and powerlessness. We need to help each other process this information on an affective level, if we are to digest it on the cognitive level” (Macy, 1983, p.xiiv). Instead of trying to get the students to analyze the film, for the first time the instructor sat down on the desk facing the class and took out a children’s book. The students were instructed to predict what the book might be about based on the title and cover and then to sit back and enjoy its story. The book was Toni Morrison’s *The Big Box* (1999) that tells of three children - Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue -who want to play and be creative and independent and in so doing fail to follow all of the socially established rules. As a result, they end up locked up in a big brown box by their parents and teachers who all agree it is for their own good:

> *Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue live in a big brown box. It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs. And the door has three big locks. Oh, it's pretty inside and the windows are wide with shutters to keep out the day. They have swings and slides and custom made beds but the doors open only one way* (Morrison 1999, p. N/A).

As the instructor read and held the book so all could see she observed that the students were listening, watching, and seemingly more in touch with their feelings. For example, as one student volunteered, “We’re all in a big box the only thing that changes is the size and our level of freedom. Society wants to control us both inside and outside of prison.” Another student said “I’ve just realized I’m not as free as I thought.” When asked how that made her feel she answered, “Angry!”

What was overwhelming in terms of the political, economic, and social complexity of the prison industrial complex was rendered brutally and powerfully simple in Morrison’s tale. The children who do not conform, not because they are innately bad or even because they never followed the rules as they often did, are punished by being locked away. And even though in this story their box has swings and slides and their parents come to visit them and bring cake and real dirt, it is clear that the adults have misunderstood their simple, yet complex needs and desires: the freedom to be themselves. Such freedom is rare as the children in Morrison’s story learn to recognize:

> “I know you are smart and I know that you think you are doing what is best for me. But if freedom is handled just *your* way then it’s not my freedom or free” (Morrison, 1999, p.N/A).

In later writing about the film Corrections (2001) many students referred to the story in a way that was powerful. For example, one student wrote, “In real prisons they don’t have swings and slides but the same concept of control and denying the people to just be is present. The prison system is not about rehabilitation, it is about keeping the monetary tide washing in while lives are trapped in a system and forced into a box.” Another student was able to relate the children in the movie to the ones in the story when she wrote, “The movie stressed that many children are seen as delinquents but when the problem is

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looked at closely I see it is because the children have nowhere to go and have clean fun so they get bored and create their own fun which is often criminal acts. As a result they are locked up in a big box like in Toni Morrison's book."

It was apparent in these class discussions and student written reflections that reading children's literature helped these students to make deep connections. It helped them to discuss their beliefs, experiences, and feelings in a way that was authentic, honest, and at times raw. Even further, the use of children's literature allowed them to connect their experiences to those of others, creating the basis of empathy. It seemed the students naturally integrated the complex social forces behind the prison industry and the expressed emotions of the children in Morrison's book. Enns & Forrest (2005) stress the importance of activities that help students to "humanize issues such as violence and gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of human experience." (p.14). Encouraging students to express empathy has historically not been encouraged in college classrooms since activities of analysis, synthesis, logical reasoning, and debate have been prioritized and revered as purely intellectual or masculine. However, the pioneering works of such psychologists as Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ* (1994) and Howard Gardner *Multiple Intelligence: The Theory in Practice* (1993) should compel us to address Goleman's call for a "new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom" (Goleman, 1994, p. xxiv).

In early childhood literacy classes where students are used to read-alouds it was the critical discussions around texts that made for powerful new discoveries. While this professor has always been mindful to read multicultural literature, more explicit discussions on issues of social justice and oppression allowed these students to think more critically and empathically about their views and biases and their possible transmission to students in the classroom. In addition, based on their writings and discussions the use of children's literature that addresses provocative social issues enabled these early childhood students to become more aware of their ethical and professional responsibility to work for justice and to end oppression, both in schools and at large. In fact it was clear in their final portfolios that many students had become more passionate about social issues and the ways in which societal stereotypes and discrimination play out in public schools. Most importantly, they began to view themselves as change agents when confronted with both historical and current examples of racism and oppression as opposed to their initial expressions of "apathy and powerlessness" (Macy, 1983, p.xiiv).

To illustrate, after reading *Home of the Brave* by Allen Say (2002), one early childhood student stated, "I remember hearing something about the Japanese-American interment camps that were set up after World War II but it wasn't until you read that book out loud that I realized we just did a similar thing after 9/11. Until I felt sorry for the little Japanese-American boy in that book I hadn't felt concerned at all about how we have been treating Arab-Americans." This, a most powerful connection and expression of empathy and compassion, started a lengthy discussion on how afraid these students were after 9/11 and how it is fear that leads to discrimination. These honest, open discussions stemming from children's literature heightened students' awareness, self-reflection, and compassion. This will allow these preservice teachers to take multicultural education beyond ac-

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ceptance to affirmation and make conscious effort towards social justice. As a result of critical discourse stemming from children's literature, these future teachers are well on their way to becoming critical pedagogues, who take great risks in confronting their own and societal prejudices, and make every effort to help young people understand deep concepts such as racism and oppression.

From Story to Theory

What these education and sociology students are learning is to use their 'emotional intelligence' which Goleman (1994) states, "trumps IQ primarily in those 'soft' domains where intellect is relatively less relevant for success—where, for example, emotional self-regulation and empathy may be more salient skills than purely cognitive abilities" (p. xiv). These 'soft' domains are the ones that a large percentage of our students will enter such as teaching, social work, or any other profession that involves working directly with people. Thus, it behooves us to begin addressing more directly the emotional skills they will need, not simply the intellectual ones. Goleman (1994) stresses this when he states, "if there are any two moral stances that our times call for, they are precisely these, self-restraint and compassion" (p. xxii).

Our efforts on the college level to engage and develop student empathy and compassion through analyzing the social issues addressed in select children's literature are, as far as we know, unique. However, critical pedagogues working with children to promote antibias and antidiscrimination sentiments in the multicultural classroom (Irwin, 1996) have of course long recognized the power of helping children address and express feelings of empathy. Therefore, it is to their work that we turn for insight and analysis into our experiences. For example, Christensen (1992) in her description of building a multicultural community emphasized empathy as being "a key in community building" (p.14). Her multicultural curriculum draws on the strengths and experiences of her students. This example of affirming students' cultural capital defies modernistic classroom environments where the value is placed solely on the practices of the dominant culture. Likewise, as college classrooms continue to become more culturally diverse, greater emphasis needs to be placed on more than the intellectual *learning* about 'others'. Engaging directly and honestly with oneself and 'others' about difficult feelings, such as fears, misconceptions, stereotypes, prejudices, dislikes, etc. must compliment intellectual learning. It is no longer enough for us to merely teach about social justice issues. We must allow our students to actively engage with how they *feel* about such issues in ways that are non-confrontational and non-threatening. It is only then that students can acknowledge the role they play in being part of the problem as well as feel empowered to be part of the solution.

Lantieri and Patti (1996) in *Waging Peace in Our Schools* suggest "One of the biggest challenges in moving toward a classroom capable of transforming kids is that as teachers we have to transform ourselves before we can expect to see change in young people" (122). They further state, "we can no longer turn away from the emotional fabric of children's lives or assume that learning can take place isolated from their feelings" (Lantieri & Patti, 1996: 3). In this manner we feel we, along with our students, need "a vision of

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education that recognizes that the ability to manage our emotions, resolve conflicts, and interrupt biases are fundamental skills—skills that can and must be taught" (Lantieri & Patti, 1996: 3). In fact, according to Goleman (1994) such skills are successfully being taught around the country in the form of programs in social and emotional intelligence (SEI). However, based on his examples, SEI is only taught to children "from preschoolers to high school (Goleman, 1994, p.x-xi). Thus, a vital part of our pedagogical mission is to aid our students in developing what Goleman (1998) calls "emotional competence." At its core emotional competence combines the two abilities of empathy (heart) and social skills (mind). This will enable students to read and be open to others' feelings on issues that are often socially and pedagogically silenced because of their difficult content. For example, Christensen (1992) eloquently explained the ideology behind what has been referred to as "fear of naming": "Topics like racism and homosexuality are avoided in most classrooms but they seethe like open wounds. When there is an opening for discussion, years of anger and pain surface" (p.14). Although Christensen is not referring directly here to the college level we feel that her observation nevertheless still applies as our ultimate goal is to get students to name emotions, not just theories. We can't expect our students to learn the basis of empathy if we as instructors do not establish the safe and open classrooms necessary to encourage critical dialogue. Irwin (1996) purports that the process of becoming nonsexist, multicultural persons is lifelong and entails "learning by listening, asking and being open to others' perspectives" as well as admitting to our "unconscious biases and the unwitting mistakes that we have made" (136). Obviously these are not easy things for our students to do, let alone us. Especially since the student / teacher relationship has historically been based on the quest for being right, as opposed to being open. Yet, without being emotionally open the most pressing moral issues of our times can't adequately be addressed.

In addition to self-transformation and the building of confidence to discuss painful issues, the students in both our classes are experiencing first hand that learning is not a passive activity as it requires they engage with their whole being. To do this one must create a non-hierarchical classroom environment that is open to all perspectives and feelings and accepting of diverse experiences. We have found that getting responses from students that display emotional competence is much easier if we use children's literature as the vehicle as opposed to the required readings that are more theoretical and analytical in content. As one student wrote, "It feels good to be treated as an equal and not looked down upon and to be read children's literature instead of Harvard graduate authored texts that serve no purpose because of their impossible vocabulary." Reading our students children's literature liberates them to be child-like again, and gives them permission to open their hearts and thus their minds.

In Envisioning Literature, Langer (1995) states, "Inherent in the act of literacy understanding is the promise of touching the many-sidedness of human sensibility. It is through the envisionments we develop as we explore new horizons of possibility that we can at least begin to imagine the perspectives or others – in other circumstances, eras, and cultures – and be moved to make new sense of ourselves, our times, and our world" (p. 145).

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Likewise, for Goleman the first stage of emotional competence is self-awareness since one's ability to understand another's feelings and be empathetic is totally dependent on one's understanding of one's own feelings (Goleman, 1994 & 1998). As a result when using children's literature students must be given opportunities to link the stories to their lived experience (King & Mitchell, 1990) in order to help create a sense of ethical and political responsibility. This was evident in both the examples given from reading *The Big Box* in the sociology class and reading *Home of the Brave* in the early childhood literacy class. In this way, we can help our students understand that reading is "not merely a skill; it is an engagement of the person in a conceptual and social world" (Guthrie, McGough, & Wigfield, 1994, cited in Braunger & Lewis 1997, p.3).

Louise Rosenblatt (1938) was one of the first to see literature as therapeutic in this way. She recognized that exposure to personalities in books may lead to increased social sensitivity. This we believe is key to enabling students to know that just as they each desire rights, respect, security, self-determination, community, access to resources, and opportunities, so does everyone. A poignant example involves Jon Muth's version of the classic trickster tale, *Stone Soup* (2003) a book about collectivism and compassion as three monks enter a village of individuals who do not get along and through the making of one giant pot of stone soup, are able to demonstrate how much everyone benefits when working together and as a result come to know happiness. After this was read out loud in class one student wrote, "When it comes down to it, it really is the simplest things that hold the most meaning whether it be in the form of literature, nature…but we get caught up in ourselves or other things…we just forget. If we're fortunate, like the other day in class, someone will remind us just how important it is to return to our humble beginnings to find a long lost or misplaced treasure." Another student, one with a poor inner city background that he often referred to in class, made a most powerful and almost raw appeal in his journal, "I just wish that every neighborhood and community could have Stone Soup, at least one time." While the reasons why all neighborhoods and communities don't have stone soup once in a while involves a complexity of social, political, and economic factors, it is possible that this young man's wish is the impetus for future action towards equality and more Stone Soup.

From theory to Practice

As constructivist teachers we do not want to set any kind of specific methodology for using children's books in college classrooms as we feel that would be antithetical to the ethos of what we are tying to do. In this manner, as expressed by Paola Friere we share the concern that "the social vision of liberator pedagogy not be reduced to a methodology of teaching, which he believed might strip it of its revolutionary ideas" (Darder, 2002 & Freire, 1998b, cited in Enns & Forrest 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, we believe that "neither feminist discourse nor a discourse on teaching social justice can provide final answers. They can, only at best, provide some wisdom to guide us in whatever choices we have the opportunity to make" (Fisher 2001, p. 220). Obviously there is a vast array of children's books available and we have no desire to limit those books that other educators feel have a significant and timely message to convey to their students. However, we have selected some that we feel based on our own experiences are wonderfully suited for ad-

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dressing specific issues of social justice and oppression. For both of us the choice to use a particular children's book at a particular time and in a particular way is completely dependent on the needs and energy of the class, the students, and of course ourselves. We see reading children's stories as a way to change the classroom dynamic by challenging the power relations between our students and ourselves. What we most seek is to give our students the autonomy to go wherever the story takes them. It is imperative that students experience us as active listeners who are there to provide a safe environment, the just-right book, and to facilitate both their thinking and feeling.

Conclusion

Our experiments with and use of selected children's literature have been an effective means to transform the issue of social justice from being not only a concept of discussion, but more significantly into stories of self as other discovery. It never failed that each and every time a piece of children's literature was read in class students would write insightful reflections that demonstrated how the text affected their learning about course content, themselves, and the world. So grab a piece of children's literature, invite them to gather around, listen, and journey together to your "long lost or misplaced treasure." For it is through every story that we live, learn, and learn to live.

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Children's Books for Empathy and Social Justice

The Everything Seed: A Story of Beginnings, Carol Martignacco
Topic: Creation, Interconnectedness

The Big Box, Toni Morrison
Topic: Oppression, Freedom, Individuality, Punishment,

Visiting Day, Jacqueline Woodson
Topic: Racism, Poverty, Family Structure, Criminal Justice

Tar Beach, Faith Ringgold
Topic: Racial Identity and Pride, Urban Poverty, Family Socialization/Tradition

Home of the Brave, Allen Say
Topic: Racist Laws, Civil Rights, United States History

Seven Blind Mince, Ed Young
Topic: Social Construction of Reality, Limits of Individual Perception, Ethnocentrism

The Streets Are Free, Kurusa
Topic: Poverty, Social Movements, Community Activism

No Fair to Tigers, Eric Hoffman and Janice Lee Porter
Topic: Discrimination Laws, Disabilities, Activism

Play Lady, Eric Hoffman
Topic: Hate Crimes, Immigration, Discrimination

Brave Mole, Lynn Jonell
Topic: Terrorism, Bullying, Heroism, Dualistic Thinking, 9/11

Heroines and Heroes, Eric Hoffman
Topic: Gender Equality/Roles, Sexism

The Other Side, Jacqueline Woodson
Topic: Racism as Socialization, Integration,

Something Beautiful, Sharon Dennis Wheth
Topic: Urban Poverty, Social Decay

Best Best Colors, Eric Hoffman
Topic: Sexual Orientation, Homophobia, Family Dynamics

From A Distance, Julie Gold
Topic: Peace, War, Reconciliation

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, Eleanor Coerr
Topic: Peace, War

If The World Were a Village, David Smith
Topic: Global Inequality, Religious/Cultural/Ethnic Diversity

Stone Soup, John Muth
Topic: Social Cooperation, Collectivism

The Three Questions, John Muth
Topic: Spirituality, Quest for Meaning

Amazing Grace, Mary Hoffman
Topic: Racial/Gender Discrimination

Voices in the Park, Anthony Browne
Topic: Classism, Urban Poverty, Stereotyping

One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads, Johnnie Valentine
Topic: Same Sex Families, Homophobia/Racism Socialization

PugDog, Adrea U'Ren
Topic: Gender Stereotypes, Gender Roles

Zen Shorts, John Muth
Topic: Spirituality, Interpersonal

The Gift of Nothing, Patrick McDonnell
Topic: Materialism, Consumerism, Spirituality, Simplicity, Friendship

Old Turtle, Douglas Wood
Topic: Spirituality, Family of Life, Religious Divisions, War

Click Clack Moo Cows Type, Doreen Cronin
Topic: Unionism, Labor / Political Activism, Rights, Literacy

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