

Chapter 24

Exploring Social Justice Issues Through Diverse Youth Literature: Erasing Prejudice One Book at a Time

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ABSTRACT

Early youth literature focused almost wholly on didacticism, a sort of social justice of puritanical nature, moralizing youth on the straight and narrow. Today's "straight and narrow," however, is not as clear cut, and social justice exploration through diverse youth literature is a necessary journey for modern youth. This journey steers students into knowledge about multiple cultures, races, gender roles. The author explores the history and inception of early literature for youth in this chapter, then explores ways in which modern issues may be explored in the secondary classroom through projects which both foster student engagement, as well as bring about potential class and community activism, further promoting social justice to, ideally, erase prejudice, one book at a time. While the author uses a few specific books as examples, many books fit these roles and would be relevant to these types of studies and projects.

INTRODUCTION

In February of 2021 while headlines raged worldwide about quarantines and coronavirus vaccines, one headline radiated from among them. Fifty kilometers northeast of Cairo, Egypt, a 12-year-old girl, Reem El-Khouly, gathered her neighbor children in the village of Atmidah and began teaching them school because hers was shut down due to the virus (Fahmy, 2021). "I thought that instead of having them play in the street, I can teach them," said El-Khouly. "I wake up in the morning, pray and I call them to start the classes. I teach them Arabic, mathematics, religion and English" (para. 3-4). The article, accompanied by El-Khouly, beaming with smiles in her hijab, was one of many, and was sprinkled with comments from other schoolchildren who speak of both love for their young teacher and gratitude for their educa-

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tion in a time they might not be receiving one. This story struck a chord in me that day, as I prepared to teach my own pre-service teachers. The lesson for us, 7,000 miles away in the United States, was crucial.

Increasingly, the words *social justice* appear anywhere the study of English language arts (ELA) does. One reason this occurs is the same justification that class picture day would always interrupt my English classes when I was a secondary teacher. From small rural schools to large city schools, almost all students were required to take an English class, which is why the school chose ELA classes to reach the majority of its students at once. Sometimes it was frustrating; I would be attempting to ensure all my students were able to write a literary analysis when suddenly a voice would erupt through the intercom: “Room twenty-two, come to the cafeteria with your picture money and envelope!” And, with that, my class period ended for school pictures.

This is, likely, why it makes so much sense that if our public schools want to ensure our students graduate not only knowing the “three Rs” of yesterday, but are prepared for successful citizenship in a diverse world today, that we as ELA educators give them a genuine focus on social justice. To that end, in 2012, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) subject branch, within the Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs (CAEP), added to its new 2012 standards, a social justice standard, which reads, in full:

Standard VI: Candidates demonstrate knowledge of how theories and research about social justice, diversity, equity, student identities, and schools as institutions can enhance students’ opportunities to learn in English Language Arts.

Element 1: Candidates plan and implement English language arts and literacy instruction that promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society.

Element 2: Candidates use knowledge of theories and research to plan instruction responsive to students’ local, national and international histories, individual identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and community environment), and languages/dialects as they affect students’ opportunities to learn in ELA. (NCTE, 2012)

This updated emphasis within our ELA teacher preparation programs, asking us to show evidence that we are teaching our pre-service educators on the subject of social justice, has excited some, while making others a bit nervous. I recall one of my campus-based leaders asking, “Now how are we supposed to prove we can assess *that*?” The answer is both simple and complicated all at the same time.

FROM DIDACTICISM TO DIVERSITY

In the early days of literature for young people, there always existed a lesson to learn, and it seemed the purpose of literature was to teach it; didacticism reigned supreme. We are all familiar with the “moral of the story” tags that would appear at the end of a narrative. After all, which children in decades of old didn’t know not to tell a lie because they did not want their noses to grow like Pinocchio’s nose did?

Today, however, it seems commonplace in the ELA classroom to assume our literature curriculum would include diverse selections and include a focus on social justice; this is not always the case for myriad reasons. Whether teachers feel incapable of assuming what they feel is “too political” of a role,

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