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Critically Engaging Students Using Social Justice Topics in Children's Literature

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USING SOCIAL JUSTICE TOPICS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO CRITICALLY ENGAGE STUDENTS

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Research Question

How can I critically engage students in social justice topics, through children's literature?

Literature Review

- "Motivation and active learning work together synergistically, and as they interact, they contribute incrementally to increase engagement" (Barkley, 2009).
- Hadaway (2007) describes the opportunity students receive when they read social justice literature because they learn about different cultures, find connections to events and stories, and can begin to imagine what characters in a story might be experiencing.
- According to Cunningham (2013), primary grade students read texts more closely when the literature allows them to critically think about connections they have to the world and themselves.
- Teachers who have a deeper understanding of the standards, according to Pohan (2000), can create opportunities for students to discuss stereotypes, bias, discrimination, oppression, and equity.
- Picower (2012) explains that students who are introduced to social justice topics can find pride in where they come from and appreciate the differences in other students and cultures they learn about.

Methodology

- In this study, 23 second grade students participated.
- Data collection included field notes, lesson plans, and student work.
- Data analysis was conducted by analyzing field notes for evidence of student engagement and using student quotes, lesson plans, and student work to support the evidence found.
- Examples of literature used in this study included, "Fly Away Home" (Bunting, 1991), "The Big Book of Families" (Hoffman, 2010), and "The Word Collector" (Wimmer, 2011).

Results and Data Analysis

- Students were actively learning when common connections were found with characters and the plot.
"She tries to make the people who are fighting stop with nice words, I use kind words when I talk to other people" (Field notes, 11/05/2016)
- Students demonstrated engagement in literature through empathy for the characters.
One student pointed out, "That just like in our class we all look different but we like each other, and they should have liked the boy in the story even if he was different" (Field notes, 11/28/2016)
"Sad because he wasn't with his family", "Scared", "Frustrated because no one gets him". "They are probably sad they don't have a house to go to" "Scared they will get in trouble" "It is sad they do not have a home" "I would be sad if I had to live there" (Field Notes, 11/30/2016, 12/05/2016)
- Students were motivated to learn when the lesson involved literature about family and culture.
- Students engaged more in depth when in small groups with more opportunity to discuss.

Conclusions

- Teachers can discover students' interest in their own classroom and use them to pick social justice children's literature to promote student engagement during lessons.
- Literature that is used in lessons should be chosen according to the classroom and what is appropriate for the students.
- By allowing students time to discuss and collaborate with each other, students can discover connections to themselves and the world.
- Integrating in children's literature that touches on social justice topics can be done during language arts lessons very easily and is a great way to reach topics that might not be taught normally.