

Reflective Bibliography: Empathy

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There were a number of themes which were apparent throughout the duration of this course which have framed my understanding of children's literature. These themes apply directly to my own teaching and experiences, and the text I have consumed during this course has helped refine and redefine what I had previously understood and accepted about children's literature. A central theme of children's literature, I have found overall, is to be about developing empathy for others. These sub themes listed with module readings and what I have consumed this term have allowed me to formulate a sense of empathy. The sub themes within the course have included: early read(ers/ing), access, imagery and the importance of context, and molding identity. Each of these themes should not be read about or touched upon in isolation, as they are fluid and many of the texts in each theme can apply to other themes within this assignment.

Theme One: Early Read(ers/ing)

The first theme for this course for me has been about looking back upon childhood and reflecting on the roles literature plays in the shaping of our lives. Module 11's *How a boy became an artist* allowed me to reflect on how we (as teachers) need to foster a love of reading and writing as much as we can in the hope that our students develop a sense of ownership of their own work. Providing opportunities within the classroom to develop storytelling skills and imagine different scenarios and perspectives is key to developing a greater sense of empathy later on in life.

Module 1's title, Views of Childhood, had Frijhoff's *Historian's discovery of childhood* appearing at the forefront of my mind when thinking about how we (as teachers and a society) perceive early readers and early reading. How I remember my own childhood is so much different than the childhood my own students are experiencing. I did not have the immense responsibility a lot of my students have, and I used literature as a means to escape, only coming back to our experiences when we reflect on how we were shaped.

Can children's books help build a better world? (Said, *The Guardian*, 2015) awoke a sense of how literature can help us make sense of the world around us, especially as we are given access to different types and genres of text. According to Said, "great children's books [are used] to help [children] make sense of their experiences, connect them to the rest of the world, and show them they [are] not alone. She [Jella Lepman] was convinced that books for young people could create bridges of understanding across the barriers of the world" (*Can children's books help build a better world?*, 2015). Early readers need the support offered by literature to help them grow developmentally and experience empathy. Smucker's *Underground to Canada* promoted a sense of urgency and provided concrete ways to tie the curriculum to developing

empathy. I appreciated the plain approach in which the book was written, as it made it assessable and intriguing to early readers.

Mallan's *Empathy: Narrative empathy and children's literature* reflects that defining learned empathy carries its own bias, in that "when we speak of empathy, are we speaking of the ability to understand another's perspective only when we first turn that perspective into one easily understood by Westerners" (2013, pg. 111). The role of literature is not solely to identify with the main characters ourselves, but to develop a sense of appreciation for the character's situation. Mallan goes on to state that "This insider knowledge to a character's emotional feelings of sadness, isolation, and difference promotes narrative empathy and may assist readers in gaining an empathic or sympathetic perspective. The illustrations also play an important part in this process. The texts also demonstrate how the similarity bias mediates narrative empathy. As the discussion of *The Chinese Violin* suggested, the similarity bias may shift throughout a text encouraging different empathic responses" (pg. 112). As a teacher who has spent their entire career working with novels and chapter books almost exclusively, I realized that I do not have the experience necessary to successfully teach my students empathy without using the aid of images in picture books. This sparked an understanding of why many of my colleagues online are requesting the titles of picture books to help create classroom community or address difficulties within the classroom.

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Theme Two: Access

The second theme I found to be prevalent in this course was the idea surrounding access. By access, I mean the availability of and the ability to read a given text. For as many students who find reading “easy” or “enjoyable”, there are more who find it “difficult” or “boring”. The culture around reading and reading for pleasure is in disrepair, with educators around the world trying to bring relevance to the curriculum, relevance to the process, and relevance to our students’ lives. I would argue that many already struggling students continue to struggle with reading because they are not given access to relevant and appropriate levelled text. All of our students want to fit in, so reading text which looks to be a lower reading level, reading text which other students read in earlier grades, and reading text which does not spark imagination create a wider and wider gap between where they are in terms of reading and where they could be. The process of creating and using canons in the middle grades is absolutely a process which needs to be stopped, simply for the reason that it limits access. Thein, Beach, and Fink missed the mark in *Critiquing and constructing canons in middle grade English language arts classrooms* when they wrote how canons can be co-constructed (2013, pg. 10) between students and teachers. Canons should not be in place in middle grade classrooms because it widens the gap between students. Guidelines may be appropriate in terms of choosing based on genre, but there should be no specified list in a middle grade classroom as students will see that as a bar set in front of them and possibly be overwhelmed before they even choose their first book.

One way we as teachers can provide access to literature for our students is to provide a wide variety of titles and complete read-alouds in our classrooms. A text I particularly liked reading with my class this term was the *Can you survive?* series. We read a fictional choose-your-own-adventure regarding the Titanic aloud in the classroom and spent a significant amount

of time in class discussion about inferences and the morality and ethics associated with each choice. My ‘non-readers’ were engaged in the discussion because they were not forced to read the otherwise difficult text, and by me placing the text under the document camera, they were better able to follow along and see words and how they are pronounced (therefore improving their fluency with no requirement on their part beyond paying attention).

In addition, Young, Moss, and Cornwell’s *The classroom library: A place for nonfiction, nonfiction in its place* enlightened me to making sure there were opportunities for access in my own classroom library. As mentioned by the authors, “It is important to provide students with books in their home language whenever possible. Nonfiction books written in students’ native languages can support English learners as they transition from their first language to their second” (2007, pg. 8). As I do not have English language learners in my classroom, sometimes I need the reminder that we need to be increasing diversity in our literature in our classrooms to reach more students. If our students see themselves, see text in their language, they are more likely to buy-in to reading, as reading can feel isolating to an English language learner. Our students are able to develop empathy when they feel invested and as if they can put themselves in a character’s shoes. Also, the authors mention that “it is important to have multiple copies of some titles so that small groups of students can experience the same text together” (pg. 8), which is another aspect I typically forget about, as sometimes in my classroom we have a wait list to read a particular title. I struggle with obtaining multiple copies of a book because I know that once the class has read the titles they will go back to sitting on the shelf, as well as budgetary concerns where I would rather purchase another title than a multiple copy. A reasonable alternative may be to have two copies of a popular title, to satisfy those students keen on the title, but to also continue to generate interest and spread funds better through the classroom library.

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Theme Three: Imagery and the Importance of Context

In Leland, Lewison, and Harste's *Multimodal responses to literature*, the authors remind us that no two readings of the same text will result in the same images drawn by students (2012, pg. 127). With any given text, it should be no surprise that our students may connect with the text in multiple ways, or not at all, based on their own experiences and perceived experiences. How I might envision a student reading a text will certainly differ from how the text is read by that student. The authors' argument stems from their idea that "the arts are integral to the processes of expanding communication and supporting oral and written language learning. We believe that in order to expand everyone's communication potential, the arts— in all their expressive forms— need to become a seamless part of the reading and language arts curriculum" (pg. 127), with which I completely agree. I have taught a number of students who identify with literature by having the book read to them and them drawing or creating based on their inspiration from the text. When I offer an assignment based on a piece of text which allows them to draw, my grade five students often opt for a drawing assignment instead of a written assignment. Often, the perception is in grade five that art is easier than writing, as many of my students find writing pieces to be taxing and boring, whereas they see art as creative and therefore 'easier'. I would argue that good art (when considering the curricular subject fine art) is difficult, but if my students want to create based on a text, I am not going to be the one to stop them, instead, I will encourage them along the way.

Short indicates in *What's Trending in Children's Literature and Why it Matters* that "Books with strong visual images hold special appeal and meaning because children are completely immersed in a visual culture in which images are central to their experiences and interactions. A visual culture is one in which images, as distinguished from text, are central to

how meaning is created in the world” (2018, pg. 289). Images in text, therefore, is trending in children’s literature according to Short. From my own perspective, this makes sense – for the duration of my teaching career the presence of graphic novels has been in the forefront of classroom, school, and public libraries. When I was attending university for my undergraduate degrees, however, not a single professor mentioned how graphic novels or visuals could help students in reading and learning. I, however, was also streamed into a high school grouping, and had very little experience beyond one middle years course with students previous to grade nine. Short’s point in her article remains that graphic novels are to be considered and recommended, and teachers do need to be placing visual narratives in the hands of our students. Short writes, “As educators, we need examples of how to engage children with visual narratives, particularly how to encourage children to think critically (in the absence of words)” (pg. 291). I am sure Short would argue (and I would agree) that visual narratives are just as important as we can practice skills such as inferencing and connections with visual narratives, and we can learn empathy through seeing others’ experiences (even through drawings). I was horrified to learn that the text, *Knots on a Counting Rope* was written with very little research or Indigenous input. The imagery in the text is not accurate for the Indigenous communities intended to be reflected, which brought to my attention the careful process we must go through before presenting text to our students. While we may think we are well-versed in understanding inaccuracies, there are many texts in our libraries and bookstores which appear to be accurate and certainly are not. This text reminded me that accessing a reference person for a particular text about a culture I am not from may be necessary. I also discovered that if I have a gut reaction that something is not right with a text, if I were to do a Google search I may find others who agree with me, with more reason than a gut reaction.

What struck me most about Rodgers' *Attending to Student Voice: The Impact of Descriptive Feedback on Learning and Teaching* was the importance of the teachers' role in listening to the student as they relay their reading and learning. Rodgers states, "the feedback dialogue . . . offers an opportunity to work in a democratic partnership, granting students the authority to voice their own experience and contribute to decisions that directly affect them. [It is important for teachers to] examine their own motives so they can hear and see their students clearly" (2006, pg. 214). If we as teachers do not attend to our students' personal experiences and contexts, we are doing them a disservice.

While reading Marquez's *Collected Stories* (2008), featuring *One of These Days*, I was reminded of how difficult it is to find appropriate short story anthologies for grade five students. Even in the midst of all of the professionals in the forum, only a few titles were suggested. Short stories, in my opinion, are low-investment pieces of literature, as they appeal to many students because they are typically quite quick and do not spend a lot of words to establish setting or develop characters, which I read alongside the UNICEF *Tiny Stories* piece. I appreciated the *Tiny Stories* piece because the authors were able to establish their context quickly through their biography and their writing. The context, I found, in many of the short stories available in the anthology, through the *Tiny Stories* piece, and in the forum had dark imagery presented, which I was trying to stay away from, as my natural instinct is to gravitate toward those types of text. Niven's *All the Bright Places* was another dark piece I chose to read, but I appreciated the imagery presented in the text in that it was hopeful. Too often, dark texts stay in the darkness, which does not promote a sense of things getting better. Personally, I wish to encourage my students to read books where there is light present in some way before the last chapter. There was a sense of hope throughout Niven's novel, which I appreciated.

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Theme Four: Molding Identity

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The danger of a single story* (2009) is cautionary in nature, as she indicates that there are multiple perspectives we often do not consider when consuming text. We are to be equally careful when writing our own stories as we often show our biases. Adichie continues to explain that we as consumers of text are responsible in seeking out other perspectives during and after reading, and we should be seeking out text where we feel represented. She stated in her talk that she often modelled her own writing off of what she read, which she had no experience with (being white, blonde haired, blue-eyed, and experiencing snow). We so often model our own identity based on what we read – how we ought to live, how we ought to speak, and how we ought to conduct ourselves. We are comprised of every text we have read in our lives and every experience we have had, so we should not be surprised when we come across others who have had different experiences. Ann Marie Fleming's *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam* was written as a memoir about her grandfather's immigration as a Chinese immigrant and life in the Vaudeville circus period. In the text, she explains how her grandfather's identity helped mould her own identity, which is often how our students approach learning about themselves. First, we ask our students to look back on their family's history and family values, then we ask them to see how they match themselves up to those values. The values, with their own experiences and preferences ultimately help the student shape their own identity.

Categories blur as teen lit comes of age (Wetta, 2016), inspired me to be more open and positive about preferring to read teen literature instead of literature typically associated with adults, as "A number of new releases focus on the conflict that results from the transition from childhood to adulthood". One of my favourite series is the *Unwind* series which is complex,

action packed, and ultimately grapples with an undercurrent of abortion. I have been hesitant to recommend the series to students in my class as I felt it would be too dark for them, but have since reconsidered. We can also develop empathy through learning about others' experiences, no matter how dark they are. Since reading Molly Wetta's article, I have engaged in discussion with my colleagues about teen literature and the universality of its themes and appeal.

Understandably, they also feel the pressure of conforming to what is "expected" of us as professionals, which includes the expectation that conduct a lot of professional development reading. However, with spring break approaching, and with more years of practice as a teacher, I need a mental break which will be reserved for teen literature.

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