

Using Literature to (re) Consider Politicized Issues

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Political issues in the United States have become increasingly polarized over the past decade. The 2016 presidential election was characterized by distrust and intolerance. Hostile campaign rhetoric positioned citizens in “ideological silos,” creating an *us against them* climate across the nation (Suh, 2014). Even seasoned teachers and those who routinely engage in critical conversations with their students have become fearful of backlash from administrators, parents, and community members. hooks (1994) writes that it is often difficult for teachers to challenge the status quo and do something different, especially when it can be seen as risky. However, avoiding potentially divisive political issues or watering them down also comes at a cost. Schools are places where students come to understand civic engagement and to develop their own political identities (Syvertsen, Stout, Flanagan, Mitra, Oliver, & Sundar, 2009). The role that teachers play in providing students with opportunities to exercise their voices, take responsibility, and consider collective action is inimitable.

In this issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom*, we share three vignettes in which teachers use literature to support inquiries into controversial issues and show that books can create safe spaces for political discussions in the classroom. The first vignette features fifth grade teacher, Shannon Clowes, who introduces Kenneth Braswell’s (2015) *Daddy, There’s a Noise Outside* to support a class discussion about the Black Lives Matter Movement. Next, Julia Hillman explores immigration and forced journeys using a global text set with her fourth and fifth grade English Language Learners. Finally, Multicultural Curriculum Coordinator Junko Sakoi conducts a thoughtful and reflective interview with Julia Hillman following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Their vignette highlights the books Julia used to introduce students to the *American’s Creed* (Page, 1918) as well as students’ responses to current public and political discourses.

As the Director of Multicultural Curriculum and a co-researcher in this inquiry, it was my goal to consider, document, and interpret the ways in which literature supported intercultural understanding and increased students’ political efficacy. When our group started this project, we had no idea how it would evolve. We only knew that it was an exciting time to work in the Tucson Unified School District located in Tucson, Arizona.

Setting and Context

From 2014-2016, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) was focused on curricular revision and the climate was more agreeable to multiculturalism than it had been in previous years. The Multicultural Curriculum Department included myself as the Director and three Multicultural Curriculum Coordinators (Dorea Kleker, Junko Sakoi and Susan Osiago). We were given the distinct honor of spearheading the district’s efforts to integrate diverse perspectives into the broader curriculum. The impetus for our work came primarily from a revised desegregation plan for Unitary Status (USP). The USP required the district to continue to develop and implement multicultural curricula. It outlined specific mandates for students to:

- conduct research
- improve critical thinking and learning skills
- participate in a positive and inclusive climate in classes
- build respect
- develop a sense of civic responsibility

Based on the mandates, it seemed appropriate and necessary to turn to children’s literature. Short (2009) writes, “Children’s engagements with literature have the potential to transform their worldviews through understanding their current lives and imagining beyond themselves” (p.10). To begin, we engaged in a multistep process to evaluate the districts’ texts and resources, create core book lists for all grade levels, and research award-winning multicultural literature. Samplings of the district’s books were evaluated at each grade level using “10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism” (The Council on Interracial Books for Children) and “Evaluating Literature for Authenticity” (Worlds of Words, <http://wowlit.org/links/evaluating-global-literature/>). The data reflected a dearth of contemporary multicultural literature in TUSD’s classrooms and libraries. The average publication date of these books, district-wide, ranged between 1997 and 2000. Moreover, the literature that was available in many schools contributed to maintaining negative cultural stereotypes or over-simplifying the teaching of diverse cultures. We used this data to write a proposal requesting that the district update its inventory of multicultural and global books.

Our work received an added boost from the incoming State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Diane Douglas, who, unlike her predecessor, said, “If any child educated in Arizona is not exposed to the suffering, trials and triumphs of all ethnic groups who have contributed to our state’s rich cultural mix, then we are failing to teach accurate history” (Huicochea, 2015). Instead of restocking classic books and outdated basal readers, our department worked with district leadership to purchase more than 400 current titles in multiple copies, reflecting the experiences of African Americans, American Indians, Latinos and Asian Americans as well as other marginalized groups and identities in our community such as refugees and immigrants.

Political Polarization in the District

Purchasing the books was the first step in a long process. A change in curriculum meant a change in district culture, which required commitment, collaboration and new understanding. In its prior attempts to re-engineer the curriculum, the district vacillated between two ends of the political spectrum. Culturally responsive teacher training and anti-racist discourse stood in contrast to the dominance of Euro-American perspectives in the standard curricula. Specific courses dedicated to the study of people of color delivered promising outcomes. That was, until critics protested that these courses “promoted resentment” (Reinhart, 2011). Culture was then removed entirely from the equation and the Ethnic Studies program was dismantled. For a long time, the political climate in TUSD mirrored the divide across the nation. This polarization was summed up neatly by two headlines that popped up on a Google search of the district. One beckoned the district to press forward toward the goal, “Want More Evidence that Mexican-American Studies Works?” Opposite, another shouted, “Liberalism is killing us!” There

has always been a question for teachers of which path to take. Most teachers in the district have floated safely down the middle, attempting to *not make waves*. Therefore, the manner in which teachers developed the new curriculum and their ability to help students make significant connections to the literature were of primary importance as we began this work.

The district paid teachers in grades K-12 (two per grade level) to participate in the curricular revision process. The work outlined for this project included integrating newly purchased books into K-12 ELA and 6-12 Social Studies Maps and also establishing lab classrooms to document exemplary practices. Based on the district's history, it was equally important for us to invite teachers to explore their own assumptions and attitudes about culture, read professional literature and learn new strategies for engaging students from diverse racial, ethnic, ability and gender groups.

Adopting Frameworks for Understanding; Embracing Inquiry as a Stance

The Multicultural Curriculum Department partnered with Worlds of Words and Dr. Kathy Short served as our project consultant. Hoping to move away from a hierarchical model of curriculum development, and instead to provide a more grassroots environment for teachers to think, talk and write, we met regularly at WOW. We brought together teachers from different schools and gave them time and frameworks through which to consider the work. We introduced them to Kathy's content framework for intercultural understanding along with her processing framework for engaging students in inquiry.

The content framework includes four, fluid and overlapping components: (1) personal cultural identities (2) cross cultural studies (3) intercultural understandings and (4) taking social action (Short, 2009). The processing framework outlines the Inquiry Cycle (Short, 2009). Both frameworks draw upon and are intertwined with democratic education, critical pedagogy, and social justice, and they were exactly what the teachers needed to focus their work.

Lab Classrooms

The second component to this project included establishing and monitoring four lab classrooms. The lab classrooms were utilized to pilot new resources and to document the impact of alternative teaching strategies on student engagement. The lab teachers received stipends from the Multicultural Curriculum Department for their work beyond the school day. Preference was given to teachers with diverse student populations and some experience with multicultural education. The classrooms were located at Steele, Blenman, Peter Howell and Manzo Elementary Schools. Members of the Multicultural Curriculum Department conducted observations during the ELA block and teachers met with us face-to-face weekly after school between September 2014 and June 2016. Data collected during this time included lesson plans, curricula vetting rubrics, booklists and proposed units, student work and teacher reflections. The data was used to document a range of culturally responsive teaching strategies as well as students' responses to this work.

We found that, irrespective of the school context or grade level, students' ability to consider human complexity and to see their common humanity with people who were both similar and different from them increased as they emerged through engagements with books. The vignettes in this issue represent three examples drawn from our lab classrooms. Our hope is that this work will inspire others to be courageous in their teaching and in their resolve to usher in a new generation of thoughtful and compassionate citizens

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