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Using Trade Books to Identify and Change Discriminatory Practices

The National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) encourages elementary educators to provide opportunities for students to explore social justice issues in their classrooms (NCSS, 2017). Simultaneously, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the English Language Arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School [NGA & CCSS], 2010) establishes the need for careful examination of text within literacy instruction to analyze historical figures' values, biases, and beliefs. The seamless integration of literacy and social studies can be effected through the inclusion of trade books (Shifflet & Hennig, 2017; Adams & Busey, 2017; Witherspoon, Clabough & Elliott, 2017; Rodriguez, 2017; Tschida & Buchanan, 2017). The inclusion of voices from different cultures and time periods in current pedagogy exposes students to multiple perspectives in a diverse world. Trade books are an educational tool which allows teachers to include those varied voices. Having students identify, analyze, and address discriminatory practices through trade books equips them with the skills necessary to build empathy and address oppressive systems (Freire, 1969; hooks, 1994; Bickford & Rich, 2017).

In this article, I provide an activity for using a trade book, *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014). This trade book was selected because it allows elementary social studies teachers to focus on discrimination which adversely affected the education of Sylvia Mendez, a Mexican-American student. I start by providing a brief overview of teaching discrimination to elementary students using trade books. Then, I give the steps and resources to use this trade book for an activity as a way to discuss diverse perspectives in the elementary social studies classroom. Educators can use this trade book to highlight a historical event in ways that link literacy with social studies as described in the NCSS C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) and the Common Core English Language Arts Standards for Reading Informational Texts in third grade.

The Value of Trade Books in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

Trade books offer factual accounts of historical events and enable students to explore an event in depth (Clabough, Wooten & Turner, 2014). Students can consider how their point of view agrees with or differs from the author through the examination of the difficulties experienced by the central figure in the text. Trade books are usually sorted by reading level and include eye-catching illustrations (Bickford & Schuette, 2016). Since reading trade books is commonplace in elementary classrooms, the integration of social studies and literacy instruction through read-alouds provides elementary students

developmentally appropriate experiences to learn about historical events (Bickford & Schuette, 2016; Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013).

Trade books allow students the ability to explore events in depth and more holistically than a textbook. Whereas textbooks provide factual evidence of events, trade books provide multiple perspectives into the human and emotional elements of these events (Krey, 1998). The details included within trade books introduce students to culturally sustaining pedagogy which directly affect the reader's attitude, emotion, and personal connections to information (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; McCarty, 2007). Culturally sustaining pedagogy repositions oppressed people and addresses the ways in which equity and justice have been absent in the narratives of these people (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Awareness of these details enable students to identify how multiple identities and cultures are reflected in their classroom communities. Trade books which contain historically accurate information offer young readers opportunities to construct knowledge through experiencing the world in which they live (Bickford & Rich, 2017).

Trade books allow students to capture the values, biases, and beliefs of historical figures while evaluating their own. Through read-alouds of such texts, teachers provide valuable opportunities to engage students in meaningful discussions and experiences which broaden their worldview of cultures and practices, including those which have been marginalized (Summerlin, Hill, & Ponder, 2017).

Awareness of such practices is necessary for students to engage empathetically and to act as agents of change. Students need to realize their potential to contribute to societal change or to be aware of the consequences of their actions (Barton, 2012). Using trade books within an inquiry-based learning framework allow students to connect daily choices to historical agency. Trade books focused on marginalized populations offer students a gateway to recognize and address their individual places of privilege or positions of oppression. Through inquiry of these experiences, students are able to identify, address, and transform specific systems and practices that set some students apart from others (Freire, 1969). The knowledge gained by these students allows them to participate with civic responsibility in the socially, economically, and culturally diverse communities in which they live (Banks & Banks, 2001). In the next sections, I provide an activity using a trade book to discuss issues with racial injustices in U.S. history.

Teaching with Trade Books about Racial Injustices

When presenting sensitive issues such as discrimination to young students, the learning environment necessary must be intentionally, thoughtfully, and carefully designed by the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Ground rules are necessary to

create an environment in which learners are comfortable sharing their ideas and listening to the ideas of others as described in the CCSS for the English language arts. (McAvoy & Hess, 2014; NGA & CCSS, 2010). For elementary students, these ground rules must be explicitly articulated. I have provided suggested ground rules in the next section.

1. One student speaks while other learners listen.
2. Students listen to others' opinions even if they do not agree.
3. All responses should be courteous and free of malice.

Activities should be framed within a compelling question that requires learners to think deeply through intentional thought and dialogue. The compelling question, described in the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework, encourages students to use evidence to fill in gaps to their knowledge (NCSS, 2013). For this article, that compelling question is "What can students do to address discrimination?" Each student's initial response to this question is charted by the teacher and displayed in the room during subsequent learning.

After responding to the compelling question, I ask for students to turn and talk with a partner to formulate a working definition for the word discrimination. I circulate through the room during the discussions and assists where needed. Then, students are asked to identify key historical events which included discrimination. The responses are clarified as necessary by me through open-ended questions such as "Tell me more about what you mean when you said that." Then, I document the answers on chart paper and posts those answers in the room.

The trade book *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014) is then introduced. Students examine the book cover, title, and illustrations in literature circles with multiple copies of the text while completing the graphic organizer in the next section. This book orientation provides students with background information necessary for the students to problem-solve during the read-aloud which follows (Briggs & Forbes, 2009). This supports struggling readers and students who have not yet developed cultural competence for populations other than their own.

Graphic Organizer to Analyze *Separate is Never Equal*

Name _____ Title _____		
Author _____		
After looking at the front and back cover, describe what you see.	How is the title related to the cover illustration?	Are there any similarities among the characters? If so, explain these similarities.
Are there any differences among the characters? If so, explain these differences.		Based on your findings so far, what do you predict this trade book will be about? What does it remind you of?

Figure 1. Student graphic organizer.

Students share responses from their graphic organizers with the whole group. Responses are charted and posted, allowing multiple perspectives to be acknowledged. The responses serve as a formative assessment of students, indicating their cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

I explain the importance of illustrations and multiple opinions to give a deeper understanding of the trade book. Prompts which require text evidence explanations from the trade book offer opportunities for students to identify and address discrimination in real-world context. The following prompts are written on chart paper and read to students to create a purpose for the reading:

1. Use text evidence to identify parts of the book that you support.
2. Use text evidence to identify parts of the book that you disagree with.
3. How did the story make you feel? Explain your answer.

Then, I read the story aloud. Immediately after the reading, students work through a Socratic seminar to discuss their findings. Socratic seminars are open discussions which enable students to participate in discussions after engaging in critical thinking at their individualized level (Cuny, 2014). Student participation is evidenced as each person is required to think deeply to the other responses, take notes when necessary, and respond verbally during the discussion. I use probing questions to clarify responses. Examples of probing question are provided in the following section.

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. Explain what you mean when you said that.

This activity benefits the students as they are able to express their opinion(s) while listening to others' perspectives.

Then, I define the word agency as “the ability to act on decisions in order to bring about desired goals” (Barton, 2012, p.131). The example of Sylvia’s father gaining signatures on the petition is used to demonstrate agency in this trade book. Specific parts of the trade book lend themselves to student agency because they could easily occur in the context of the students’ daily lives. Allowing students to connect past events to the present empowers students to believe they can create change (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013). Then, students are told that they will develop agency as they create an appropriate response to a chosen scenario from the text. Those chosen scenarios follow:

1. On page two, a young white boy pointed at Sylvia and yelled “Go back to the Mexican school! You don’t belong here!” If you were Sylvia’s friend, what could you have done when that boy said that? Would it be more effective to speak to Sylvia or to the boy? Explain your reasoning.
2. On page three, Sylvia did not speak or introduce herself in her classes. She kept her head down when walking in the halls. What are some words that you can think of that describe how Sylvia felt? Can you remember a time when you or someone you know may have felt like Sylvia? What could you do to help Sylvia during this scene?
3. On page eight, the secretary gave Aunt Soledad two enrollment forms when there were four new students at the school. Look at the illustration on page eight and nine. Why do you think the secretary gave forms for Alice and Virginia but not for Sylvia and her brothers? What could you have done if you were there? What do you think the other characters could have done differently?

After choosing their activity, students engage in a jigsaw activity. First, they work collaboratively with other students who choose the same option as a small group. Then, the small groups gather back together with the class to present their chosen scenario. I circulate through the room and assist where needed. This approach allows each small group to become an expert on a specific portion of the text and present that carefully planned response to the group. Through this activity, students understand that varied responses to literature are appreciated and that there are multiple ways to address oppressive actions and systems.

After the jigsaw activity, students work in pairs to examine a copy of the United States postage stamp obtained from http://about.usps.com/news/national-releases/2007/sr07_038.htm. This stamp commemorates the Mendez vs. Westminster court decision. Students examine the details of the stamp and write their observations to specific questions reflecting what they see and their interpretation during a quick write. Examples of questions students should answer follow.

1. What does the phrase “Toward Equality in our Schools” mean?
2. What does the book represent?
3. What do the human figures represent?
4. What other important images do you notice in the stamp?

Then, each student pair discusses their findings. I circulate through the room and assist where necessary. Following the discussions, the whole group meets together to share their observations. I caption student responses on a poster size copy of the stamp. This activity allows students to examine a primary source item (the postage stamp) and to see that significant historical events are represented in various ways in our daily lives.

Mendez v. Westminster School District Commemorative Stamp



Figure 2. Kessler, E. (2007). *Mendez v. Westminster School District*. Retrieved from http://about.usps.com/news/national-releases/2007/sr07_038.htm

After working through an examination of the postage stamp activity, students answer the compelling question (What can students do to address discrimination?) again orally. Next, I chart students' responses. I place the chart paper with the initial answers side by side with this chart paper. Then, the students orally compare and reflect on similarities or differences in their responses. This allows students to see that changes in perception are warranted when new information fills in the gaps in their knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014).

Students complete the unit by accessing the See Saw student digital learning platform at <https://web.seesaw.me/> to reflect upon their learning and ask lingering questions. In their video, they define discrimination, tell how it is harmful, and explain their "big takeaway" from the unit. Their "big takeaway" is their analysis and reflection of how this learning has reinforced or changed their thoughts. This benefits the educator as a means of identifying additional educational steps which may be necessary for clarification of historical information. For example, if students do not recognize how the previously highlighted scenarios are oppressive, additional instructional time should be dedicated to the learning. The actions benefit students as they are again able to self-reflect and extend their learning into practice.

Teaching with trade books is common in the elementary classroom. Using a trade book to teach students about discrimination benefits students in numerous ways. Students are able to evaluate a controversial topic that may otherwise be avoided. They are able to examine the issue from multiple perspectives, including those which differ substantially from their own. Most importantly, the experience encourages students to express how social inequities currently affect them and individuals during different time periods (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Conclusion

In this article, I present an activity to teach elementary students about discrimination through a trade book. The steps in the activity are discussed in this article. Then, students acknowledge, share, and defend their perspectives with others. Finally, they reflect upon their learning through close analysis of their perspectives. This activity allows young students an opportunity to think critically and to construct responses to events which continue to affect them and others. For elementary students to move away from learning common lists of historical facts and move toward learning how history is relevant in their lives, they should be provided with such opportunities to practice civic engagement and democratic principles.

Levstik and Barton (2015) refer to opportunities such as those utilized in this article as “doing history” rather than learning history. Experiences such as the activity discussed in this article invite students to engage in purposeful activities from which they create a stance to interpret their findings. The steps in my activity allow students to utilize a trade book to be able to identify discriminatory practices in one case in U.S. history. Then students are able to apply their agency to change social, cultural, economic and political institutions to more actualize the democratic principles our country was founded upon.

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