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TE 849

Literature Position Paper

I have been teaching for 4 short years. During my experience in the classroom, I have taught first grade (during my MSU internship), 2nd grade for a year, and the past two years have been in a 4th grade classroom. The end of this school will mark my 3rd year teaching fourth grade. I have come to realize, especially through this class, that the importance of reading and literature is central to every classroom, regardless of the age of the students. I have always held the belief that literature can transport anyone to another world and teach us things that we would never really be able to experience on our own. This class has helped to solidify many of those thoughts for me.

While reflecting on this class and the role that I believe literature should play in classrooms, I cannot help but go back to one of our first assignments, What Literature Can Do. It was in this assignment where I really began to think about the roles of literature and what it does for its readers. I cannot help but pull many of the statements I described back into perspective as I write my final reflection.

As described in the week's course work, literature has several purposes. It can do the following: let us see other lives through other's eyes, develop imagination, help us solve problems, gives us a sense of history, transmit cultural literacy, lets us experience the beauty of language, lets us experience the play of language, teaches us information, and helps us develop our reading skills. While reading our last article, *Speaking My Mind*, by Donald Smith, I also came across several of the purposes for reading literature. In his article, he described several angles that a reader can take while reading. To me, this is the purpose for reading. Every person, regardless of age, approaches a text with a specific purpose. I really enjoyed reading Smith's perspectives and got me thinking about what I am communicating to my students about reading. It also had me thinking about what my beliefs are about the reading experience for children.

Overall, I believe that reading is a very personal experience. Any person, adult or child, brings their own life experiences to any story that they read. Books can be read for pure entertainment, allowing us to use our imagination and laugh at the silliness of the words. Other times, books can be read to experience a life that is not how we are used to living. We can learn new information about cultures, historical events, animals, and basically anything we can dream of. Through reading, we get to experience the world at it's best, in all it's beauty. If it had to be put down in a sentence or two, I would say that the purpose of introducing stories to children is to have them experience and learn lessons about life. This includes the lives of others that we are not familiar with. The assignments of this class and the discussions with my group members helped solidify these beliefs for me. It is my goal as an educator to have my student realize the opportunities and experiences that literature can offer them. I truly wish to instill this view into all of my students. I want my students to realize the fact that reading is more than just opening a book and reading the words on the page. It is about the experience and journey the reader takes while reading those words on paper. This semester, I felt as if I have gone on journey with many of the texts we have read and I want my students to experience that as well.

During this journey, one thing that really had an impact on me was the importance of using multicultural literature in the classroom, but on a different level than I have thought about it before. Previous to this class, I have always valued and stressed the importance of reading about different cultures and groups of people to my students. I had never really thought about the issues as deep as I did during this course. With my group, we experienced and discussed several issues that surround multicultural literature. During the first few conversations, I was still unsure how to define multicultural literature. I now realize that it is much more than a definition. Teachers need to be intentional in their search for books that represent a wide variety of underrepresented cultures as well as make sure that the books are telling the correct story of that culture.

Referencing what I previously stated in my reflection on the multicultural unit, there are many things I want to take back into my classroom because of what we did those three weeks. I had never thought about how a book might inaccurately represent a group of people as deeply as this class required me to. The experience really got me thinking about what kinds of books I have in my classroom library and what message I might be sending to my students, even unintentionally. I believe that it was through the use of discussions with my group and reading different viewpoints that I was able to really connect with these issues. The last article we read for this unit was what helped me pull all of my thoughts together. The article was *Cai's Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Just "Ivory Tower" Bickering?* by Mingshui Cai. It helped to answer what multicultural literature really is, which is more than just a simple definition. The thing that stood out the most to me in Cai's article was the issue of informing and empowering. I realize that maybe it is impossible to truly define what multicultural literature is, but I also realize that it is important for children as well as adults to understand and be exposed to the issues and struggles that different cultures have experienced. I liked how Cai took this one step further and explained that we need to empower students to think critically and analytically about the issues. He says that, "we need activities that adopt an issue driven approach and thought-provoking books that challenge children to think about the issues that they may face." To me, this is the biggest challenge and thing I want to take away from this course. I want to take simple exposure and teaching about different cultures and help my kids develop a real appreciation and understanding for diversity. Then build on it to empower my students to take action to challenge the social norms that still exist today. This starts by helping the kids make connections to stories that are about cultures different and unfamiliar to themselves. This is what I need to strive to do more of in my classroom, rather than just have a lot of "multiple+cultural" books in my classroom library.

I want to make a better effort into getting a wider variety of books into their hands- ones they would not choose to read on their own. Cai says, "Teachers and librarians need to help children find these books and get engaged with them." (Pg. 321)

This is what I want to do! He also goes on to say on page 321, “Some students of the mainstream culture may find it hard to engage in multicultural literature because it reflects experiences different from theirs. Educators are obliged to help them find ways into it.” This quote was a wake up call to me. If I do not expose my students to these books, it is highly unlikely they will find interest in them on their own. I know this because of first hand experience.

As I mentioned in many postings, the content of this unit did not interest me at first, but as I continued to read and discuss, I was captured by their story. This experience helped me to realize that many of my students probably have similar thoughts to several of the books I have in my library. They will never choose to read and engage in them if I do not provide them reasons to do so. I realized that a great way to do this is through the use of several different types of media and genres, as we did with *Coraline*. The story of *Coraline* was great to read as a fantasy novel with hints of traditional literature. However, the reading of the graphic novel brought new ideas up as well as comparing the written story to the film version. I hope to be able to do this more frequently in my classroom, as I see how powerful it can be as a teaching tool for different genres. In fact, I used the book *Coraline* as a read aloud before returning it to the library. The book did engage students and I even had a few ask me what other books they could read that were similar. This was a great win for me because these particular students did not want to read anything other than books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Big Nate*.

Along with being more intentional in the books my students are reading and experiencing, I want to make sure that the discussions they are having are rich and complex. I want their discussions of text to help them build their knowledge of the world and how different people experience it. It was during our group conversations and reflections that I realized this. I have other online classes with online discussions and group work. However, this class was a unique experience. As mentioned in our last group conversation, my group really worked well together. It almost seemed as if we were actually sitting face-to-face having a conversation, rather than across the

computer. I enjoyed being able to talk about text with people who had similar as well as different viewpoints. The discussing helped me realize just how important this type of interaction is for my students. I always say to my kids that it is ok to disagree, and I realize that without opportunities to do that, my point is mute.

With our discussions, the first assignment was outlined and described for us. We had different roles that we were to follow when we discussed the two books. As I mentioned in my posting, I think that this was both helpful as well as hindering. Due to the fact that this was one of the first times we were engaging in a discussion, it was nice to have exactly what we were to be expected to focus on. It helped guide my reading and allowed me a place to start in my discussing. However, as I read, I found myself hindered by the fact that I did not want to step on other member's toes. I wanted to say more than my role allowed me to say. Once we had all posted, I felt comfortable speaking my mind about the other topics, but it was slightly difficult to hold back on them until later.

Thinking about how this can and does affect my classroom, I realized that perhaps I am hindering my students right now in terms of their book club discussions. Having done book clubs for each of the years I have taught, I understand what they are supposed to look and sound like. However, this year, my kids do not seem to be as engaged as previous years. After thinking about the use of roles and how they might be limiting my students thinking, as it did mine, I am wondering if I am unintentionally blocking my students from being able to freely talk about a text. I wanted to be specific in my expectations for discussion in the beginning of the year, so I outlined the roles and they were assigned in a rotating basis. It worked at first, but now I am not seeing the development in the discussion as I had hoped. Based on what I learned from my discussions in this class, I am going to be pulling the defined roles from my book clubs for the rest of the year. Sure, the students will have focus questions and expectations, but I want to remove the boundaries of where their responses can go so they are free to talk about what matters to them. My hopes are that students begin to question each other's responses to the books and truly engage in more meaningful conversations.

Connecting what is happening in my classroom right now with what I have experienced in this course has been extremely helpful. In our discussion of literature and its purposes from week 3, I had talked about how I think teachers may be focusing too heavily on the correct answer rather than hearing the student's individual perspective of a text. As this course wraps up, I still believe this, in fact, probably more so. Yes, students need to be able to comprehend text and understand the message, but as I said before, reading is a personal experience. Our children do have their own minds, and often times we try to guide them to the typical response, but I wonder what would change if teachers stopped trying to plan everything and just let their students lead the discussion and learning. I realize that this takes time to develop students into young minds who are able to do this, but ultimately this is my goal as a teacher!

To this point, I have discussed things that were reinforced for me during this class or eye-openers for me. However, there is one key issue that was not resolved for me. It goes back to the role of multicultural literature and what exactly that should look like in my classroom and for my students. I have a much better understanding that multicultural literature is more than just having a lot of books that are about different groups of people. I understand that I need to always model questioning of how a culture is represented in a book, and what might that culture's response to the book be. What I still am struggling with is how it would be represented in my classroom. Should I have a basket set out labeled Multicultural Literature? Should we set aside a separate unit for us to explore these complicated topics? Who's story should I focus on? How much should we read? As I said before, I am not sure if there are correct answers here. It is a complicated issue and one that I am sure will change over time. The only thing that I realize is the importance of sharing this issue with students, even those who are elementary aged. In the future, I want to start reading all books through the lens of multicultural literature. I want to have discussions with my children about whose story is being told and whose might be getting misrepresented. I even bought a few of Joseph Bruchac's books to put into my classroom library.

Lastly, it is impossible to write my literature statement without including the basic pieces of literature, the literary elements. These elements are what captures the reader and provides a unique experience. As I reflect over what I did in this course and how I described individual pieces of literature in terms of the elements, I realize that I need to do a better job communicating the power of them to my students. I want my students to realize how an author can draw a reader in by the words they choose to use to describe events and characters. The perspective of who is telling the story can be a way to present an experience that a reader might never have had. It can also provide opportunities to question stereotypes that might exist and open student's eyes to cultures they never spent time thinking about. A well - developed plot that can take a reader to another world can be a window into different cultures and people. Though careful character development, a person might find himself or herself identifying with a character in a book who helps them overcome a personal struggle or teaches them a valuable lesson. A well thought out theme or message could influence several young children's lives and set them onto a path that was never thought possible. It is these basic ideas that drive my excitement and passion for teaching literature.

Literature does, and always will, play a central role in my teaching. After taking this course, I have been reminded of my personal beliefs as well as exposed to new ideas that I have never thought about. I am truly excited to put some of these new experiences into practice with my future students.