SECONDARY TEACHERS SHOULD EXPOSE RURAL READERS TO BOOKS THAT ARE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT THAN THE STUDENT’S PERSONAL CHOICE

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Literacy Education

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 2018

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Introduction

Cities, suburbs, and rural towns all have a variety of different types of students attending their schools. These students are exposed to different events, depending on the type of town and activities that occur in it. Events that may occur daily for those students who live in the cities or suburban areas, might only happen once in a blue moon for students in a town of 1,000 people. Dependant on the area, African-American, Hmong, Hispanic, and many other cultures may not be present at all within these school districts. There is a lack of cultural awareness in these school, at no fault of their own, simply because these schools do not have a large variety of differing cultures attending their schools. This leads me to my capstone project idea of creating a book club that provides novel choices of an array of cultures, so that students can be exposed to these cultures in a unique way.

I teach in one of these school districts, in a town of about 1,000 people. The population of my school consists of over 90% White students, which means that those students are not exposed to students who are from a variety of cultures. Lopez (2016) claimed, “We would not be a functioning [...] society without books that offer a different view of the world,” (p. 1). Schools need to allow students to be part of the story in a setting that is different than what they know (Lopez, 2016,). I started thinking about how I could help expose them to ideas that they are not aware of in their everyday life. There is not any gang violence near this town, there is no exposure to cultures from around the world, or really any cultural altercations near this town. This is due to lack of ethnic diversity in the school.

After realizing this, I noticed that my 7th and 8th grade students were only really reading books about white females falling in love with rebellious white males, in a giant, picture-perfect
high school life. Or strong white characters were trying to save their crumbling world from
disaster. The plot line of these stories were all so similar to one another; Girl falls in love with
boy, then girl must face the backlash of this. Or the girl encounters a problem that must be solved
by a different character coming in to help save the day. White characters/protagonists must save
the world, and only they can do it. I wanted to find a way to expose my students to ideas that
were outside of this realm that they seemed to be sucked into.

After discussing intense topics like racial differences, and problems that arise when
people differ in their opinions on this, with my 7th and 8th graders, I realized that they may not
be the best fitting audience for my capstone idea. This caused me to think about the possible
discussions and thoughts I could get from seniors in high school, which led me to the
groundwork of the book club project. Since a senior’s schedule seems to be constantly buzzing
with with new classes, ACT testing, and clubs, I figured that creating an after school book club
would be the best idea for a project, even though this idea could be quite fitting for a classroom
unit as well.

The students would have to voluntarily commit to a few weeks of after-school
discussions in order to get the most out of this book club. There are students, at least at my
school, that wish they could join a book club, and this idea is my way of helping them achieve
this desire. I am sure there are most students out there like this. Getting rural students to read
books that are different from the ones they would normally converge to, is the main goal of this
book club. I encourage you to incorporate this book club into your curriculum however you see
fit; this project will simply focus on an after-school book club setting.
Reasoning Behind Book Club

The students will use this book club to reflect on their own personal choices in books, and why they choose these certain novels. This book club will expose these rural students to ideas far outside their own everyday reality, like gang shootings and racial differences. These students will reflect before, during, and after they read a few difference novels. Powell (2011) stated, “[...] teachers need to converse with students about their reading selections and habits, including asking them questions about their prior experiences with reading,” (p. 6).

This is a great way for students to reflect on books of their choosing, and to make them think about why they have previously chosen certain books, and why it might be beneficial for them to choose a different style of novel. The whole point of this book club is to have students choose from a few stories that have very similar plot lines, like girl falls in love with boy, main character needs to save the world, or any idea similar to that. The three books that I chose to fit this category, on my “Book List One” include Legend by Marie Lu, If I Stay by Gayle Forman, or Turtles All The Way Down by John Green. With this book club, any book similar to these would be acceptable to use, for they all are centered around a semi-comparable plotline.

The other books, on “Book List Two” include Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds, and The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas. These two books are my choice for this book club because they involve gang shootings and racial tension and difficulties. Rural students are not as much exposed to these aspects as city students. I established these books choices after discussing with the school librarian, because she, too, agreed that the students deserved to be exposed to different cultures. By reading these novels in the book club, it allows a way for rural students to
acknowledge the fact that these problems occur in this world, to people their same age, and even though they live in a rural setting, it does occur.
Novels used in the book club:

Book List One

*Legend* by Marie Lu  
Published: November 29th, 2011, by Putnam Juvenile.  
Synopsis, taken directly from Goodreads: “What was once the western United States is now home to the Republic, a nation perpetually at war with its neighbors. Born into an elite family in one of the Republic's wealthiest districts, fifteen-year-old June is a prodigy being groomed for success in the Republic's highest military circles. Born into the slums, fifteen-year-old Day is the country's most wanted criminal. But his motives may not be as malicious as they seem. From very different worlds, June and Day have no reason to cross paths—until the day June's brother, Metias, is murdered and Day becomes the prime suspect. Caught in the ultimate game of cat and mouse, Day is in a race for his family's survival, while June seeks to avenge Metias's death. But in a shocking turn of events, the two uncover the truth of what has really brought them together, and the sinister lengths their country will go to keep its secrets.”

*If I Stay* by Gayle Forman  
Published: April 2nd, 2009, by Dutton Books.  
Synopsis, taken directly from Goodreads: “Choices. Seventeen-year-old Mia is faced with some tough ones: Stay true to her first love—music—even if it means losing her boyfriend and leaving her family and friends behind? Then one February morning Mia goes for a drive with her family, and in an instant, everything changes. Suddenly, all the choices are gone, except one. And it's the only one that matters. *If I Stay* is a heartachingly beautiful book about the power of love, the true meaning of family, and the choices we all make.”

*Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green  
Published: October 10th, 2017, by Dutton Books.  
Synopsis, taken directly from Goodreads: “Sixteen-year-old Aza never intended to pursue the mystery of fugitive billionaire Russell Pickett, but there’s a hundred-thousand-dollar reward at stake and her Best and Most Fearless Friend, Daisy, is eager to investigate. So together, they navigate the short distance and broad divides that separate them from Russell Pickett’s son, Davis. Aza is trying. She is trying to be a good daughter, a good friend, a good student, and maybe even a good detective, while also living within the ever-tightening spiral of her own thoughts.”
Book List Two

**Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds**
Published: October 24th, 2017, by Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books

Synopsis, taken directly from Kirkus Book Reviews: “After 15-year-old Will sees his older brother, Shawn, gunned down on the streets, he sets out to do the expected: the rules dictate no crying, no snitching, and revenge. Though the African-American teen has never held one, Will leaves his apartment with his brother’s gun tucked in his waistband. As he travels down on the elevator, the door opens on certain floors, and Will is confronted with a different figure from his past, each a victim of gun violence, each important in his life. They also force Will to face the questions he has about his plan. As each “ghost” speaks, Will realizes how much of his own story has been unknown to him and how intricately woven they are. Told in free-verse poems, this is a raw, powerful, and emotional depiction of urban violence. The structure of the novel heightens the tension, as each stop of the elevator brings a new challenge[...]”

**The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas**
Published: February 28th, 2017, by Balzer + Bray.

Synopsis, taken directly from Goodreads: “Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed. Soon afterward, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer and a gangbanger. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil’s name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr. But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life.”
Setting up the Book Club

RECRUITING STUDENTS: Whatever way your school works for providing information to students and parents, use that platform as a way to inform students on your book club. Provide information as to the meeting times, requirements, novels, and what they will get out of this class, or after-school activity.

MATERIALS NEEDED BEFORE BEGINNING:
- Multiple copies of all the books on both “Book Lists.”
- Pre/During/Post questions.
- An explanation ready for the final paper.
- Book chats ready to be given to the students via Google Slides, or some other format you deem fitting.

OBJECTIVES/LEARNING OUTCOMES:
- Students will be able to reflect on a novel of their choice.
- Students will be able to decipher what books will fit well within their school’s culture.
- Students will be able to compare their school’s culture to that of a different culture found within a novel.
- Students will be able to analyze the differences between two fictional stories and their characters and plot.
- Students will be able to explain their reasoning for choosing certain novels, and support their answers with reliable evidence.
- Students will be able to reflect on their own lives and compare it to the novels.
**Step-By-Step Layout of the Book Club**

**LESSON ONE:** Provide students with a small book chat per each novel. This way, students know what each book entails, and if they would be interested in it. Provide a brief summary of what the book is about, characters, and setting. Also provide a passage from each book. Choose a passage that describes an important event, or important characterization. This way, it intrigues the students and makes them want to read more. They also get to view how the author writes, which is just as important as anything else.

**LESSON TWO:** Allow students to choose one of the books from “Book List One.” After students have chosen a book from the first list, allow them time to choose a book from “Book List Two.”

**LESSON THREE:** Once students have chosen their books, before they read they should answer the “Pre-reading questions.” These questions help them analyze their novel choices, while reflecting on their own lives. This way, the students can better relate what they are reading to themselves. Refer to this student objective: “Students will be able to reflect on their own lives and compare it to the novels.” As the advisor, your goal for these pre-reading questions to to get a stance on where the students’ beliefs are at before reading, and to see if those beliefs change as the book club continues.
(EXPLANATION): Since this is an after-school book club, students are expected to voluntarily commit their time to reading and reflecting. Each time we meet, which is once a week for four weeks, students are expected to come ready to discuss the book. They are not asked to write anything down, for they will be writing at the end, but they do need to come with developing thoughts and inner reflections. This will make the discussions worthwhile. If you choose to complete this project within class time, you could have your students write reflective journals about what they read. As stated previously, you can create this book club into a class unit, and not after school like this project reflects.

LESSON FOUR: Amongst your discussions about the novels, distribute the “During Reading” reflections per each book. That includes one for the book from “Book List One” and one for the book from “Book List Two.” These questions allow the students to reflect on what they are enjoying, or not enjoying, about the books they are reading. It allows them time to reflect on the reasoning behind why they may or may not be enjoying it. As the advisor, your goal for these questions is to provide opportunity for your students to look back on all that they have read and to interpret how they feel about what they have read.

The objective of this book club is to ensure students can reflect on what types of books they enjoy reading, and what types of culturally diverse books would fare well in their own schools. I want them to think about why it is a good thing to have themselves, and others at their school, read these culturally diverse novels. It also allows the students time to think about how the other students in their school would react to reading these types of books. Would it go over well in their school? Would it not, and why? These questions open their eyes to how their school
culture is, and why the school could possibly benefit from learning about multiple different cultures besides the few that they are used to.

**LESSON FIVE:** This book club should take roughly four-five weeks of meeting after school once a week for about an hour (depending upon the types of students participating in it). After reading both novels, and discussing weekly about what has been read, the students are to reflect back on it. Distribute the “Post-reading questions” which help the students fully reflect on what they read. Alongside these questions, ask the students to choose a character from either of the books and compare themselves to this character. What are some similarities or differences between themselves and that character? Ask the students to write a one-page comparison paper. This comparison paper allows the students to reflect on what the characters were like, and if they are similar to them. By doing this, the students can see how they relate to the “Book List One” characters, or the “Book List Two” characters. Both are characters around their same age, but they experience vastly different encounters. If the students find themselves relating to the characters in “Book List Two,” it helps them realize that those kids are not that much different than themselves, even if their culture is quite opposite of their own.

**FINAL LESSON/END OF BOOK CLUB:** Here is where the most reflection on school culture will occur by your students. Once again, the whole objective of this book club is to incorporate valuable reflection on what books the students are reading, and why they are so interested in these books. Another objective is to allow time to reflect on books discussing other cultures, and why it might be important for their school to read these types of books. Wrap up your book club
by having your students share and discuss their papers. What characters did they compare themselves to, and why? What were some challenges they faced while writing this paper? You can also have the students discuss the books and what they liked or disliked about them. Since it is the last day of the after-school book club and the final papers have been completed, a good discussion to end it all is a great way to have the students summarize and discuss what they learned from it. As the advisor, this is the end of your after-school book club, and your goal is to ensure that your students took something away from the culturally diverse books you provided them time to read.

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Below is content for the book club
Pre-Reading Questions for Book Club

1. What two books from the book lists are you going to be analyzing? (please include title, author, date published).

   Book List One:

   Book List Two:

2. Out of all the selections, why did you choose these two books? Please explain your reasoning.

3. Take a look at both novels closely. What are some differences between the two that you notice? Examine the content, author, style, etc.

   Similarities between the two?

4. Which novel do you think you will relate to and why? Do any of the novels sound like something you would see around where you live?

5. In a short paragraph on the back, explain which novel you think you will enjoy more, and why.
During Reading Questions for “Book List One” Novel

Book Title and author:

1. Describe the characters so far in your novel. Describe their lives, personalities, friends; anything you can think of.

2. What appears to be the main problem your character is encountering? How does he/she plan to resolve this conflict?

3. Have you read a book similar to this before? If so, what was it called and why was it similar?

4. Do you think that other kids in your grade would enjoy reading a book like this? Why?

5. Growing up in a rural area, would you say that you face similar problems as the character(s) in this novel? Why or why not?

6. Were you more apprehensive, or excited, to read this book? Why?
During Reading Questions for “Book List Two” Novel

Book Title and author:

1. Describe the characters so far in your novel. Describe their lives, personalities, friends; anything you can think of.

2. What appears to be the main problem your character is encountering? How does he/she plan to resolve this conflict?

3. Have you read a book similar to this before? If so, what was it called and why was it similar?

4. Do you think that other kids in your grade would enjoy reading a book like this? Why?

5. Growing up in a rural area, would you say that you face similar problems as the character(s) in this novel? Why or why not?

6. Were you more apprehensive, or excited, to read this book? Why?

7. Have you heard of books in your school library with characters and a plotline similar to this?

8. Do you wish your school had more options and access to books similar to this novel? Why?

9. In your opinion, would having more books in the school library that cover topics similar to this novel help, or hurt, your school? Explain your reasoning.
**Post-Reading Questions for Book Club**

1. Have you always lived in your “hometown?” If not, where did you move from?

2. What does the term “rural” mean to you?

3. How would you describe the culture of your town? What are people like? What do people do? Etc.

4. Which book would more than likely occur in your “neighborhood?” Why?

5. Would you recommend either of these books to kids at your school? Why or why not?

6. Think back to your original answer to this question: “Which novel do you think you will enjoy more, and why?” Is your answer the same then as it is now? Why or why not?

7. Think about the characters in the novel. How are you similar, or different, to them? Write down some examples, as this question will help you write your final reflection paper.
Reflection Paper Directions

Now that you have read novels from both “Book List One” and “Book List Two,” reflect on the characters in the books. Think about yourself. Are you similar or different to these characters? You will be writing a one-page reflection on this.

Requirements:
- One page double-spaced writing.
- Comparisons to yourself and a character(s) in the novel of your choice. You may choose to compare characters from both novels you read.

Brainstorming Questions:
- Who are the main characters in Book One and Book Two?

- Which of these characters do you relate to the most? Why?

- Provide at least 3 examples from the book that relate to experiences in your life.

Now, take the above answers to help you write your one-page reflection paper!
References:
