PICTURE BOOKS FOR TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

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The project is a website providing background information on critical literacy and social justice literacy lessons for educators in elementary settings. The purpose of the website is to provide teachers with access to lessons and resources they could use in their classroom to begin holding social justice discussions through the use of picture book read-alouds. Learnings through my coursework at Hamline University paired with my elementary teaching experience led me to the research question *How can picture books be used to support discussion on social justice issues in the elementary classroom?* This question has been the driving force behind my research and website project creation.

As I took time to reflect on how teachers of today tend to get information and resources for their classrooms, it became obvious that websites and blogs are a favorite medium. For example, according to an article by Forbes, over two-thirds of teachers in the United States use the teacherspayteachers site for resources (Jones, 2018, para. 2). I have personally gone down many rabbit holes and spent far too many hours searching for the right lesson or book to use with the particular topic I am researching. With this thought in mind, I wanted to create a website that was a one-stop-shop for my K-2 colleagues and other elementary teachers. I wanted to remove hours of searching and develop a site that was easy to use and provided everything teachers might need to tackle discussing social justice issues.

The website, *Social Justice Literacy Lessons* which can be found at [https://sites.google.com/orono.k12.mn.us/social-justice-literacy-lesson/home](https://sites.google.com/orono.k12.mn.us/social-justice-literacy-lesson/home), compiles research based practices in critical literacy and social justice education. It provides lesson plans,
discussion questions, and text sets elementary teachers can use to support discussions around
topics of wealth inequality, disabilities, and race.

The homepage, Social Justice Literacy Lessons, acts as the “command center” to access
links to different pages. It contains an overview of the website purpose, content, and information
on navigation. It houses links in the upper righthand corner where teachers can access the
different pages (see Figure 1).

"Begin to get comfortable with the uncomfortable."
The purpose of this website is to provide elementary teachers with resources pertaining to critical literacy pedagogy and utilizing picture books as a means for holding social justice discussions in the classroom.

Figure 1. Home page for website.

The first linked page is titled Critical Literacy and incorporates the rationale behind the
importance of implementing critical literacy education. This page provides background
knowledge and the “what” behind critical literacy based on research completed by McLaughlin
and DeVoogd (2004). (See Figure 2). All photo images on the website came from the royalty
What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy education links back to the works of Paulo Freire and his efforts in helping to establish the Critical Literacy Theory. In a nutshell, this form of literacy education involves reading texts with multiple lenses and actively participating in the reading process. It empowers readers to challenge the author’s message and intent and helps them actively reflect, question, transform, and take action. In addition, it allows students to gain a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts related to power, inequality, and injustice. (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

Research has found that critical literacy skills actually deepen students’ comprehension. It allows them to “become actively engaged with the text and question the author’s purpose, thinking, and format” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 7).

Student thinking is the key to inquiry and critical literacy. The following strategies can be used to...

**Figure 2.** Critical literacy website page.

The next page is titled *Social Justice* and gives a rationale for why these are important discussions to have in elementary classrooms. The *Social Justice* page link contains a drop down menu that houses a section titled *Why Picture Books?* This page explains the research backing why picture books are a great way to begin having these discussions. Also, under the *Social Justice* page there are three additional links to the three different social justice issues our staff voted on (wealth inequality, disabilities, and race). This page can eventually expand to include more social justice topics in the future (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Example of page layout on social justice topic race.
My individual social justice pages includes a “norms setting” lesson plan that could be used as a way to introduce the social justice texts. These pages also include texts sets around each specific social justice topic. I included a read-aloud video of each text so all classrooms have access to the book. The videos were made with an app called Shadow Puppet (2014). The app was easy to use and made it simple to take pictures of each book page and add a voice over recording. The page also includes a lesson plan related to critical literacy strategies addressed in chapter two, including problem posing, alternative perspectives, switching, and exploring identities. I used a lesson plan template modified from the website www.smartdraw.com. The discussion questions included on the website are developed from the framework suggested by Fountas and Pinnell (2006. The style of discussion questions focus on thinking within, beyond, and about the text in the lessons. It also includes a follow-up activity such as a writing activity or craft the students could complete. Some of the lesson plan questions or activities stemmed from other social justice lesson plans I located on the internet. Table 1 displays the text name and website that inspired some of the questions or activities for my lessons.

<p>| Table 1 |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| SOCIAL JUSTICE TEXT | WEBSITE(S) PROVIDING INSPIRATION FOR LESSON |
| All the Colors We Are | <a href="http://www.teachpeacenow.org/allthecolors.html">http://www.teachpeacenow.org/allthecolors.html</a> |
| The Colors of Us | <a href="http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators/activity/245/">http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators/activity/245/</a> |
| Amazing Grace | <a href="https://www.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=32384">https://www.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=32384</a> |
| The Name Jar | <a href="https://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/BookModule/TheNameJar">https://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/BookModule/TheNameJar</a> |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Title</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t Call Me Special</strong></td>
<td><a href="https://disabilityequalityeducation.org/?attachment_id=406">https://disabilityequalityeducation.org/?attachment_id=406</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Pirate of Kindergarten</strong></td>
<td><a href="https://www.rif.org/sites/default/files/Support_Materials/Pirate-Educators.pdf">https://www.rif.org/sites/default/files/Support_Materials/Pirate-Educators.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>We’ll Paint the Octopus Red</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://storypath.upsem.edu/well-paint-the-octopus-red/">http://storypath.upsem.edu/well-paint-the-octopus-red/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Text titles and websites that provided lesson inspiration.

My last page is a resource page that houses links to other critical literacy resources, professional development opportunities (such as upcoming conferences), possible grants teachers could apply for to purchase books for their rooms, and websites such as diversebooks.org so teachers can explore even more titles to add to their collections. My hope is this website layout design provides my K-2 colleagues and other elementary teachers with a quality resource they feel confident in using in their own classrooms.
REFERENCES


WEBSITES

Activities for Those Shoes


Brain Building in Progress Resources for Early Learning

http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators/activity/245/

Candlewick Press Teacher’s Guide: Rescue & Jessica


Disability Equality Education https://disabilityequalityeducation.org/?attachment_id=406

Diversity Abroad Conference https://conference.diversitynetwork.org/

Dollar General Literacy Foundation https://www.dgliteracy.org/grant-programs/

DonorsChoose.org https://www.donorschoose.org/teachers


Homeless Hub Tool Kit https://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/q2ebqbz3.pdf#page=12

Institute for Humane Education

https://humaneeducation.org/blog/2014/14-childrens-picture-books-exploring-race-racism/

International Literacy Association Conference

https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/news-events/conferences-events

Lesson Plan for My Brother Charlie PDF

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1UI0Z21uTN6OEtQYW9mZlYtaG8/view

More Alike Than Different-NDSC https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg2ZBPw2LyE
Mrs. Bishop’s Brilliant Blog

https://mrsbishopsblog.wordpress.com/2012/10/24/my-brother-charlie/

National Conference on Diversity, Race & Learning

https://odi.osu.edu/about/conferences/national-conference-on-diversity-race-and-learning/

National Cross-Cultural Counseling and Education Conference for Research, Action, and Change
https://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ce/conferences/nccec/

National Reading Recovery & K-6 Literacy Conference

https://readingrecovery.org/conferences/national-reading-literacy-conference/

Reading Your Way to a Culturally Responsive Classroom

https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2016/culturally-responsive-classroom


Story Path: We’ll Paint the Octopus Red http://storypath.upsem.edu/well-paint-the-octopus-red/

Teach Peace Now http://www.teachpeacenow.org/allthecolors.html

Teachers: Get the Grant Article

https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/teachers-get-grant/

Teaching Children Philosophy

https://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/BookModule/TheNameJar

Teaching Critical Literacy Article

http://educationalleader.com/subtopicintro/read/scholastic/scholastic_343_1.pdf

Teaching Tolerance https://www.tolerance.org/about/educator-grant-guidelines

The NEA Foundation

https://www.neafoundation.org/for-educators/learning-and-leadership-grants/
The Pirate of Kindergarten: A RIF Guide for Educators

The Snapdragon Book Foundation http://snapdragonbookfoundation.org/

Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen PDF

United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) Award Books
https://www.usbby.org/outstanding-international-books-list.html

Unleashing Readers: Helping Readers of All Ages Navigate the World of Books
http://www.unleashingreaders.com/?p=16957

Using Picture Books as a Vehicle to Teach Children about Social Justice
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002=&context=teal_facpub&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.google.com%252Furl%253Fq%25253Dhttps%25252F%25252Fdigitalcommons.usu.edu%25252Flegacy%25252Fcontent%25252F123456789%25252Fviewcontent.cgi%253Farticle%3D1002%26context%3Dteal_facpub%22

Weneeddiversebooks.org https://diversebooks.org/resources/where-to-find-diverse-books/

Weston Woods: Amazing Grace Discussion Guide
https://www.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=32384
CHILDREN’S BOOKS CITED


Kissinger, K. (2014). *All the colors we are: The story of how we got our skin color.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.


