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| PRAXIS |

An Instructional Approach to Exploring Poverty and Immigration: Three Children's Books that Pack a Punch

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Abstract

Contemporary children's literature can be used as an instructional approach to examine a variety of critical issues that are presented in multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching college courses. The author discusses the benefits of using children's literature to examine poverty and immigration; his recommendations for selecting the right books and stories; and his experiences using three children's books: Walk with Me (2017), Two White Rabbits (2015), and Jimmy the Greatest! (2015), all created by the same author and illustrator, Jairo Buitrago and Rafael Yockteng. Each book is carefully reviewed, and followed by a sample of critical thinking questions used to raise college students' awareness of matters that impact the lives of children they will serve.

Keywords: *Children's literature, immigration, poverty, instructional approach*

Introduction

Contemporary children's literature covers a breadth of topics that directly and indirectly honor the culture and life experiences of children who are considered among the most marginalized and disenfranchised groups living in our society (Keis, 2006). In my teacher education classes, children's literature has proven a tremendous asset for teaching about social justice issues, since it offers a non-threatening way to explore deep issues and question our values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about ourselves and others. As Kies points out, "Literature is a medium for questioning behavior, for the discovery of alternatives, and for finding hope for new beginnings and reexamined attitudes" (p. 14). More importantly, children's literature allows my students to explore issues from multiple perspectives and world views, which they will undoubtedly encounter throughout their career (Kies; Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, Sunday, & Summers, 2017).

In this article, I orient readers to how I use children's books as tools to challenge my future teachers' understanding of the sociopolitical context of diversity while demonstrating the plight of children who live in our local communities. I find that others who work to advance social justice for all people can use children's literature to examine social class, poverty, immigration, and so forth through the lens of inequity, privilege, and the dynamics found in the lives of children we serve. I have chosen three books to

spotlight—*Jimmy the Greatest!* (2010), *Two White Rabbits* (2015) and *Walk with Me* (2017)—all from the same author and illustrator, Jairo Buitrago and Rafael Yockteng. Praised as “poignant,” “important,” and “timely,” these stories are packed with powerful yet subtle messages.

The Benefits of Children’s Literature

Children’s literature can be instrumental in debunking myths and stereotypes (Masko & Bloem, 2017) and sparking empathy and action (Wheeler, 2008). From *Esquivel: Space-Age Sound Artist* (Wood & Tonatiuh, 2016), for example, readers can learn how Mexican music comes in varied forms of expressions, not just the *mariachi* music they might hear in a Tex-Mex restaurant or the top 40 songs on a Spanish radio station. From *Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood* (Campoy, Howell, & Lopez, 2016) readers can see the beauty in murals created by a real San Diego community who transformed their neighborhood from “gray and drab” to “a place of beauty.” And, from *Ada’s Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* (Hood & Comport, 2016) readers can witness an impoverished community mobilized by hope to succeed at making instruments and music from recycled trash. I like to point out that these books present a culture with strengths and assets, one that is replete with a broad and deep knowledge base and valuable social networks, rather than one that is disadvantaged, inferior, or in need of fixing (Reyes, 2007; Bahruth, 2007; Rueba, 1999).

Not just for children, children’s books can be used across grade levels from kindergarten to graduate school. Even the simplest story can be used in a graduate seminar to examine sociopolitical issues (Pohan, 2017), as demonstrated in *The Real Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989). To draw attention to dominant culture ideals, a teacher could explore the image of the brick house while raising a question such as, “What kinds of ideas might be drawn about people who tend to build and live in straw houses when we hear the story of the three pigs?” Considered a better house than the one built from straw and sticks, the brick house is built by a pig who is smart and hardworking. The other homes are built by pigs who are not. People in the West tend to build brick homes; straw homes are built by non-European cultures. Another concept worth exploring in Scieszka’s retelling of the three pigs story is the characterization of law enforcement. The policeman guarding the prison where the wolf is incarcerated is a pig, and it can be inferred that the wolf was apprehended (and tried) by pigs since “The Daily Pig” reports -- through a headline – that the wolf is “Big and Bad.” Students can explore the idea of how different the story could be if the police (and the judicial system) had included wolves (Pohan). In this political climate where some communities are distrusting of law enforcement, a teacher could ask, “How might some communities regard police who encounter alleged criminals who do not share their race or ethnic heritage?”

Recommendations for Choosing the Right Books

Before turning to the work of Buitrago and Yockteng, it is important to point out that care and deliberation should be spent in choosing the right books for each lesson. I select books that challenge my students to analyze stories and pictures critically (O'Neil, 2010). In other words, the stories offer opportunities for my students to reflect on their own and others' positionalities, particularly the role they have in children's lives (e.g., students can be provoked with a question such as, "How does your stance on immigration affect a child who is undocumented?") and to think about how others exist or survive in our society (e.g., some children's books lend themselves to asking questions such as, "What emotional experiences might a brother of a child with autism have?") (O'Neil, 2010). I prefer stories with people (rather than animals) to give my students an accurate and humanistic account of how some children live in this country (Davidman & Davidman, 2000). I also look for children's books that:

- 1) Are inclusive and reflect the changing times of our society (Miller-Lachmann & Taylor, 1995). In other words, I am considerate of populations that are often overlooked. I am amazed at the number of books that are now available about children with disabilities, children who are LGBT (or have parents who are), children whose parents have declining health, etc., which I can use to draw attention to children whose circumstances have been ignored for much of our history.
- 2) Represent diverse groups of people (Miller-Lachmann & Taylor). I look for characters who are portrayed positively so that my students have an affirming understanding of people who may not look, live, and behave like them (Kim & Augsburg, 2017).
- 3) Address how children are affected by the social class of their families (Fu & Stremmel, 1999). "With nearly one fifth of this nation's children living in poverty," Fu and Stremmel point out, "social class as it affects that lives of children must be brought into the foreground of our democratic conversations" (p. 107). Children's books like *Maddi's Fridge* (Brandt & Vogel, 2014), the *Last Stop on Market Street* (De la Pena & Robinson, 2015), and *Those Shoes* (Boelts & Jones, 2009) can be used to discuss the issues that abound on social class, including how children who live in the lower classes are often marginalized by the dominant culture. Inevitably, these discussions can lead to the best ways to help children succeed in school when they may be malnourished, stressed, affected by turmoil in their immediate surroundings, or facing health problems (Reed & Bhat, 2014).
- 4) Present children with unique circumstances and address them accordingly (Bush, 2008). In other words, the text should invite readers to get to know the character(s) to fully understand their individual circumstances so that readers keep from developing stereotypes. O'Neil (2010) emphasizes, "When we develop behavioral expectations for a particular group, we limit the potential for growth and individual experience for these individuals" (p. 47). After reading the stories, teachers should steer students away from tendencies to generalize or sentimentalize, such as "All children like the character in the story have sad, lived experiences," or "How sad that similar

children live the way they do.” Instead, readers should explore the assets that the children in the story, by asking, “What capital does this child have that I could tap in my instruction? What can I do so that he is successful in my classroom? What are the best ways to meet his needs?”

- 5) Explore an alternative point of view or outcome on a real issue (O’Neil, 2010). O’Neil suggests that the story should question “the validity of conventional mores and (leave) much of the meaning up to the reader” (p. 43). Upon reading the book, I want my students to reflect on questions such as, “Why do I think about this topic in this way? How has society shaped my thinking about this topic? How does my thinking (and people who think similarly) affect others?” Through this process of self-reflection, I expect that my students will develop new understandings and ways of thinking about the topic, which can expand their sense of justice and equity (O’Neil). As an example, I have had students explain how they have given very little thought to what young immigrants might experience when they are separated from their relatives by the U.S. border. But upon reading *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* (Tonatiuh, 2010), their proverbial eyes were opened to what immigrant children might go through when they live apart from their loved ones, and how they must yearn for continual communication to maintain the bond of their relationships.
- 6) Are enjoyable and engaging (Kim & Augsburger). My students are motivated to learn about a topic when the text is fun, and the illustrations are appealing, such as *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* (Stephoe, 2016), the story of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. The book is beautifully illustrated and crafted and easily draws in readers. I like to point out a one two-page spread where Steptoe explains how Jean-Michel’s heart breaks because his mother’s mind is not well, she can no longer live at home, and his family is broken. Here, I like to raise questions, such as, “How might a parent’s mental illness affect their child’s performance at school? How would you help such a child succeed in your classroom? How is mental illness regarded in our society? Why do we have these beliefs about mental illness?”

Springboards for Class Discussions

As I was planning for an upcoming semester, I thought about how to expose my students to children’s books that would be rich in content, beautifully illustrated, and complete with narratives of characters who live through issues that may not be all that important to groups that my college students belong to (Smith-Buster, 2016). As alluded earlier, the books I was searching for had to stimulate my students to think about (or rethink) (O’Neil, 2010) two issues that are important in the lives of children in our community: poverty and immigration. The books that I found, and subsequently used, are titled, *Walk with Me*, *Two White Rabbits*, and *Jimmy the Greatest!*

Walk with Me. The most recent of these three children’s book is *Walk with Me* (Buitrago, & Yocksteng, 2017). The story is translated from Spanish, but some of

the original words remain in the illustrations (e.g., signs, billboards, etc.). This story is simple and shorter than many children's books. In fact, only a few sentences are found within the 12 double-page spreads. On the first spread, we find the protagonist – a girl without a name – who seems mature and older-looking for her age. She befriends a lion (a statue mounted to its base) who has come to life through her imagination. She offers him a flower and invites him to accompany her through her afterschool reality: He listens to her as she walks to pick up her younger brother from daycare; roars behind her at the market associate who no longer offers the family store credit; sits at the kitchen table in her barren apartment as she prepares the family meal; and waits for her mother's return from the factory where she works. When the lion leaves at bedtime, she asks him to return when she needs him. At the story's close, readers see that the girl, her mother, and her brother are sleeping on one mattress. The girl rolls over to the nightstand where there is a photograph of her family at a happier time; the photo includes her father who happens to have a thick mane of hair. The flower she offered the lion is now in front of the photo.

The text is straightforward in that the illustrations and the storyline convey a protagonist whose unfortunate circumstances are exacerbated by poverty. We find her living in a modest home with a range of chores to do – chores meant for adults; shopping at a *bodega* with a line of credit that has been suspended; greeting her mother who seems low-spirited; and longing for her father – that caregiver in the truest sense of the word who can nurture, support, protect, listen, among other qualities known to optimize children's development. The imaginary lion is unmistakably the surrogate.

Using this book to introduce the topics of social class and poverty is less threatening than jumping right in to a discussion that can quickly grow heated. As an opening activity to stimulate a class discussion, I begin with critical thinking questions such as:

- What are some beliefs you have about people who live in poverty? Where do these beliefs come from? How have they been validated throughout your life?
- How does poverty manifest in the community that you serve (e.g., observe, teach, volunteer, work)?
- What are the root causes of poverty?
- What are the different social classes in the community where you live?
- What are the inequalities among them?
- How might poverty differ between urban, suburban, rural communities?
- What should we keep in mind as we teach children who live in social class different than ours?
- How do we keep from creating stereotypes about people from lower social classes?

I vary how I present the book and the questions to the class. At times, I start with the questions after the students have read an article or a book chapter devoted to matters associated with diversity, equity, and multicultural education. Other times we read the book in class and examine the text and the illustrations for meaning.

Naturally, I allow the students to raise questions in their aim to clarify, analyze, or draw attention to aspects of the story (Fox, 2007). To augment the discussion, I have my students comment on what they learn from their peers' observations. A rewarding feature is that my students unfailingly raise commentary on an illustration (or aspect of it) that I may have missed that unexpectedly contributes to the topic at hand. I follow the reading with more questions, for example:

- What emotions does the main character experience? (Pohan, 2000)
- What emotions did you experience as you read the story?
- What did you learn from the reading the story (or from comments your colleagues made)?
- What did you find most interesting from the discussion or story?
- What is Buitrago's purpose in telling this story?
- What inferences and conclusions can you make about the character, setting, or series of events? (Pohen)
- How does the story clarify your understanding of poverty? (Masko & Bloem, 2017)
- How do your beliefs about poverty influence your behaviors? (Pohan, 2000)

Two White Rabbits. In *Two White Rabbits* (Buitrago, & Yocksteng, 2015) readers again find simple sentences and phrases (and sometimes just illustrations, which speak volumes) throughout the 23 double-page spread. Here, the story is reminiscent of the journey that so many desperate immigrants make from their homelands to the U.S. The protagonists – a father and his young daughter – are traveling to the U.S. border, presumably from Central America. There is no mention of a mother or a reason for the travel. Readers can only infer it is to escape their hardships for a better life in the states. As the girl shares what she sees on their perilous journey, neither she nor her father seem terribly dejected, which is important to point out because readers intuitively know that the father is staying strong for his daughter's sake, keeping any look of fear, worry, and anxiety at bay. Only one time do readers notice anguish in the father—when he is counting his money near the end of the story.

The illustrations depict a girl who trusts her father wholeheartedly and entertains herself as they travel. While there is no direct mention of their “guide” (i.e., the human smugglers known as “coyotes” who help migrants cross the border), readers see how they meet up with a tawny coyote who orients their travel across river borders, onto a moving cargo train (best known as “La Bestia,” the beast) that migrants ride atop and risk physical dangers and death as they travel north through villages, and so forth. The most heartbreaking part of the story is when father and daughter are riding atop of the train, and the girl is making the most of the trip counting clouds, playing with her stuffed rabbit, personifying the clouds, and sleeping out the journey. In keeping with the title, *Two White Rabbits*, a boy gives the young girl a box of two white rabbits. In one double-page spread, we find the young girl asking the rabbits, “Where are we going?” One rabbit shrugs its shoulder. In the following spreads, the rabbits are let loose in the cargo bed of a truck and eventually let go on arid grounds within steps of the U.S. border wall. The two

white rabbits have come to symbolize the girl and her father – never quite free and perpetually constrained.

This book comes at a good time considering that immigration is undoubtedly a contentious topic in this political climate. To incite a revealing discussion on immigration, especially the immigration of undocumented youth, I start with these questions:

- What are some beliefs you have about modern-day immigration in this country? Where do these beliefs come from? How have they been validated throughout your life?
- How do issues of immigration manifest in the community that you serve (e.g., observe, teach, volunteer, work)?
- Why would a migrant leave their homeland to begin a new life in a foreign country?
- What emotions are the two characters experiencing? (Pohan, 2000)
- Why would a parent send their child unaccompanied to cross into the U.S.?
- What obstacles do migrants encounter on their journey and once they arrive in the U.S.?
- What biases do Americans have about undocumented immigrants?
- In what ways are we affected by undocumented immigrants in our community?
- How does the story challenge stereotypes about immigrants? (Masko & Bloem, 2017)
- What inferences and conclusions can you make about the character, setting, or series of events? (Pohen)
- What could be an alternative immigration story to the story we just read?

In the past, to bring this story to life, I have complemented the discussion by showing parts of the documentary, *Which Way Home* (Documentress Films, 2009), which follows the journey of unaccompanied child migrants. Since the film is engaging and leaves viewers concerned and wondering about the children's lives, I follow with adaptations to the questions above but underscore with questions such as:

- How has your idea of immigration changed since watching clips from the documentary?
- How does what you have learned fit with what you already know?
- What is the most important thing you learned from the story, the documentary, or your classmates?

Jimmy the Greatest! In *Jimmy the Greatest!* (Buitrago, & Yocksteng, 2010), Buitrago and Yocksteng present the life of a boy who lives in a remote, sparsely populated village in Latin America, which is comprised of a small church and a meager gym. The boy, Jimmy, begins boxing training after he is spotted by the gym's owner, Don Apolinar. Don Apolinar gives Jimmy a box filled with books and newspaper clippings about Muhammad Ali, which inspires him to become the finest boxer in the humble village. Jimmy, too, begins to speak in a style akin to Muhammed Ali. Soon, Don Apolinar decides the time has come to leave the village

to pursue better opportunities, boxing and work. Some might intuit that Don Apolinar is leaving because he trusts that Jimmy is able to take over for him. In the pages that ensue, readers witness Jimmy growing into a man; a man who maintains the gym, creates a library, and more importantly embraces the life he has set for himself in the village that others abandon. By the end of the story, the village has grown and acquired electricity, but much of it is left unchanged.

The book indirectly honors the very people who choose to stay behind and live in their home country (town) no matter how dull, boring, and inactive it may seem, rather than be enticed to leave. Jimmy chooses to stay and, in effect, improve it as much as he is able. In one of the final pages, the author writes how people often leave towns like Jimmy's, "[b]ut for now, Jimmy is staying." Here, readers can decide for themselves whether he's firmly rooted and will stay, or if he's destined to leave like others. A heartfelt moment in the story is when young Jimmy promises his mother a new icebox when he becomes a boxer. In the second to the last double-page spread, readers witness Jimmy bringing his mother a blue two-door refrigerator.

I am drawn to this story because of a unique perspective on the issue of immigration. With *Jimmy the Greatest!*, students' attention can be directed to the lives of the persons who choose not to leave their country (or are left behind by their parents or spouse). The main takeaway is focused on what the lives must be like for those who stay. I ask questions such as:

- What are some of the benefits/drawbacks of staying (or being left) behind?
- What happens to the children whose parents leave them behind? Even though they may have regular contact with parents and receive their financial support, how must they feel for having been left behind? What emotions must they endure when they learn they have siblings born in a country that is unfamiliar to them?
- What happens to the friends and relatives who stay? How do you think they regard persons who leave and persons who stay?

Follow-up Activities

Since I want my students to continue to reflect on poverty and immigration long after our discussions, I use a variety of follow-up activities, such as interactive journals in which the students are assigned to reflect on critical thinking questions like those presented above. (To make it more personalized, they could reflect on the times in their lives when they were most affected by poverty or immigration, believed they were marginalized by others, or others did not seem to care that they were experiencing discord). Then, they trade their journals and respond to each other's reflections. (Alternatively, students can write and respond to a class blog.)

I always try to assign an activity that involves art, such as drawing, as a way for students to express their emotions and unleash their creative potential. "The act of drawing is a dynamic, cognitive, social and expressive event involving both interpretation and translation of thought into symbolic, material form," Dunkerly-

Bean, Bean, Sunday, and Summers (2017) explain, and “drawing becomes a space where (students) attend to the complexities of knowing familiar and everyday perception, where they experiment with ideas about the self, and where they invent and reinvent their understanding of rules that govern social and just behavior “ (p. 681). Writing a poem or song, taking a photo, or creating a digital film about poverty or immigration that represents what they learned can be just as effective. Not to mention, they can write their own version of a children’s book that shares their perspective on the topic.

Field trips to agencies that support persons affected by poverty and immigration can prove beneficial, eye-opening, and popular, as can having guest speakers. A service learning project could also provide students with a meaningful understanding of these two topics, while concurrently meeting the needs of the community (Masko & Bloem, 2017).

Summary

Children’s books can be used to explore a wide-range of topics. While they may seem intended for children in the primary grades, they can be used in university classrooms to examine issues of multiculturalism in non-threatening ways. Contemporary children’s books can help readers debunk myths and stereotypes, spark empathy and action, and show how cultures in this country are replete with strengths and assets. To help students better understand cultural assumptions, attitudes, and values in our diverse society, the books should be inclusive, represent diverse groups of people, and explore an alternative point of view. Buitrago and Yockteng offer three thought-provoking books that, through interpersonal exchange and reflection, can help strengthen student understanding of poverty and immigration in the lives of children.

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