The Role of Literature in the Classroom

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To describe my vision for the role of literature in my classroom (or in my case, in the reading enrichment program I oversee), I must address two questions: what should we read, and how/why should we read it? The answers to those questions are of great import, because I recognize that I—and all educators—do not only help students build academic and life skills, but by making choices about what we teach and how we frame learning, we also may impact students' ways of thinking and their perspectives on themselves, others, and the world. As Clark & Blackburn (2009) pointed out, classrooms are not neutral or apolitical, and literature in particular can be a source of controversial, challenging, and powerful learning moments on a range of issues that are relevant far beyond classroom walls (pp. 25-26). In light of these realities, I recognize the importance of crystallizing my position on what texts belong in a literature classroom for young adults, and how those texts should be approached.

In regards to the first question, my thoughts about which texts should have a place in the curriculum are rooted in the concepts of access and exposure. That is, I believe students should have as much access and exposure to the greatest diversity of voices possible. I believe that texts in a curriculum should be authored by people from many different identity groups and experiences, and I understand that including works by a truly diverse group of authors may take additional work on my part. Characters in the texts we provide students with should be similarly diverse, and educators should spend time educating themselves on texts they include to ensure they are aware of potentially problematic or stereotypical portrayals of any groups. Many articles that we read in this course have extolled the benefits of developing a multicultural library: Rudine Sims Bishop (1997) explained that multicultural literature can help all students learn how to listen to others' stories and respect others' experiences and perspectives—skills that can help students successfully navigate our diverse society and world (p. 3). Borrowing language from an article we read by Dr. Joan K. Blaska (2004), my goal is to create a classroom library that allows all students to find texts in which they see their identities and experiences reflected positively ("mirror texts") as well as texts that expose them to lives that are in some ways very different from their own ("window texts"). Having access to "mirror texts" affirms students' value, and helps them believe that their stories and identities matter, belong, and are worthy of study. Having exposure to "window texts" challenges students to empathize, to imagine, and to listen. If I am committed to creating these opportunities for texts to be mirrors and windows, I must be committed to a plurality of stories and an ever-growing "canon" in my curriculum. Since I will always have imperfect knowledge of my students, and since there are no perfect books that can bear the weight of representing any one identity group, I believe that I must work to collect many texts that represent a variety of people in varied and authentic ways and include them in my curriculum (Sims Bishop, 1997, p. 18).

Further, I am convinced that I should strive to give students access and exposure to a diversity of texts in terms of *genre* and *form*. I must admit that I used to have fairly narrow views of which types of texts truly belong in the reading enrichment program that I oversee. I preferred novels and poetry, believing that they had the greatest capacity for containing artistic merit, big ideas, and powerful use of language. I also had a negative conception of young adult literature and other literature written expressly "for" young people. These attitudes reflected my own reading preferences: I have long preferred novels and poetry to other forms of literature, and I didn't much care for "young adult literature" even when I was young adult. However, reading a variety of forms of literature in this class has prompted me to reevaluate my thinking, arrive at a great appreciation for many forms and genres, and expand my ideas about what texts can be used to create deep, rigorous, meaningful reading experiences for students. While I suspected that "young adult" novels would be superficial and filled with flat characters and shallow exploration of what adults perceive to be "teen issues" like romance

and peer pressure, I have been delighted to find young adult novels that counter those stereotypes. Specifically, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, and *How it Went Down* by Kekla Magoon presented nuanced characters, addressed difficult realities, and were beautifully written. Although I now understand that there are high-quality young adult texts, I do still believe that young adults are capable of understanding and connecting with literature that wasn't written with their age group in mind—every day I see high school students in my program read, love, and connect with works that stump many adults.

Similarly, my thinking about which forms of texts belong in the curriculum has evolved and expanded. For example, when reading the graphic novel *Coraline* and comparing it with the novel and film versions of the same story, I appreciated the intentionality and artistry that infused the text, and realized that for many of the English Language Learners in my school, a piece of literature that supports text with images could be more accessible than a traditional novel. Also, by reading award-winning nonfiction texts such as *Balloons Over Broadway* by Melissa Sweet, I realized that nonfiction texts can tell stories that are just as captivating as anything novelists can make up. Conversations with my students also contributed to my evolving views: one student explained to me that he felt more connected with characters in nonfiction texts because he knew they were real. This student's perspective on nonfiction is very different from my own, but this helped me realize that we are all in relationship with literature in very different ways. What I love about literature and how I make sense of texts will be different than how my students or coworkers love or make sense of texts. I have come to realize that I need to make space for, be supportive of, and capitalize upon the many different relationships students might have with literature.

Turning to my second question—how and why do I believe literature should be read in my "classroom"—my first and most practical response is that literature should be used to develop literacy skills. This seems obvious and even trite, but it is enormously important. Every day, I work with students of color, students from immigrant families, students from low-income backgrounds, and students who will be the first in their family to go to college. Every day, I see the power of literacy. I see how the ability to read and write enables students to advocate for themselves and access opportunities that are too often reserved for the privileged few. I see how deficits in reading and writing provoke anxiety and insecurity, perpetuate inequality, and sustain intergenerational poverty. Accordingly, it is a priority for me as an educator to "do literature" in a way that works for *all* students, and to use literature as a platform for developing crucial literacy skills.

Still, literature can do more than help students become proficient readers. In my "classroom," I want literature to play many additional roles: I want to frame reading literature as a way to learn about oneself, others, and the world (this connects to the idea of "mirror" and "window" texts that I discussed earlier). Speaking of my own experiences as a reader, pieces of literature like *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Brothers Karamazov* have helped me better understand my own values, and texts like *100 Years of Solitude* and *The Stranger* have enabled me see the world through different eyes. Literature—including children's and young adult literature—can be a platform for engaging with real, difficult issues, as is the case with *Rose Blanche* by Ian McEwan, a children's picturebook about the Holocaust, and as is the case with *How it Went Down*, which addressed issues of racism, community violence, and segregation. Texts like these provide a starting point for difficult but important conversations and learning. While literature can provide important information and insight, at the same time I want to position reading literature as a multidimensional meaning-making process that is, as Professor Apol wrote in our course, composed of interactions between the reader, the text, and the context. In sum, for my students, I want literature to both illuminate (teach them about) and be illuminated (be informed by) by their life experiences and their world.

Since a reading of a text is so subjective and context-specific, I want to position literature not as a puzzle to decode or as a problem that has one correct solution; instead, I hope to teach students to

explore, understand, and evaluate many different interpretations and meanings of a text. I want literature to be an arena for practicing active, critical thinking and deep questioning. I want to challenge students to move away from passive responses to literature. I want to encourage students to move away from "I like/dislike that book" and move towards "what I found interesting or important is…". I want to encourage students to move away from "it was relatable/not relatable," and move into actively making connections and analyzing how the text is shaped by the world and worldview of its author. I want literature to be something students interact with, manipulate, and scrutinize. I want the reading process to be something students have ownership over. This means that I want students in my "classroom" to have choices—about goals they set, about strategies they employ, and about texts that they read. Of course I believe that there should be boundaries for student choice—I want to ensure that students are reading texts that will challenge them appropriately, and I want to ensure they are being exposed to a variety of styles and ideas—but I know that choice is a motivating factor for students, and that a student who is motivated to read reads more and becomes a better reader. In our reading enrichment program, we give students a lot of say in which text they read, and it is not unusual for a student to read more than was assigned because they are enjoying the text and in charge of their own learning.

Ultimately, when I think of what I want literature to be in my classroom, I think about a recurring experience I had with my niece when she was young. When she was about three years old, she absolutely loved books. She would often select one of her favorite books, sit down on my lap, and when I would ask her if she wanted me to read the book to her, she said "No—*I'll* read the book, *you* do the words". In her mind, the fact that I was the one decoding and pronouncing the words didn't mean that I was reading. To her, reading meant being in control of her journey through the story and doing the hard work of making meaning of—and *enjoying*—a work of literature. That is exactly what I want my students to experience. I want the texts that I provide and the ways that I engage students with texts to support students in developing their own identities as readers and their own ways of finding sense and meaning in literature. I want them to be able to start to answer the questions—what should we read, and how/why should we read it—for themselves.

References

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