

Chapter 13

Beyond Anne Frank: Exploring the Aesthetics in Children's and Young Adult Literature to Develop Critical Literacy Practices in the Content Classroom

Ritu Radhakrishnan
SUNY Oswego, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the ways in which aesthetic practices provide educators at all levels and across disciplines with practical tools for enhancing critical literacy in pursuit of responsible citizenship. Engaging with aesthetics allows students to create meaning-making experiences and explore their own thinking about a topic and provides students with an opportunity to create meaningful experiences to address social action. Sharing of these processes and creations is often less polarizing than dialogues or debates and allows for inclusion of students with multiple modalities and talents. This curricular approach is more than simply creating an arts-integrated curriculum. Students should be creating, critiquing, and engaging with various forms of aesthetics (e.g. visual, drama, dance, music, etc.).

INTRODUCTION

In May 2018, researchers uncovered two mystery pages from Anne Frank's Diary that contained "dirty jokes" (Jackson, 2018). *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* became popular curricular reading in some states in the late 80s and early 90s. Many, if not most, students know and learn the Holocaust in an abstract way: it occurred in the past, and it was horrible. Beyond that, it was not always clear how children and young adults could connect with this atrocity almost 40 years later.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7706-6.ch013

Beyond Anne Frank

This was with the “censored” version, the version that was published first in 1947. A revised version was released in 1991, and yet another revision was published in 2016. The recent unearthing of the 2018 “dirty jokes” is the most recent update. All versions seem to add more pages to the *Diary*, but more importantly, another layer to Anne Frank herself.

I remember that I began reading it one Saturday afternoon in 5th grade. I finished by bedtime that evening. This was not unusual - I was a fast reader. However, I was a fast reader of fiction, of stories with a similar 80s pre-teen. I normally did not read non-fiction. During my reading of Anne’s private thoughts, I kept looking at the front cover, the picture of a serene Anne in a pale blouse, seemingly reading a book or working on some homework. I stared at the picture looking for answers. I can still remember the sorrow, the loss, the hurt, and the fear I felt. At ten years old, when life should be filled with the usual childish growth and development, I first learned about evil and loss. I did not know how to process. I talked to my parents, and I looked for more sources. I was so unsettled. Pre-google, many of my resources were limited to encyclopedias and non-fiction adult books about the Holocaust, and the 1959 *Diary of Anne Frank* movie. These adult books gave me facts, but they did not acknowledge the confusion I felt as a ten year old. The books did not offer solace or make sense of the atrocity. The books assumed I was an adult. I was not.

Children’s and Young Adult Literature (CYAL) provides a significant and necessary space for young readers. This genre offers a wealth of books geared for all ages and grades K-12. Both non-fiction and fiction books address atrocities in a way that honors the stories and events, but provide space for the younger reader to process the events and make connections. These books are thoughtful, truthful, and hopeful, providing resources for young learners that are not always available in books geared toward the adult reader.

The need for more diverse and culturally relevant CYAL has never been stronger. Our current educational climate has standardized curriculum; aspects of holistic learning (e.g. social studies, arts, physical education, and social issues) are pushed aside in the interest of increased instructional time in literacy and math. As high-stakes standardized testing and recent reforms have influenced and constrained curriculum, schools have failed to help many students develop critical, higher-order thinking skills (Hursh, 2008). As students engage in the learning dictated by politicians and hegemonic principles, they are compelled to resist their own thinking and awareness in order to perform according to standards (Apple, 1996). Theorists since John Dewey (1934) have long advocated the benefit of arts in education, particularly in educating the “whole child.” As the following section will demonstrate, studies have indicated a significant and positive correlation between engagement in the arts and students’ achievement and learning.

Over the past two to three decades, teachers have seen an increase in their responsibilities, expectations, and, for lack of a better word, restrictions in teaching. These increases are a result of federally-implemented educational policies created as a result of a fear of falling behind other nations and not measuring up. This past decade alone has introduced two separate educational policies (Race to the Top and Common Core State Standards) which have significantly impacted how curricula have been implemented and enacted in our nation’s schools. More importantly, these policies have changed the way that teachers teach and how they include literacy in the classroom. Because such policies have enabled more attempts to standardize curriculum as a way to prepare for standard testing, “standardized testing is promoted as a means of assessing the quality of students, teachers, and schools, thus ensuring that all children are treated fairly” (Hursh, 2008, p. 85). What we have seen over the past 16 + years since the implementation of policies such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core State Standards is evidence of the harmful effects of these types of educational reforms on already marginal-

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