

Chapter 10

Challenging the Poverty Narrative Through Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

Poverty and homelessness are often portrayed in children's literature as an individual problem rather than a larger systemic issue involving societal inequities. Children's literature can be used as a means of self-affirmation and as an opportunity for dialogue around social justice issues in the classroom. Through thoughtful planning, identity work, and the use of critical frameworks, educators can evaluate the quality of children's literature, monitor their students' textual experiences, and plan for dialogue to promote change. This intentional planning will help students build a strong sense of self-agency and a broader understanding of how to think critically around improving the overall human condition.

INTRODUCTION

In children's literature poverty and homelessness are often depicted as an individual problem, rather than as a result of systemic inequities (Kim & Wee, 2020). While exploring the link between culturally responsive children's literature and poverty, it becomes evident that there are substantial inaccuracies within the storylines being used in today's classrooms. What does this poverty narrative look like and how does it differ from reality? Could this disparity play a role in a child's understanding of their self-worth and agency according to their intersectional identity? Are there ways in which classroom teachers can enhance their selection of texts and dialogue around systemic inequities to better emphasize a greater social understanding and build on reformation? This chapter addresses these questions by exploring different narratives associated with poverty and the use of children's literature as a means of self-affirmation and reformation. The author presents two critical frameworks to support culturally responsive literature practices in an effort to improve the overall human condition.

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BACKGROUND

When considering how classrooms are currently engaging with books, the priority is overwhelmingly dominated by academic rigor. In the United States educational culture which emphasizes test scores above the individual, it is not surprising that books are often overlooked as a means for social change. There is a need for educators to explore literature that supports moving read alouds into a critical dialogic space with efforts to form deeper connections and social understandings around marginalized populations (Adam, 2021; Christ & Cho, 2021; Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

A classroom read aloud involves the teacher reading a book aloud to a group of students and highlighting opportunities for learning. The most effective read aloud lessons are planned and interactive with additional textual-talk (Wright, 2018) and engage in higher-order discussions to build comprehension (Acosta-Tello, 2019; Baker et al., 2013; Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Research has demonstrated that reading a book aloud has many academic benefits (e.g., Acosta-Tello, 2019; Baker et al., 2013; Christ & Cho, 2021; Kuhn, 2020; Silverman, 2007; Swanson et al., 2011; Wright, 2021). For example, while reading aloud a difficult text, teachers can model appropriate fluency, focusing on accuracy, automaticity, and prosody in reading. Additionally, teachers can model strategies for word recognition, reading comprehension, and ascertain the meaning of unfamiliar words (Christ & Cho, 2021; Swanson et al., 2011; Wright, 2021). Children that read for at least 20 minutes per day are exposed to over 1.8 million words per year and this increased vocabulary knowledge strongly correlates with higher test scores and increased reading comprehension (Nagy & Herman, 1987; Quigley, 2018; Silverman, 2007). While teachers are aware that there are numerous academic benefits to incorporating read alouds into classrooms, moving the read aloud from a static place to a critical dialogue is where students will begin to explore different perspectives and opportunities for social justice reform (Adam, 2021; Jones et al., 2010; Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

Educators need to explore culturally relevant and responsive texts as a means for social understanding and self-affirmation (Adam, 2021; Kibler & Chapman, 2019). Self-affirmation includes improving one's agency, the compacity to act without influence. Most avid readers can recall a story in which they connected to a character because it was a reflection of themselves. Beynen (1977) acknowledged that literature provides a lens through which children assimilate their cultural heritage. Bishop's (1990) metaphor of using books as windows and mirrors emphasized the importance of all readers finding themselves within a book. Children's literature has potential to be seen as a means of self-affirmation. What you read, becomes a reflection of yourself and your surroundings. Within the storyline, also referred to later as a narrative, readers can make connections to the larger human experience. Books can lay a foundation for social interactions and influence understandings of how individuals fit into the larger world (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). While reading a story, readers can attach their own experience to the narrative that is then reflected back to them. This begins to build a foundational framework for establishing the reader's self-worth and place within society. Jiménez (2021) expands this framework across intersectional identity work, using literature to build on intersectional social justice. The term intersectionality was initially coined by Crenshaw (1991) to recognize how an individual can have multiple identities within marginalized communities. In today's classrooms, students and teachers bring with them multiple identities which intersect and situate them within society. These intersectional identities can be affirmed and supported within children's literature (Adam, 2021; Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

The opportunity to read about foreign places and unknown social experiences is also relevant. For many readers, literature is able to extend beyond what is typically known or seen. Napier (1970) em-

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