Chapter 13
Teaching Controversial Issues:
Using Text Clusters of Picture Books to Teach About Homelessness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes recent research findings on homelessness in the United States and its relationship to poverty and other related factors. It also provides an introduction to text clusters, a curricular resource that includes high-quality and award-winning picture books and is anchored in the Way-In and Stay-In books. It continues by presenting a text cluster on the topic of homelessness, along with a variety of research-based instructional strategies that K-8 teachers can use with this text cluster, as well as with other text clusters on controversial issues. It ends with some final thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes recent research findings on homelessness in the United States and its relationship to poverty and other related factors. It also provides an introduction to text clusters, a curricular resource that includes high-quality and award-winning picture books and anchored in Way-In and Stay-In books. It continues by presenting a text cluster on the topic of homelessness, along with a variety of research-based instructional strategies that K-8 teachers can use with this text cluster, as well as with other text clusters on controversial issues. It ends with some final thoughts. It begins, however, with a vignette.

Vignette

Recently, I provided professional development in teaching reading comprehension at a middle school located in the Northeastern part of the United States. One day, I was asked by Department Chair of the English/Language Arts (ELA) to provide a demonstration lesson, specifically a read aloud, to a class of

8th grade students that would show them (and teachers) how to comprehend inferential text. I selected to read aloud *Riding the Tiger* (Bunting, 2001). Here's a summary.

This story tells the story of Danny who is new to a city neighborhood. One day, a tiger invites him to hop on his massive back for a cruise through neighborhood. Everyone seems respectful and Danny feels powerful. He soon learns though that it is not respect for, but fear from him and the tiger. Danny wants off, but also learns that in this instance it's harder to climb off than climbing on.

I selected this story for several reasons. One, as part of the professional development, I regularly recommended and shared a variety of internationally renowned authors and award-winning literature with teachers so they could them with their middle grades students. Eve Bunting is one of those authors and *Riding the Tiger* is an award-winning piece of literature. Two, Danny, the main character, is ten years old, an adolescent, as were the students in this class. Three, the story takes place in a neighborhood city. Student also live in a neighborhood city. Lastly, and most importantly, this story is a challenging text and requires readers to infer.

For example, the story is a narrative, but also a provocative allegory. The tiger is not a literal character, but an interpretive symbol, a symbol of gangs, drugs, or any number of dangerous temptations that are based on peer pressure, threat, obedience, conformity, etc. Like many adolescents new to a city, Danny is lonely and naïve. He feels recognized and accepted by the tiger, but when he asks to get off, the tiger refuses and, like others in the neighborhood, threatens Danny, too. He has made a dangerous mistake. Finally, when the tiger traumatizes a homeless man, Danny overcomes his fear and hops off to aid the tiger's victim.

After reading, I invited students to talk about the story in small groups. Like other teachers in the room, I circulated and participated in some of the discussions. In one group, I noticed that a young boy was not participating in the discussion. He kept alone, silent, until the bell rang. Students grabbed their backpacks and headed out the door to their next class. The young boy was still fumbling with his materials, so I sat down next to him. I asked him if he did not participate in the small group discussion because he didn't like my book. He barely raised his eyes to me and muttered,

Actually, I really liked the story. Danny reminds me of myself. I just moved to this city. I don't know anybody and don't have any friends. The homeless man in the book also reminded me of my dad and me. You see, my dad and me were homeless and lived in his car for a long time. Nobody at this school knows that I was homeless and lived in a car so please don't say anything to anyone. I always feel sad and embarrassed about it. That's why I was so glad when Danny got off the tiger to help that homeless man. He could have been my dad. Then, slipped on his backpack and quietly slipped out the door. Unfortunately, I never saw him again.

Emotionally, this young boy's experience with hopelessness took my breath away. It reminded me once again of so many students that have had to cope with, much less overcome, challenges like this boy. He was coping, but not very well, and certainly had not yet overcome the embarrassment and humiliation of being homelessness.

Professionally, this vignette inspired me to write this book chapter. In general, it sparked my interest in and curiosity about the controversial issue of childhood and adolescent homelessness. More specifically, it rekindled my long-held interest in how teachers can teach controversial issues. In this instance,

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