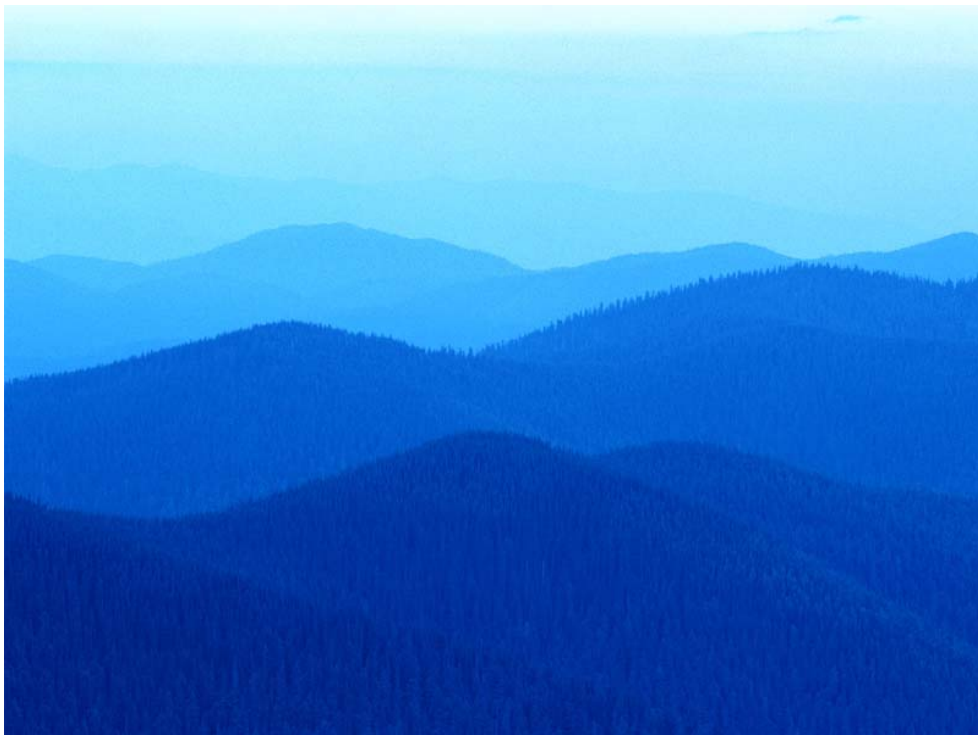


*Becoming teacher: Sites for teacher development in
Canadian Teacher Education*



Lynn Thomas, Editor

Canadian Association for Teacher Education

Association canadienne pour la formation à l'enseignement

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Literature and Educating for Social Change

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Abstract

This article explores issues of using literature to promote teaching and learning about social equity and diversity for and with Teacher Candidates. The relevant literature considered comes from the field of education, as well as fields in conversation with it, such as gender and postcolonial studies. The focus of the article is the many uses for literature in promoting social change in educational contexts, including an assignment for Teacher Candidates that highlights the connection between literature, social equity and diversity instruction, and the role of teacher as transformer.

“I don’t know how you deal with homophobic students” – Teacher Candidate

“Every instance of homophobia, racism, or sexism is a teaching opportunity” Teacher Candidate

Teacher education, perhaps more than any other professional training, requires candidates to deconstruct aspects of their identities, their experiences, and their social worlds. Reflection upon reflection is written, not just on teaching practice, but also on how experience has shaped the approaches and skills candidates bring to the classroom. My own experience of Teacher education had a profound impact on my sense of social justice. I began to see that issues such as racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism were not simply large-scale social problems, but that they played out in the very classrooms in which I was learning and teaching. I became attuned to the ways in which male students were asked to speak more than female students. I became aware of issues of bullying/harassment that related to racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I became angry that these issues were not a more crucial part of the curriculum.

The education system is the only true societal leveler that exists in Canada. While students will have different experiences and opportunities in their families, communities, and social circles, most students still receive public education, which means that the experiences in their classrooms and schools are what connect and bind them. It is, in my view essential, then, that schools redouble efforts to make anti-oppression central in the content of classroom teaching, and the substance of co-curricular assemblies and activities. The only way such a vision can possibly be realized is if Teacher education itself more strongly focuses on anti-oppression.

This paper arises out of the conference of the Canadian Association for Teacher education (CATE), on the topic of “teacher as agent of social change.” CATE asked presenters to focus on the following ideas and questions:

Descriptions such as ‘teacher as transformer’ and ‘teacher as agent of change’ suggest that teachers need to develop capacities that exceed their socialized repetition of the status quo in education. How important is this aspect of becoming teacher? How should these capacities be developed? How much control does/should teacher educators have in the process?

My academic background in researching and teaching literature, particularly those texts that address issues of race and gender, as well as those that move the reader through geographic spaces and cultural differences, has shown me that literature is the way to develop such capabilities and to promote the values of equity and diversity.

This paper addresses how and why literature is a powerful tool in creating teachers as “agents of change,” within Teacher education programs. The problem I see in promoting social justice values amongst Teacher Candidates is that many faculties of education have been doing this work for some time, yet many emerging teachers do not necessarily “buy in” to what is being taught. In my own Teacher education, I can remember leaving a session of my favourite course; the course centred on issues of equity and diversity and how they relate to the teaching profession. Everyone in the class always said the “right” (read: politically correct) things, but outside of class I would hear students mock the course instructor and the course content. It was clear that these would not be teachers who would foster solid anti-oppression work in their classes. They were not effectively challenging their assumptions and beliefs about social class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc., even though the course was asking them to do so. I

wondered what the disconnect was between the course content and the enduring understandings. And I wondered how to change it.¹

After teaching in the secondary school system for some time, I went on to pursue graduate work in the field of literature. My areas of specialization were postcolonial/world literature (specifically South African) and gender in literature. Both my academic research and my teaching at the post-secondary level consistently reinforced the same thing: reading works by and about marginalized individuals and communities has a profound impact on empathy and, ultimately, the desire to create a more equitable and fair world. Rather than an “objective” historical or sociological discussion about marginalized groups, literature gives students characters with which they can relate, and fosters a deeper understanding of social issues through that character-reader-author relationship. Numerous students have told me that their best understandings of global issues and events come from reading novels as opposed to textbooks. These students go on to find ways to stop bullying/harassment, engage with social programs that seek to fight injustice, and generally live lives committed to equity and diversity. Of course this does not happen every time and to the same degree with every student. But it has proven, in my own observations, much more effective than simply teaching about social issues. The use of literature is transformative for students in terms of grappling with their own identities and the social issues that produce oppression and injustice in local and global contexts.

¹ In *Private Practices: Girls Reading Fiction and Constructing Identity* (1994), Meredith Rogers Cherland argues that literacy is “situated social practice” (212) and can be used for social transformation. She notes that critical pedagogy promotes a diversity of voices (18) and literature can help bring those voices into the classroom. Her project is about gendered reading, and mine is about gender as well as race, location, class, and diversity as a general construct, but our ideas complement one another.

Unlike many of my colleagues who draw from mainly pedagogical and educational theorists, my pedagogical approaches are influenced primarily by the literary theorists. This is foundational to why I use literature in the classroom; I understand it to be inextricable from teaching, learning, and growth. Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982), for example, lent me the concepts of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia." Dialogism, rooted in the word dialogue, assumes that novels function through the interactions of speaking and hearing, writing and reading, encountering the other in relationship with the self. This is hugely important because our project asked Teacher Candidates to not only learn from the dialogues within the text, but to enter into a dialogue of sorts with the protagonist as well. Although fiction does not represent real conversation, it does represent the importance of multiple perspectives – something that is essential to the empathy and compassion required for social change. Heteroglossia, the idea that multiple perspectives and forms of writing also contribute to a more pluralistic understanding of society, is also something Bakhtin addresses. This is partly why our assignment relies on the form of the novel to bring forth the types of thinking and reaction that we are hoping will inform teaching practice.

Reading novels and other types of literature promote dialogue and hearing a multiplicity of voices. To me there is no doubt that this is one of the keys to using literature in education. Not only can it empower students (our Teacher Candidates as well as their students – current and future) to help them find their own means of self-expression, but it can help students emerge out of their own experiences and understandings and into other perspectives through their imaginations and interpretations in reading. Postcolonial critics also address the value of literature in education. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has many texts devoted to both literature and education, most notably *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (2008), in which she demonstrates that

literature is key for postcolonial pedagogy; without hearing a multiplicity of voices, it is difficult to transcend issues of privilege. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), gives us the idea of a "Thirdspace" between self and other, something that he also finds through reading.² These critics are a small sample of the many I have studied, and now incorporate into my pedagogy and teaching practice, who focus on equity and diversity, particularly in the arenas of gender and race, have been fuelled by theorists who consistently position literature and education as the primary means through which dialogue, empathy, and social change can happen. I am now in a particular position to be able to influence educators, and use literature, towards empowering them to become agents of social change.

I am currently teaching at the Trent School of Education. One of my courses, Sociocultural Perspectives on Human Development, introduces the ideas of sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and other issues of bias and oppression. We talk about the impact of these identity/social issues on human development and on teaching/schools. Each week, I wonder how many of my students will leave the class and snicker, the way I saw them do after the course I took as a Teacher Candidate that broached similar topics. In order to combat the type of ennui or resistance that can come with doing anti-oppression work, one of the strategies is to introduce literary texts as teaching texts.³

As a result of my personal and professional experiences, it is part of my project to use literature as a way to teach about social justice and equity issues as they pertain to education.

² Richard Beach's "Conducting Research on Teaching Literature: The Influence of Texts, Contexts, and Teacher on Response to Multicultural Literature" (2005) also references Homi Bhabha's "Thirdspace" (2), and also argues that, because race, class and gender are "institutionally constituted," (25), literature provides counter-narratives that engender social critique.

³ My course coordinator, Karleen Pendleton Jimenez began doing this with her students. Both of us realize the link between literature, anti-oppression work, and education, but the specifics of the assignment I discuss here are hers and I am indebted to her work.

This paper focuses on the results of an assignment at our School of Education, in which Teacher Candidates are asked to read a novel (one of five that are offered to choose from), and to write a paper about how, if the protagonist of the novel were a student in their class, they would be able to teach them. Each novel had a crucial equity issue that affected the protagonist; issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, the immigrant experience, and class struggles were represented. Our Teacher Candidates had the opportunity to use the literary text (fiction) as a way into understanding the tough problems that affect our real students (fact). The idea is that the literature produces social knowledge and also empathy, and that those are crucial to teachers developing skills as agents of social change. Our candidates were asked to reflect anonymously on the experience of this assignment, its applicability and effectiveness as a teacher training tool and whether the assignment might have affected a view of themselves as teachers who are/could be agents of change. Below is more explanation of the literature informing the project, and other social issues that bear on this assignment and the survey given to gauge student reaction. The survey data is then presented and analyzed.

There is much academic research on the topic of teaching through literature for social justice, such as “Effects of Children's Literature on Preservice Teachers' Opinions about Multicultural Education Issues” (1995) by Rebecca McMahon and Carolyn Reeves-Kazelskis; “Curriculum, Identity and Experience in Multicultural Teacher education,” (1998) by Jon Young and Roy Graham; and, “Text and Context: Using Multicultural Literature To Help Teacher education Students Develop Understanding of Self and World” (2001) by Judith Singer and Sally Smith. These research texts are important for laying the foundation of the theoretical approaches to this sort of work. All of these theorists articulate the value of literature as a tool for the development of empathy for those in different circumstances. Literature as a forum for multiple

perspectives, relationships with characters, and a window into hardships one might not experience oneself, all add to other curricular tools and modes that foster social justice education. Voice is a common theme throughout the literature; writing not only empowers marginalized people to have their voices heard, but empowers people with relative privilege to be able to access those points of view. The survey research presented below highlights the findings of the above educational theorists: literature is an impactful tool for the promotion of social justice. The research bolsters the feelings and findings of my students: the use of literature is crucial to Teacher Candidates' understanding of their own identities, as well as those of others. And that these enduring understandings are in turn crucial for teachers becoming positive agents of social change throughout their careers.

One of the reasons I am drawn to the teaching of literature is that it provides a platform to get into the various voices and minds of diverse characters. I know of no other medium that allows for such deep and profound access to various subjectivities and perspectives. My doctoral dissertation, entitled *Re/sisters: South African Women's Literature* (2011), focused on women writing across race, creating dialogue and forging sisterhoods, through their writing. In light of the ways in which women of different races in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa experienced extremely different circumstances, with white women often colluding in the exploitation and oppression of women of colour, it is a difficult process for women to see one another as allies. Yet given the societal privileging of race over gender (both officially, through a government program that interpolated white women into its national aims, including the oppression of people of colour, and also in the resistance where women were often told that fighting sexism would have to wait until after apartheid's end), women have often found each other in spite of the odds, and have worked together for personal and political change.

The novels I studied all included examples of women writing across difference; forging fictional conversations with each other, in a kind of dialogic reconciliation process. Thus my thesis posited that women need one another's ally-ship, despite the differences among them, and thus social transformers (resisters) needed to heal from the divisions between women and foster a renewed sense of sisterhood (re-sisters). Literature, in allowing space for a comparison of situations, for the development of empathy, for the space to engage in dialogue, for the ability to transgress the boundary between self and other, has often been the medium of calling those in South Africa to action. In post-apartheid, it has provided a forum for reconciliation, for expressing experience, and for finding some common ground towards political emancipation, challenging gender-based violence, and fighting for the social transformation not yet completed in apartheid's wake.

My dissertation topic was inspired by a research trip I took to South Africa when I was undergoing my own teacher education. I had a grant to investigate how the schools fostered inclusion and diversity after they became integrated. I was interested in the lessons for anti-racist education in Canada, and also how the issues of memory, equity, and history were handled as students from very different backgrounds collided in the classroom. I found that South African novels were one way that students could negotiate with each other. They could argue over point of view, perspective, identity, and meaning, but through addressing characters that were outside of their own lives. I began to become excited to investigate the potential uses of literature in the classroom. As I have continued to teach at the secondary and post-secondary levels in Canada, I

have become more and more certain that literature is able to reinforce identity, challenge assumptions, and build bridges across difference.⁴

My students in the Trent School of Education read a novel that centred on a character experiencing marginalization and oppression. They had choice in which novel, which allowed different groups to discuss different social structures. For example, the novel *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (2011), by James Bartleman, describes the intergenerational effects of residential schools on Aboriginal Canadians. Students also could choose between *Funny Boy*, by Shyam Selvadurai (1994), which portrays a child growing up amidst the violence of divided Sri Lanka, and also questioning his sexual orientation. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), about a Black girl growing up in the Southern United States,⁵ *The Pick-Up* (2002), by Nadine Gordimer, about a relationship between a Middle Eastern man and a white woman in South Africa, and *Lucy* (1990), by Jamaica Kincaid, about a domestic worker in the U.S. from the Caribbean, were the other choices.⁶ Teacher Candidates wrote papers that were part literary analysis and part classroom planning. They imagine the protagonist is a child in their classroom, and articulate

⁴ Ingrid Johnston's *Re-mapping Literary Worlds: Postcolonial Pedagogy in Practice* (2003) charts a similar path. Johnston taught literature in South Africa and realized its potential for promoting dialogue across race. In Canada, she was concerned with the lack of multiculturalism reflected in the books assigned to students, and wanted to present students with a greater diversity of representations and perspectives. She studies the positive values of diverse students engaging with texts of their *own* histories, as well as how reading and deconstructing postcolonial texts might enable teachers and students to problematize representations of self, place, and the "other."

⁵ See Laraine Wallowitz "Resisting the White Gaze: Critical Literacy and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (2008) on how this text can help students learn critical literacy skills that can support social justice education.

⁶ All of these are texts I had previously encountered as a student and teacher of postcolonial literature. For a related study, see James Greenlaw (1994) who studied students who were asked to read and respond to postcolonial texts in order to challenge the paradigms offered by a typically Western literary education.

how they could make them feel included and foster their learning. In short, through the novel, our Teacher Candidates use literature to consider issues of oppression and equity, and are asked to integrate that into how they imagine their future classrooms.

My goals in assigning this project are to have students experience the empathy for a character that is, in most cases, well outside of their own experience. Many Teacher Candidates, who need to have already experienced success in order to get into our program, have not faced the barriers that the protagonists of their novels face. Many of them had not considered how systemic oppression might look and feel on the level of the individual. Through this assignment, many of our students came to identify and empathize with the protagonist, so that pursuing inclusion became more personally important to them as emerging teachers.⁷ I find the project to have been successful in terms of using literature to create teachers as “agents of change.” Their own words are far more convincing, however.

The survey results of the students are used to determine the efficacy of the assignment, the impact it had on the Teacher Candidates’ perspectives, and the usefulness in their view of using literature to teach about social justice with their own students. The survey used a mixed-methods methodological approach, whereby students were asked questions on a rating system on a variety of questions pertaining to the assignment, and then asked for their written feedback on each question. The quantitative data shows a positive reaction to the assignment, the learning it produced, and the future potential use for literature and social equity in teaching for these candidates. Much more valuable in ascertaining the effectiveness of our assignment, and the

⁷ See also Janice Hartwick Dressel on “social responsibility and reader response” theory (2), and students developing empathy and critical thinking by “assuming a character’s perspective” (60). For more on reader-response and teaching for social justice see Cai 1997.

ways in which Teacher Candidates transformed through the assignment, is the language with which they respond to the qualitative questions.

Teacher Candidates were given a survey to complete about the assignment. Below are the questions, the numerical ranking, followed by samples of the qualitative feedback that was given on the question. Surveys were completed anonymously and were optional; not everyone who completed the assignment chose to fill out the survey. There were ninety respondents.

The questions were designed to ascertain the efficacy of the assignment (whether it enhanced learning about social equity and diversity), whether Teacher Candidates would use literature in similar ways in their own teaching, whether they believed they were/should be agents of social change, and whether the relationship between literature, topics in social justice/equity, and teaching was productive. Below are the numeric findings followed by samples of qualitative responses for each question.

Question #1: The Novel I Read Helped Me to Understand Equity Issues Differently

Quantitative:

Blank /5	1 /5	2 /5	3 /5	4 /5	5 / 5
1	5	4	17	31	32

The majority of students felt that the novel changed their point of view. Unless they chose to give qualitative feedback on this question, we do not know whether those who responded that they did not experience such a change felt that a) the novel was not a useful tool or b) they already came with a sensitivity to and knowledge of issues of equity. We can see from

the numbers, however, that most students did feel they experienced their learning differently through this assignment as compared with others that did not have a literary focus.

Qualitative:

The qualitative feedback on this question highlights the way in which Teacher Candidates' beliefs were challenged through the reading of the novel. They responded with open statements to that effect such as: "After reading *The Bluest Eye*, I have a different perception of the oppression experienced by African-Americans. It became an eye opener to the effects of socialization"; "It taught me how frustrating things are when you are not part of the privileged part of society, or are part of the marginalized population"; "I felt more strongly connected to the history of aboriginals and felt that the novel by Bartleman helped illustrate how far reaching the psychological impacts of the residential schools was." These responses highlight that the reading of the novel was a personal experience for the Teacher Candidates that gave way to a change in their social approaches and understandings.

Others spoke about the form of the novel as being essential to their learning: "The book really let me enter the heads of the characters to understand how someone first hand experiences issues of inequality – eye opening"; "Partially, although I was well versed on the issue prior to – though it had a personal experience to the novel"; "The novel I chose taught me about equity issues in a way that was real." The question asks whether the novel helped produce learning, but Teacher Candidates were as focused on the content of the learning as the form. Responses such as these highlight that, were they to encounter these narratives in a non-fiction or other format, the learning would not have been as impactful. The second question on the survey asked for students to respond directly to the idea of literature as a forum for teaching equity and diversity:

Question #2: Teaching about Equity and Diversity through Literature Makes the Issues More Clear and Approachable for Students

Quantitative:

Blank /5	1 /5	2 /5	3 /5	4 /5	5/ 5
0	0	2	9	34	4

From this answer we can see, numerically, that Teacher Candidates do, on the whole, feel that teaching equity and diversity through literature is good for students. The answers are less in the “5” range than the “4” range on this question, suggesting that although they might have found the experience personally satisfying and positive for learning, they are not convinced other students would feel that way as strongly.

Qualitative:

Some Teacher Candidates felt very positive about the impact of teaching equity and diversity through literature: “Absolutely! I think that learning through literature is a good change from traditional learning, and also helps with literacy issues”; “Especially for younger learners who love and are comfortable learning through literature”; “Students make connections to the characters in the novel and relate to the experiences they faced.” These candidates make note of the cross-curricular connections that teaching through literature can enable; as schools focus on literacy, using literature to highlight social knowledge reinforces the learning in both curricular areas.

These responses also allude to findings such as that in pedagogical research: that literature offers a different level of comfort, a heightened forum for empathy, and a richer text from which

to explore complex social issues that other forms of text. The uses of literature for empathy, for a way into uncomfortable topics, and a tool for engagement come up multiple times in their responses: “I think literature teaches students empathy. More importantly, it teaches us the value of listening to the stories of others”; “I think that reading a novel is a way to engage students and really allow them to become invested in the characters and issues they are reading about”; “It helps students talk about issues that can be touchy subjects without making it personal”; “Absolutely. Text to self connections construct meaning for kids”; “These are broad, intangible concepts which can make it hard for students to really understand them. Grounding them in literature helps.” Other types of feedback suggested that literature is only one of many possible tools for teaching about equity and social justice: “Nonfiction can also be effective,” but the vast majority of responses expressed enthusiasm for literature as a highly effective tool, and one that the candidates would use in their own teaching.

Question #3: Teachers Should be Agents of Social Change

Quantitative:

Blank /5	1 /5	2 /5	3 /5	4 /5	5 / 5
0	1	1	4	19	65

I was surprised by the enthusiasm that these numerical responses suggest. I did not think that the majority of Teacher Candidates thought it was part of a teachers’ role to be an agent of social change. Whether this was a point of view they came to learn through our course and this assignment, or whether this has been foundational to their philosophy of teaching from the beginning, I found the responses to be very affirming of the work of our course in which we try

to encourage this approach to teaching, as well as offer tools to make the approach a reality in classrooms.

Qualitative:

Although the numerical responses were highly in the affirmative to the question of whether teachers *should* be agents of social change, a number of the written responses reflected a hesitation or apprehension about putting that belief into practice: “It’s hard for some teachers not to get preachy. Whose idea of “social change” shall we bring to the classroom and weave into the curriculum?” This comment is very fair. One of the conversations we came back to again and again was the necessity of balanced approaches. The overall topics of fairness, and promoting equality and equity that is reflective of current legislation, for example, helps to limit personal views. Other students clearly expressed anxiety that there would be negative consequences if they acted as agents of social change: “It is extremely hard to do this in public schools, because of the backlash from parents, administrators, and school boards”; “We are not protected in the Charter for our opinions and our voice is not to be heard. So how can we support this?” In our class we address topics such as “teaching about controversial issues without becoming controversial,” and other ways of balancing social and political bias with creating social change. Some candidates, however, clearly still feel that they may have the desire to create social change, but perhaps lack the power to do so. Others felt strongly empowered: “Teachers are in a position of power and are held to a high standard in society, therefore they should be empowered to become activists for change and promote inclusivity”; “Heck yeah we should, we can help make a difference”; “Yes! We as teachers have the opportunity to teach important values and life skills, while creating a positive community in the classroom”; “Sometimes we are the only ally

kids have so this is important”; “Teachers should expose students to a variety of different perspectives and challenge students to think critically about their beliefs.” On the question of whether teachers should be “agents of social change,” both the numerical and most of the written data from the survey suggest that Teacher Candidates feel they should. The candidates expressed again and again that this is crucial to their mission as teachers.

Question #4: Using Books and Literature to Illustrate Social Issues Is a Good Strategy for the Prevention of Bullying in Classrooms/schools

Quantitative:

Blank /5	1 /5	2 /5	3 /5	4 /5	5/ 5
1	0	1	11	26	51

Teacher Candidates responded very positively to this question, highlighting that the same claims about literature encouraging empathy and highlighting multiple perspectives that make it a useful tool for teacher education, also inform the way we can address issues of bullying amongst students in schools. This question was designed to highlight the connection between equity and social justice theory, and bullying (which is often connected to issues of inequity and injustice as they play out in schools). Teacher Candidates showed that this link was clear to them, and that they knew their job would involve promoting fairness through anti-bullying work in schools.

Qualitative:

Some of the Teacher Candidates' responses were positive about the use of literature, but stressed that they see literature as one part of a full complement of anti-bullying tools and resources: "Lead by example, encourage positive relationships, use books, yes, but social exercises and positive practice more so!"; "I think there are other more effective ways to tackle bullying, but reading about the issue can help us empathize with the bully." The majority of the responses, however, made clear that literature would be absolutely crucial to their anti-bullying efforts: "Students can gain understanding for social issues through many facets and literature is an excellent entry point to introduce some of these complex concepts into the school setting"; "Books and literature can teach a lot about character education and the different roles involved in bullying (bully, victim, bystanders, ally)"; "Books about bullying often get made fun of by children, I find, but books about oppression are very effective." Almost all of the written responses addressed how empathy and multiplicity of perspective are reasons why literature is so important. This was interesting because, through our assignment, we did not address bullying specifically. What this meant was that Teacher Candidates had internalized some of the messaging we were promoting concerning the value of literature to teach equity and diversity subjects, and were applying that view of literature as a tool to other areas of classroom and student management that we had not discussed. Their learning, then, was not only about the usefulness of the content of social equity and diversity learning, but also the form through which that learning takes place. Literature itself became the subject, instead of just the tool.

Question #5: I Would Use Books/literature to Teach about Social Topics in My Classroom

Quantitative:

Blank /5	1 /5	2 /5	3 /5	4 /5	5/ 5
0	0	1	5	21	63

Teacher Candidates clearly felt very favourably towards the use of literature. This question investigates whether they saw it as simply good for their own learning, or whether it would be a tool they would use in turn with their own students. The numerical data suggests that many future teachers will be inspired to use literature in their classrooms to teach about social issues. One of the reasons the high level of these numerical responses is surprising is that the Teacher Candidates reflected all subject areas of Intermediate/Senior teaching. They were not, for the most part, English teachers, and so had not had formal training, for the most part, in the use of literature. This speaks to the success of our project in using literature; it was convincing to the candidates as an important pedagogical tool.

Qualitative:

Teacher Candidates generally responded very favourably in their written feedback on the question of their potential use of literature in their own teaching. Some comments reflected a passion for literature: “Love books/literature – believe in the power of books. Empathy. Understanding. Acceptance.” Others, simply valued the way literary texts give way to conversation and other curricular activities: “I think text is a great segway into a discussion”; “Good for the theory part – need the “practice” as with drama activities, writing, participating in community programming, etc.” Other responses repeated earlier suggestions that literature

makes approaching these topics more comfortable: “What a great way to approach topics that we may otherwise feel a bit overwhelmed with.” This final question is what truly made the team of instructors teaching this course feel that the literature assignment was positive. Not only did it enable the learning of our Teacher Candidates, but it convinced them that using literature will promote learning about equity and diversity in their future students as well.

Overall Comments

The Quantitative feedback shows an impressive level of commitment to creating social change through teaching. Reflecting on their own experience of reading the novel, the majority of Teacher Candidates report that the novel they chose helped them to understand an issue in equity differently. Many candidates also feel that they would, in turn, use literature towards the same ends. As issues of bullying and discrimination are often underwritten by issues of equity and diversity, oppression and marginalization, the novels helped them to see those deeper processes and to engage in an experience well outside of their own. Some of their qualitative feedback, their comments, helps to support this idea. I have included many of the comments. I omitted those that were very similar to comments included below.⁸

The survey invited any further comments about the experience of the assignment, or anything else the candidate wanted to add about using literature to teach about equity and diversity, teachers becoming agents of social change, or anything they wanted to add that was of relevance. Teacher Candidates responded overwhelmingly positively to the assignment, and all of its effects: “I loved learning and having my eyes opened to different perspectives. I had

⁸ I have left the comments as they were written on the surveys. Thus there are some grammatical and spelling mistakes. I did not want to impose any editing on the comments; I wanted to let the students’ voices speak for themselves.

logically thought about the more marginalized groups of society, but had never really tried “walking in their shoes” or trying to understand what it would be like to be “different” based on race, sex, sexual orientation, class, and ability etc.”; “I was an English major so I am a firm believer in the power of literature to shift mindsets. Literature will be an integral part of all the curriculum I teach.” “*Funny Boy* is probably one of the best books I have read! I learned so much about equity issues in the world that I had no idea were happening. I really felt for the main characters and I learned as much from the novel. Some things I learned could not have been taught traditionally. Thank you!” Many of the Teacher Candidates simply expressed appreciation for being introduced to texts they otherwise may not have read.

Our Teacher Candidates have clearly experienced a transformation through their reading, and are interested in transforming others through similar literary study projects. Of course, teachers will use literature in a variety of ways and will not ask their students to reflect on the pedagogical value of these texts, in most cases. Their comments include discussing the value of the “relationship” between reader and text, the learning about equity that can happen through character, and how important teachers are in making such connections with their students. The overwhelmingly positive nature of the numeric and written feedback suggests not only that the learning took place, but also that learning about diversity and equity through literature was enjoyable for our Teacher Candidates – something which, as I describe above, can be a struggle.

It is notable that some of the candidates describe a particular anxiety about speaking about social issues for fear of a teacher imposing a point of view on his/her students, or of legal or other disciplinary consequences from parents or administration. Of course, every teacher must determine what he or she is comfortable doing. Some of us push the boundaries of what is acceptable in the classroom, some feel that social justice and equity are already core to the

curriculum, and some do not wish to entertain these topics. The use of literature can be key for any of these types of teachers who wish to approach controversial subjects without seeming controversial themselves. Letting characters and writers speak for themselves, and eliciting student interpretations and understandings of the characters, is a way to avoid potential litigious or other pitfalls. All schools teach literacy, and in fact value it as among the most important skills. It is my position that critical literacy includes an ability to comprehend characters from very different points of view from the reader's own. Thus literature provides both a "safe," but also provocative, medium for discussing social justice.

The Teacher Candidates' expressions of enjoying the reading on a personal as well as a professional level were notable. The comments are enthusiastic and exuberant. In my own teaching experience, these comments are rare and are reflective of a particular transformative experience. Students are often happy with what they are learning, or challenged and stimulated by curricular material, but the tone of the comments that the students provided suggests a different sort of learning. Some of the Teacher Candidates regard this assignment as the one that was *most* transformative during our course. For them, the medium of literature was most effective in making the topics approachable, and in making text-to-self and text-to-world connections.⁹

The academic literature on text and pedagogy, from theoretical approaches such as Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia, as well as more focused studies such as those by Laraine Wallowitz, Ingrid Johnston, and James Greenlaw, all suggest that literature is an effective means of encouraging students to shift their paradigm through viewing the world in a character's

⁹ Literacy instruction in Ontario is currently interested in promoting text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Another reason this type of assignment is absolutely in line with the curricular goals of our current educational policy and mandate.

perspective, as well as promoting discussion that interrogates the boundaries between self and other. These objectives serve a larger goal: giving students the tools to recognize and combat injustice. Laraine Wallowitz notes that reading Toni Morrison gave her students the language and context to interrogate, resist (p. 158) and disrupt (161) the “white gaze” many of them had internalized. She concludes that literary texts give her students the communicative capacity for “recognition, resistance, and reconciliation.” These are the goals I have for my students as well.

When asked whether teachers should be agents of social change, some of the students responded “Yes!,” but others said things like “This is one of the main reasons I want to become a teacher.” We all come to the field of education for different reasons, but once we have been practicing as teachers it is apparent that our influence can have a huge impact. As someone committed to fighting for an equitable world, education offers me the opportunity to work with young people who often share my commitments to equity and diversity, and those whom I believe can benefit from contemplating those issues in a deeper way than they have been asked to previously. Literature is an effective forum through which to foster these conversations, and encourage Teacher Candidates to push the boundaries of their knowledge and perspective. It *is* my project to help instill the values of social justice in Teacher Candidates so that they may become agents of social change. Literature is my tool of choice in this pedagogical project.

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