

Examining Prejudice through Children's Responses to Literature and the Arts

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In their lives outside of school, learners naturally move between art, music, movement, drama, mathematics, and language as ways of thinking about and experiencing the world. They talk and write, but they also sketch, sing, play, problem-solve and dance their ways into new perspectives and understandings. It is only in schools that students are restricted to using one sign system at a time to think, with an almost exclusive focus on written language (Eisner, 1994).

As elementary educators with strong backgrounds in the arts, we are interested in the integration of the arts into an inquiry curriculum. Although there are many approaches to the arts as a significant component of children's experiences in schools (Eisner, 2002), we are particularly interested in a sign system or semiotic approach (Peirce, 1966) in which the arts and other sign systems are viewed as tools for thinking and communicating. In particular, we have explored the ways in which the arts support children in considering alternative perspectives within their inquiries about social issues and in constructing understandings of education as democracy (Kauffman & Short, 2001; Short & Kauffman, 2000; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000; Short, Schroeder, Laird, Kauffman, Ferguson, & Crawford, 1996). Our collaborations allow us to combine Kathy's perspective



We will always have a wall of prejudice. Some of us will be able to climb to the other side. Some will be left on the side of prejudice. A few will be left on the wall of prejudice to decide if we want to be prejudiced or not. Justin, age 11.

as a university educator and Gloria's experiences as a classroom teacher to examine children's inquiries into difficult social issues.

The particular inquiry that we share in this article grew out of tensions between students in Gloria's multiage fourth/fifth grade classroom that reflected larger tensions within the school and community. Some of these tensions grew out of incidents of prejudice and discrimination between specific ethnic groups in the community including Latinos, African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans and European Americans. Other tensions were related to issues of gender and social class and to differences in peer status that are often significant for students of this age level. Children were coming into the classroom

from lunch and recess upset at the use of racial slurs and other name calling and those tensions were having a negative effect on the classroom learning community.

Because Gloria works to create a community based in democracy and the valuing of both the individual and the group, she wanted to openly address these issues of prejudice with her students. She also knew, however, that students initially needed a safe way to talk about these issues before they could address them directly in relation to how they were interacting with each other. We decided to work together and create initial

plans for an inquiry in which students could use responses to literature and the arts to consider prejudice in the world and in their own lives.

This article tells the story of that inquiry with students and the ways in which the arts facilitated children's explorations of prejudice. This inquiry is framed by our beliefs about the ways in which literature and the arts support democracy within a classroom setting. We begin by discussing that theoretical frame and then share the story of our inquiry.

THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION WITHIN DEMOCRACY

Our understandings of democracy are based in the work of Dewey (1916) and Rosenblatt (1938). Dewey believed that

democratic social arrangements within classrooms support a higher quality of human experience that is more accessible and enjoyable for learners than traditional methods based in coercion and repression. Dewey saw democracy as based in a negotiation between individual diversity and community needs where each person has the right to his/her own values and opinions but also needs to take into account the consequences of those beliefs for themselves and others. Rosenblatt argued that democracy involves a conviction and enthusiasm about one's own ideas along with an open mind to others' points of views and needs. She believed that imagination, the ability to try on alternative perspectives and ways of thinking about the world, is essential to democracy and is encouraged by literature and dialogue as response to literature. Her theories of reading as a transactional process posit response as both personal connection and group dialogue. Although she argued that students first need to share their initial personal responses and connections, a valuing of individual voice, she viewed personal responses as essential but not sufficient. Students, therefore, need to engage in dialogue with others where they critique their personal responses and consider other perspectives. Freire (1970) characterized this dialogue as wrestling with words, not just walking on the top of words.

This process of dialogue involves negotiation between students as they collaboratively work together at meaning making about a particular text, with the goal of creating and critiquing their understandings, not necessarily coming to the same interpretation. Shannon (1993) highlights negotiation by arguing that democracy is a system in which people participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives. This participation involves negotiation among equals about both the decisions and the determination of the choices that are the focus of those decisions—the behind-the-scenes thinking that teachers often do and impose onto students.

We believe that negotiation and response to literature also relates to children's responses to texts from other sign systems. We define sign systems as all the ways in which human beings share and

make meaning, including art, music, dance, drama, mathematics, and language (Pierce, 1966). These sign systems are basic processes of signification which are available to all learners. Since human beings do not have direct access to their world, they cognitively "read" sensory impulses through the mediation of particular cultural perspectives as "signs" to which they assign meaning. From a sign system perspective, a text can be defined as any chunk of meaning that has unity and can be shared with others. A text, therefore, can be a novel, a painting, a sculpture, a play, a dance, or a song. Response is not just talk, but response through any sign system.

In our inquiry about prejudice, we offered students multiple opportunities to imagine themselves into others' perspectives through their responses to a range of texts (literature, art, drama, and music) and through dialogue that challenged their conceptions of difficult social issues. In particular, we wanted to engage students in transmediation (Eco, 1976), the process of taking understandings created in one sign system and moving them into another sign system.

The process of transmediation is not a simple transfer or translation of meaning from one system to another because the meaning potentials of each system differ. Instead, learners transform their understandings through inventing a connection so that the content of one sign system is mapped onto the expression plane of another (Siegel, 1995). They search for commonalities in meanings across sign systems but, since each system has different meaning potentials and there is no one-to-one correspondence, their search creates anomalies and tension. In turn, the tension encourages learners to invent a way to cross the gap as they move to another sign system and, in so doing, they think more generatively and reflectively. They create a metaphor that allows them to think symbolically, make new connections, ask their own questions, and open new lines of thinking (Siegel, 1995). Transmediation is thus a generative process in which new interpretations are considered and learner's understandings are enhanced.

AN INQUIRY ABOUT PREJUDICE

Our planning for this classroom focus on prejudice was based in our beliefs about inquiry and our use of the inquiry cycle as a curricular framework (Short & Harste, 1996). We knew that we needed to begin by planning engagements so that children could connect to their own experiences and conceptions. We also needed to offer a range of invitations that would encourage children to expand their perspectives and understandings. Out of these connections and imitations, we believed that compelling tensions would arise for children to pursue in investigations. We spent time carefully thinking through the initial experiences, but did not know where the children's inquiries might go.

CONNECTING TO CHILDREN'S CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS

We believe that curriculum always begins, not with what we think we should teach children about a particular topic, but with listening to children. The initial engagements should encourage children to think about and share their own experiences related to the class focus. We wanted to listen to their stories and understand their beliefs about prejudice.

We asked children to talk about they thought word "prejudice" meant. In several class discussions, it became apparent that their ideas about prejudice were based on the media and school emphasis on prejudice as racial tensions between blacks and whites. They did not associate prejudice with their own lives, but with issues of history and race, specifically with slavery and with Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and the Civil Rights movement. We knew we needed to challenge their limited perceptions which kept prejudice safely outside their own lives.

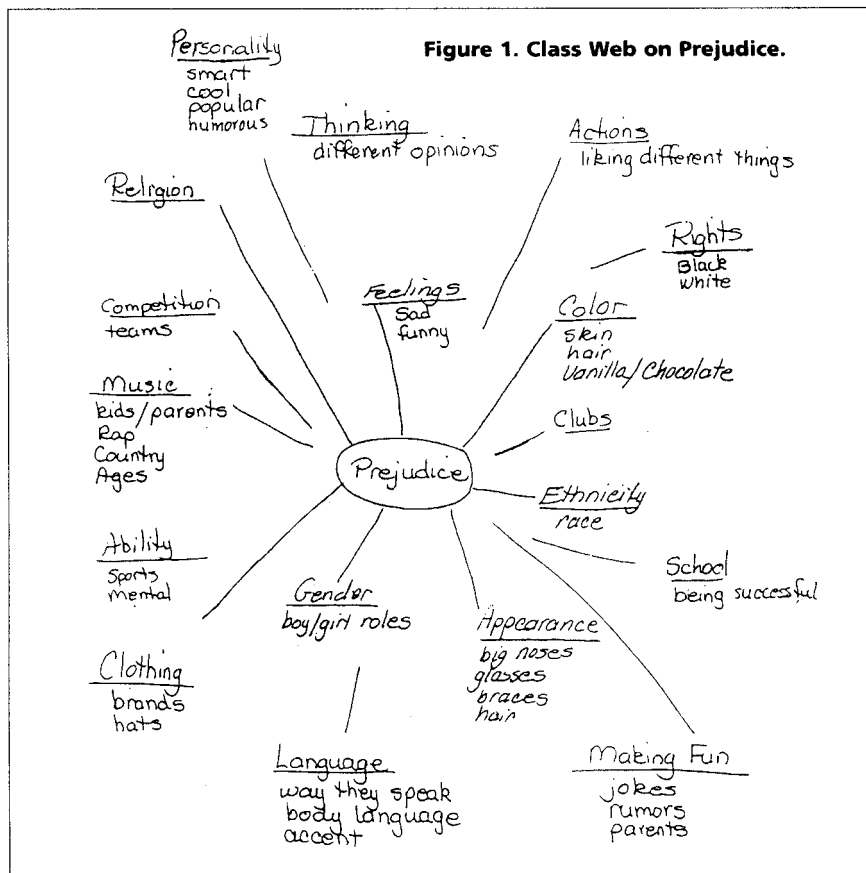
We asked them to bring in artifacts (objects, photographs, newspaper articles, etc.) that they thought reflected prejudice. The artifacts straggled in, a few each day, and so we began each morning with a sharing time for whomever had remembered to bring an artifact that day. We engaged in a strategy called Save the Last Word for Me (Short & Harste, 1996), where the child who brought the artifact would show it



to the class, but say nothing about it. The other class members talked about how they thought that artifact reflected prejudice. The child who brought the artifact remained silent during this discussion, but was given "the last word" to share why he or she had brought that artifact to reflect prejudice. This particular engagement encouraged children to think more deeply about what they thought prejudice was in order to select an artifact to bring to school, but it also forced them to consider alternative perspectives as they listened to class members discuss a particular artifact.

The types of artifacts that children brought to school and the perspectives they considered gradually moved beyond prejudice as limited to a historical problem between blacks and whites. For example, Lupita brought a Barbie doll with a chewed off leg as her artifact. As the class discussed her artifact, they realized that almost all of the dolls they saw in stores and catalogs were white and that none of them had ever seen a Latina doll. The nearness of the Christmas holidays clearly influenced their awareness of the toys available to them, and this awareness led them to talk about prejudice as related to the visual images in toys and advertisements that consistently do not reflect their own identities and the decisions of manufacturers about who matters in our society. Lupita's last word raised another type of prejudice when she shared that she brought the doll because it made her think of prejudice toward those with physical disabilities, thus expanding even further what the children considered prejudice.

The children became so interested in the different ways in which prejudice surrounds them in the community and in the world that they decided to create a museum on prejudice. A counter space and bulletin board were cleared for children to place and label their artifacts. The artifacts were quite diverse, ranging from a sports article on the Washington Redskins reflecting prejudice toward American Indians to a basketball reflecting the exclusion of girls from boys' games at recess. They continued to add new perspectives on prejudice to this museum throughout our inquiry, even after the class moved on to other engagements.



EXPANDING CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

These initial engagements with inquiry encouraged children to think about their own connections to prejudice and to build from those connections to consider new perspectives. We wanted to continue to challenge and expand their perspectives and understandings to a greater extent through a range of engagements involving responses to the arts and literature.

We began by reading aloud picture books to the class and engaging in class discussions about the different ways in which prejudice is part of our lives and society. We carefully chose books that would broaden the issues of prejudice that children were considering and that had powerful visual images as well as written text. We spent a week reading and discussing several books each day with children and then brainstormed a class web about their conceptions of prejudice. Figure 1 indicates how far the children had come from their initial thinking about prejudice as only involving racial tensions between whites and

blacks.

As we examined the web, we realized that their focus was still primarily on the different types of prejudice. We wanted to expand their perspectives beyond who is the target of prejudice to understand the causes of prejudice, the different ways in which people and society manifest prejudice, and the feelings and experiences of those who engage in and are the target of prejudice. We knew that the arts would be particularly significant in these explorations of actions, thinking, and emotions and began gathering resources for a range of engagements. We consulted with the educational coordinator of the photography museum at the university to identify historical and contemporary photographs related to prejudice. We used our own knowledge as well as consulted with art and music educators in the school district's central resource center to gather reproductions of paintings and pieces of music, such as Landscapes by Elinor Coen, various art pieces by Jacob Lawrence and William Johnson, a collection of songs from the Underground Railroad, and the sound track from the movie, Amistad. We also drew from work we are previously done with drama through an artist-in-resi-



experiences. We then used these resources within a range of engagements including:

- Viewing slides of historical photographs reflecting prejudice and hope while listening to music. After several viewings, some quiet sketching and writing, and then discussing these photographs with others, Polaroid cameras were made available so children could take and bring into class their own photographs of prejudice in their community.

- Viewing various art prints and sharing initial reactions to how these prints reflect prejudice. Breaking into small groups with each group choosing a particular art print to discuss their thinking and experience of prejudice in relation to that print.

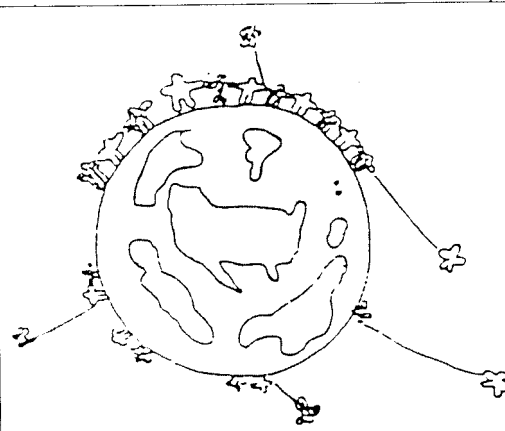
- Listening to various pieces of music and responding to that music through Sketch to Stretch (Short & Harste, 1996) where children created sketches about the meaning of that music to them in relation to prejudice.

- Working in groups of 3 to create tableaux of still-life scenes reflecting some type of tension resulting from prejudice.

- Improvising dramas as groups of 4 about an instance of prejudice that children had experienced on the playground. Each group developed a drama which included the roles of victim, aggressor, rescuer, and bystander. The groups acted out their improvisations four times so that each child could try on each role and perspective.

- Browsing sets of picture books about different aspects of prejudice and responding to those sets on large sheets of paper to create Graffiti Boards (Short & Harste, 1996) where children quickly jotted and sketched visual images and key words/phrases about the ideas and connections that these books raised for them about prejudice.

The children were given opportunities to think about their responses to the feelings and ideas from these various experiences with books, art pieces, music and drama through poetry, sketches, quick writes, discussion, and movement. Their responses reflected their move to thinking about prejudice from a broader range of perspectives, and their ability to take more critical stances. Figure 2 pro-



Not all people of the world believe in prejudice. The people floating do believe in prejudice.

The people of the world are trying to pull the floating people in and encourage them not to believe in prejudice.

Michael, age 11.

vides several examples of sketch to stretches that children created during several of these engagements.

ENGAGING IN INVESTIGATIONS

These engagements with the arts and literature and with responding through the arts led to a growing interest by children in human rights. They saw prejudice as violating the rights of human beings to live with freedom and dignity and were passionate in examining the connections between prejudice and human rights. These concerns led to several class meetings where we listed the issues that children wanted to investigate in greater depth and the children then broke into small groups based on common interests. One group wanted to look at the ways in which African Americans experience prejudice in modern society because they had previously assumed that prejudice only happened to African Americans long ago. Another group wanted to look at women and girls and gender roles and stereotypes. A third group wanted to focus on American Indians today, particularly tribal nations in Arizona, because they felt that much of what they found in books was about long ago. A fourth group wanted to focus on children, particularly

on the rights of children in relation to the significant adults in their lives, such as their parents. The fifth group focused on the rights of animals and the ways in which people think about and treat animals.

The children decided that they wanted to start with reading and discussing a novel related to their focus as a way for them to form a community through dialogue and to develop some shared understandings and tensions for further research. Literature circles, small group discussions of novels, were a common practice in their classroom and so their choice of these discussions was a way to create a thoughtful and safe environment for them to pursue difficult issues together. For example, the animal rights group read and discussed *Shiloh* (Naylor, 1991), the story of a boy who disobeys his family when he steals and tries to save an abused dog, and the children's rights group read and discussed *Running Out of Time* (Haddix, 1995), a novel

in which parents have chosen a particular lifestyle but have hidden the true nature of their community from their children.

Through their discussions, children moved into dialogue where they engaged in critical inquiry together about issues that emerged from the characters' actions within their novels. As they completed their discussions, they identified the issues related to these rights that they wanted to investigate in their own setting. For example, the children investigating the experience of African Americans today interviewed several African American teachers and their principal as part of their inquiry. Each group found a way to investigate their issues through a range of research strategies and then presented what they had learned to the other groups through murals, charts, dramatic skits, and poetry. Each group had to decide what was most significant about what they had learned through their research and then find a sign system that would allow them to powerfully communicate those insights to others in their classroom.

The presentations of their research, in turn, led to class discussions about what they had learned about prejudice and the kinds of action they wanted to take at school or home. We saw this discussion



as essential to connecting what they explore in school contexts to their actual lived lives. As Barnes (1976) points out, children often separate their school knowledge from their action knowledge and assume that neither informs the other. We wanted to break down this dichotomy. In this case, one of the results of this discussion was the establishment of new classroom processes and structures for responding to problems between students that involved a committee of students to whom other students could bring problems for discussion, listen to the perspectives of those involved, and create options for solving the problem. The final solution was then negotiated between the students and Gloria, as their classroom teacher. The children decided to call this committee of rotating students, the Democracy Committee, because they saw it as reflecting their right to be part of decision-making processes in the classroom.

CREATING TENSION THROUGH THE ARTS WITHIN A DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM

Although the arts are, and should be, the basis for many kinds of experiences within school contexts, our focus here is on the purposeful use of the arts to create tension in challenging students to engage in the observation, reflection, theorization and articulation of difficult social issues (Harste, 2000). Dewey (1938) argues that tension is what drives the learning process in a generative cycle of action and reflection leading to new tensions which, in turn, result in more purposeful action and further reflection.

We value the ways in which the arts and transmediations across the arts provide children with the opportunity to analyze and critique the everyday, to question the taken-for-granted aspects of their lives and world. We want children to realize that their use of sign systems position them as participants in a particular culture; that, with signs come particular attitudes and assumptions about power and privilege that are often invisible and taken as "common sense" knowledge by insiders within that culture. Children can use the arts to critique these assumptions and therefore to reposition themselves in the world (Harste, 2000). This repositioning and critique is essential to democracy as a "system in

which people participate meaningfully without system-derived privilege or prejudice in decisions that affect their lives" (Edelsky, 1994, p. 253).

The arts provide a way for children to slow down their experiences in the world, to create tension in learning, to support reflection, and to encourage a critical re-theorization of the possible. We believe that this critical theorizing and re-theorizing of our everyday experiences and of the possible are essential to creating the critical imagination that is at the heart of democracy. The arts can play a key role in creating classrooms that educate for democracy—for bringing an end to the oppression of privilege and prejudice and for creating an environment in which people have a significant say in the decisions that affect their lives.

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