

Literature Position Statement

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Prior to this course, I would consider “literature” to be part of the subject of reading, and reading to be considered part of language arts. I now see “literature” to be so much more, an area in itself, for my students to study and for me to carefully select and frame as I implement it in the classroom. I see literature to be a teacher in a sense, something that can teach my students lessons and give them life experiences they otherwise would not be able to have. I see literature as something so complex, with hidden meanings, and various possible interpretations that come from our own personal ideas and experiences. Through the use of small group book discussions this semester, it has been made clear to me just how many different connections and interpretations can be made with one single story.

Literature can make anyone a teacher. I could not count if I tried just how many times someone from our class or our group pushed, changed, or challenged my thinking as a result of their thoughtful discussion posts and responses. This showed me that anyone can become a teacher when literature is involved, and when I think about my students discussing pieces of literature in small groups, they, too, can become teachers to each other as my classmates did to me throughout this course. It is clear to me that literature can play a vast role in our lives and our learning, in school and outside of school, and that literature can be an extremely powerful thing.

I have realized that literature can truly bring people together. During our book discussions, group members shared very personal connections and extremely personal life stories, and these were no longer just names on a list to me, but people that opened up and came to life as a result of literature. If I can implement literature in such ways in my own classroom,

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to where my students are coming together and opening about life experiences with each other, than I feel like my role as a teacher has become even more powerful.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.” This is a phrase we hear often, and speak often to students. This is a common theme in books we read and discuss with our students. This is a phrase that can be interpreted literally, as well as to say, that things are not always as they appear to be. I would like to apply this “cliché,” if you will, phrase, to frame how this course has changed me as a reader. Literally, I have learned, that you cannot judge a book by its cover. We learned to read critically, search for hidden meanings and themes, consider various perspectives, carefully study even the simplest pictures, and analyze complex issues as we read such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ideas of childhood and adolescence. We learned there is so much behind the cover of a book that cannot begin to be revealed until we really delve into the text. I will never look at the cover of a picture book again and assume I know everything in regards to what it is about, as I have admittedly done in the past.

One of the most significant takeaways from the course for me had to do with picture books, and learning how to truly read picture books. To me, the illustrations in picture books are no longer “cutesy” pieces of entertainment, but rather works of art with meaning behind them. I have learned the difference between an illustrated book and a picture book, and irony that picture books can portray. Hintz and Tribunella (2013) define a picturebook as, “a narrative or non-narrative book in which words and images form an artistic whole” (p. 160). Matulka (2008) distinguishes between three types of ways that words and images relate in picture books: symmetrical, complementary, and contradictory (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013, p. 166-167). I now read picture books differently than I did just seven weeks ago, I carefully study the illustrations,

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consider the media used, and identify which of the three ways I see the text and images interacting. I look for dramatic irony to help me better understand the complexity of the story, as Hintz and Tribunella (2013) explain, “dramatic irony, establishing a tension between what a character knows or sees and what is presented to the reader” (p. 167). Now that I am aware of the components of a picture book, I want to pass this knowledge onto my students. If I was informed about these components at a younger age as my students will be, I would have been a stronger young reader, and I am truly excited to pass this knowledge onto my students. When I was speaking with a children’s librarian the other day about new picture books, she handed me a wordless picture book and told me she cried when she read it. I took the book home and read it myself. Had she told me this seven weeks ago, I would have not understood how she read a this wordless book to the point where she cried, but now I understand her. I am thankful for this new, fresh perspective that I have developed for picture books.

Since the very first draft of my teaching philosophy, I have always believed and wrote that as an educator, I see my responsibility to be more than presenting subject area content, I feel it is my responsibility to prepare children for the world beyond the classroom. This course helped me realized how I can use literature to do so. Specifically, the idea of building resilience in my students. “Resilience” is defined as the, “ability to bounce back from difficult circumstances and traumatic events” and Hintz and Tribunella (2013) continue, “and therefore to take the disturbing material encountered in books in stride” (p. 428). I have realized we can build resilience, such a foundational aspect of character, in our students through the use of literature. I now see literature as a “safe” way to expose our students to complex and confusing issues and tough experiences and build resilience; what a powerful tool literature can be.

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I am walking away from this course with many clarifications and deeper understandings, but also many, many questions. My questions mainly stem from the ideas of gender and sexuality, and what is appropriate when it comes to my students and these issues. I learned that “the term “gender” refers to the system of culturally specific characteristics and behavior sets such as masculinity, femininity, manhood, and womanhood. Starting with a distinction between sex and gender is important to recognize that the two do not always line up in expected ways” (Hintz and Tribunella, 2013, p. 390). I now realize how much of “gender” is socially constructed and I read even more critically than I once did being aware of this, looking at how gender is represented in literature. I also learned a lot about “sexuality” and what it means, “ “Sexuality” is thus a way of bringing together under one term 1) certain “sexual” practices or acts which may or may not be genital, 2) the biology and physiology of sex/gender and arousal/pleasure, 3) ways of perceiving or conceiving of desire and pleasure (as a matter for art/poetry, or science and medicine; as fixed and inherent or malleable and changing), and 4) ways of naming oneself and others in terms of particular and available identities” (Hintz and Tribunella, 2013, p. 406). During my Independent Reading Project, I approached literature with a heightened awareness about sexuality, and I noticed that it is referenced in some way, even in the slightest, most indirect ways, very frequently. I am left with the questions of, when should children be exposed to these ideas in literature? And what is the appropriate way to do so? Are my students more aware than I think they are? The list of questions could go on.

As I move forward, I will share my strengthened passion interest for children’s and adolescent literature, and deep knowledge with my students and make it a goal to teach in a way that encourages them to build their critical reading skills. I am grateful for the challenging and

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intellectually stimulating experience this class has provided and overall I feel that I am walking away as a better teacher than prior to the course.

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References:

Hintz, Carrie, & Tribunella, Eric, L. 2013. *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical*

Introduction. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.