

Unit 8 – Social Issue Clubs/ Critical Reading Clubs

This unit focuses readers' attention on the characters in their books and their interactions with social issues. By social issues, we mean issues that are more than personal, as in, issues that a character experiences and others as well. These issues are bigger than us and outside of us. A character may struggle to fit in- and that character is not alone. A lot of people struggle to fit in. Poverty is a social issue, and so can be the fear that ones family is falling apart. Homelessness, bullying, homophobia, verbal and physical abuse, racism, issues of body image and peer pressure are also examples of social issues. These are some of the urgent social issues that shape the lives of our students. How beautiful it will be if they learn from books how others deal with these issues. First, this can make students feel less alone. Second, it can give them reasons to read (Alfred Tatum says that particularly for disenfranchised or reluctant readers to keep reading, the curriculum has to answer the question, "How can I live my life every day?"). Thirdly, this work helps children bring more to their books and get more from them.

The purpose of this unit, then, is to teach children to be passionate readers and to be passionate about the world around them. It is unabashedly about teaching towards social justice. Get ready by wearing your passions on your sleeve. All of us know that sometimes, when we read a wonderful book, we find ourselves welling up with a passionate commitment to everything we believe in. Stories remind us that we care very much about justice and injustice, and about living lives of meaning and significance. You will be teaching children to take their books and their lives seriously. You'll need to think, as you prepare, about what books have affected *you* – the choices you make, what kind of person you try to be, the issues you care about – so that you can talk about these books and your life with your students. Which characters, in which stories, gave you new insight into people's experiences?

While this unit invites children to explore and develop their thinking around the social issues that may have gone unnoticed in their books and in their lives up to this point, the unit also encourages children to track and interpret the issues that affect the characters and communities in the books they are reading. Within the small community of their book clubs, readers support one another's efforts to extract lessons that extend beyond any one text. In doing so, we teach readers to leap nimbly from close reading work to empathy to interpretive thinking.

You will undoubtedly find it helpful as you prepare, to also turn to the unit on book clubs in Lucy Calkins', *The Art of Teaching Reading*, and Randy and Katherine Bomer's, *For A Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*. Consider how your readers have been progressing in their independent reading lives and in their book talks for prior book clubs, so that your teaching will be towards their next steps.

If you are using this unit to bolster children's reading skills, then much of their focus will be on engaging with characters and children will have to envision, empathize and infer. It's easiest for readers to look for examples of how a character faces an issue that readers

are told exists in a book (as in, this club is looking for ‘bullying’). It is harder for them to locate an issue and examples in a book (as in, this club is reading this book, and seeing the issues that arise), and it is most complex to locate several issues in a book or across books. So you might make text sets for your more struggling readers, and you might steer your stronger readers to make their own text sets.

Organizing the Books

You’ll want to decide whether you want children to read only chapter books in this unit or whether they will also read a nonfiction article or two, a picture book, and a poem or two. You’ll need to decide how important it is to you that your readers are reading from multiple copies of books. It’s conceivable, though not ideal, that students will read different texts but with a shared lens.

For your more emergent readers, you may need to rally them around an issue for which you have just-right books and give these children a basket of mixed-genre, leveled texts that make an issue visible. For example, you might have a basket of J-K books that demonstrate the pressures people feel to fit in.

We suggest you deliberately make your collections very small—no more than three books and some short texts—so there’s room for children to add to the collections. If you don’t classify the books your children know best, this becomes something they can do, and they’ll see how books can show many issues. You will probably want to have one basket (and one issue) for the whole class to study together through the read-aloud and minilessons. You may choose to convene the class around the same issue that a group of struggling readers will also explore, providing support and lots of dignity for those strugglers.

Getting Started

You may begin the unit by showing children that issues hide within the pages of books they know well. To do so, return to favorite read-aloud books and look for social issues that exist in them. This can lead towards the creation of a chart full of social issues. Many times children will look up at this chart and say, “Wait a minute, ‘having absent parents’ is an issue in this book to! Let me show you.” They’ll also see that the issues in books also thread through their own writing. This also teaches children to empathize with characters who might seem different at first.

At the start, you may choose to focus this work on characters in stories, including the struggles the characters face, how those struggles may be named as social issues, and how they deal with these struggles. This work helps children move away from sequential retelling, and helps them develop one lens for determining importance in a story. Thus, you could teach your young readers that when we read with a lens, first we read for the story, for what happens, and then we read asking, “What does this story teach us about x ?” (with x being homelessness, or bullying, or losing someone, etc.). Children might ask questions such as, “Which issues seem important in this story?” “What are the characters’ reactions to these issues?” “How do the characters deal with these issues?” “What perspective does each character have on this issue?” “If the perspective is different, what explains the difference?” Teach your children to get ready to talk to their book clubs by

putting post-its on moments when they see their characters first facing *x*, then struggling with *x*, then overcoming or not overcoming *x*.

Students who are reading *Amber Brown*, for instance, might read it on the surface level simply as a school story. If they read or reread it though, with the lens of ‘dealing with parents separating,’ then they notice a lot of moments that they may have missed the first time – the way Amber looks through the photograph album of her dad, the way she thinks about him being in Paris, the way she is unsure about her mother dating. None of these events were significant to the main action of the story and so young readers may skip over them. But in order to read more complicated texts, they need to become the kind of readers who pay attention, who can notice and accumulate more complicated character development. In *Amber Brown*, the big school problem may get solved. The longer term, more subtle problems she faces may not – which is common in more complicated, higher level books. Reading with this lens will be an introduction to realizing that books can be about more than one thing at a time, and readers can read for more than plot. It’s not important that the reader notice any single event so much as that the reader realizes that paying close attention to the details in a story, and talking about those details with others, can lead you to a richer understanding. They’ll feel like smarter readers – and they will be!

Your job in this work would be not only to teach students to locate issues in their books, but also to learn to use this lens as a way to extend their reading and conversation. One way to do this would be to find, once you have determined the issues and groups that this text will be addressing, scenes where these issues are glaring. These scenes might be hiding in parts of the text that bother us, that we feel are unfair, or that seem implausible. These “critical scenes” can then be closely read by a book club to try and mine the scene for what the character is going through, how he or she is reacting, and what we might learn about the issue or group that scene seems to be about.

For the first few days of a Critical Reading study, you might want to have readers trying out their critical lenses on a variety of amazing picture books that clearly portray situations of power and oppression. Critical questions, wonderings, and noticings will be easier with these texts and help students solidify in their minds the difference between groups holding power over other groups and individual emotional issues between characters. A list of books that are particularly rich for this study are attached in the additional resources section. One way to scaffold children to think critically about these abstract social issues, is to ask them to think, write and talk about gender or race or class before you read a story that has one of these at the core of the book. For example, you may get children to write or talk about what they think it means to be a boy. How are boys perceived? What pressures do boys have? How do boys think or behave? Then readers could read a book that illustrates this issue, moving between their ideas and the ideas in the story. This will help them spend time thinking about who they are, what they believe and what they care deeply about so they read carrying those lenses. You might also push your children to dig deeper into these issues by asking, “Does the way this story talks about gender (for example) ring true for me?” As they answer this question, they will want to examine why the text reflects or does not reflect their experiences of

these issues. They can question what the values are that this text espouses. This can allow children to move between reading and thinking about the sort of world they want to live in.

One thing that we might avoid is the idea that any given book is “about” any one thing. In addition, to say that we can *only* read texts for issues that create dangerous or dramatic situations like abuse or sexism or homelessness also puts limits on the kinds of interpretations our readers can make and connect to. You will want to avoid teaching that talking about gender or race or class automatically means there is an oppressor and a victim. There is value in interpreting and inferring around these identities without necessarily always trying to find the “problem” or “issue”.

As children become adept at noticing social issues, they’ll often become particularly interested in certain issues. Teach them, as a next step, to come to books with certain lenses – what we might call concerns about social issues. You may find that children can read while searching for places in the text that fit with bullying or homelessness, but struggle when asked to read with the lenses of power, gender, class, values, invisibility, democracy, etc. If so, you can help them understand what these mean by having them write or talk about the issues as they relate to their *own* lives. It is probably best if you demonstrate that each of us is a member of many groups—groups which are determined in part by our gender, race, religion, class, etc., but also by our hobbies, and our professions. We can talk about how a group-identity shapes us. How does your position as, say, a Latina woman, or a fifth grade teacher affect your response to today’s headlines in the newspaper? Ask students to think about what groups *they* belong to and how those groups shape who they are and how they think.

As we read stories with these lenses, it will be important to talk back to the text in our clubs. We might ask each other: Are we okay with how this group is being represented? Does this fit with what we have seen in the world? Is there something the author seems to want us to know about being a member of that group? Does this fit with our lives? What kind of community is this? What causes people to act this way? What would happen if the character’s group was “flipped,” that is, if a girl character was a boy or a poor character rich? Would that change their choices or reactions? What does this say about what we believe?

An Option for 5th Grade: Critical Reading Clubs

If you teach a class of strong 5th grade readers, you might consider directing your students toward critical reading clubs. Critical Reading Clubs ask readers to look past small moments of one character experiencing divorce or bullying to ask if there are larger historical and political forces of power represented in the conflict. While situations like divorce and having an absent parent are terrible, even tragic, emotional and social problems for children, they are not always related to larger systems of oppression by one politically powerful group over another. It is often the case in the rhetoric of “picking oneself up by the bootstraps” that individuals in dire circumstances are blamed for making it or not making it. But the truth is that in this country, individuals who are of color, who are female, who love someone of the same sex, or who speak Spanish as a

first language, or who were born in poverty have much less chance of pulling out of those circumstances than someone who was born into white, heterosexual, middle or upper class privilege. For some of us, this is a difficult reality to admit; yet, as writer James Baldwin reasons, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed unless it is faced.” Educators who teach critical literacy want their students to recognize when systematic oppression is happening in order to name it and speak back to it.

This Unit will also suggest that students can learn how to read critically by recognizing social injustice in books that truly highlight those issues. For example, in a novel like *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, the main characters’ lives intersect in frighteningly close ways with the tragic story of the bombing of the church in Birmingham in 1963, and the death of four little African-American girls. With practice and repetition of critical questions, however, any and all texts can fall under the scrutiny of fairness and justice simply by noticing whether people in stories and photographs have equal chances at happiness, and if not, what forces in society are holding them back from that chance at happiness. You can model this idea by bringing in a magazine ad, for instance, and showing your students that when you looked at it you wondered, “Why does the picture show only young white [heterosexual] couples with two children when it is advertising condos for sale in Cancun, Mexico? What magazine does this ad appear in? Who is the ‘target’ audience for this ad? Who can afford to buy these condos, and why? Why couldn’t some of the people in the ad be persons of color?” Until we question and speak back to the status quo, the “naturalized” and “normalized” ways that texts go, we cannot begin to change the status quo.

In their book, *For A Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*, Randy and Katherine Bomer suggest beginning the work in a different way. They advocate teaching about the major concepts that enable students to think across texts with critical lenses. The most important of these is “Groups.” The Bomers suggest you ask students to make webs, lists, Venn diagrams, or invent their own ways of depicting all the various groups they belong to. You will need to model for them your own groups so that they understand the variety of ways in which people associate with each other. You might, for instance, belong to the following kinds of groups: male/female; Indian, Korean, African-American, Irish-American, Haitian; teacher; piano player; tennis player; over-50; single father; bird owner, etc. Some of the groups seem fixed, such as your race and ethnicity. Others, though, are more diverse and fluid: artists, “extreme sports” fans, coffee drinkers, Stephanie Meyers fans. What makes “groups” a critical concept is when some groups, by virtue of size, wealth, and cultural power, oppress more vulnerable groups and keep the people in them from attaining a healthy, happy life. In our United States culture, females, persons of color, immigrants, and children are just some of the groups that have experienced unequal chances in life at the hands of groups, such as males and Caucasians that have historically held more power and wealth.

Taking this concept to books, articles, poems, songs, photographs, ads, and billboards, readers can ask critical questions, such as, “If the character/subject in this text has problems, can you see how those problems are about having or not having money,

struggling with others for power, or being cheated or helped by society's rules? Eventually, and with practice, readers can bring critical concepts to any book, even the most simple, wondering if people are being treated fairly by each other or by the author. Or they might read any book as a metaphor for critical concepts. For instance, the classic picture book *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni (where the little school of fish forms into one giant fish, with Leo, the only "black" fish, forming its eye, in order to scare the predator fishes) can be read as a metaphor for community organizing and peaceful resistance against a larger, more powerful and life-threatening force. This is a more politically active take on a book that is often used in classrooms to demonstrate acceptance of someone who is "different." In one classroom, a student read the fact that "Swimmy" is black as racism on the part of Lionni, but the other students defended Lionni, saying that the author made the black fish the smartest one—in fact, he is the hero!

Once readers have some understandings about critical concepts, you can have them turn to any texts with those same lenses. This is more difficult, and perhaps not possible for many children as their understandings of how the world operates are naturally naïve and unformed. You can help by practicing yourself looking at anything you read wondering about how hidden and subtle sources of power, race, class, and gender operate in our culture.

At this point, you might decide to have clubs form around a set of texts, including novels, stories, nonfiction articles, poems, and pictures of one historical period. Or you might form groups around a particular lens—power, justice, power, race, class, gender—then turn that lens on whatever texts the group decides to read.

An exciting possibility for doing this work might be to have your students collect their favorite picture books, magazines, comic books, video games, and even movies from home to bring to their Critical Reading club to study with new lenses for social justice issues. One of Katherine Bomer's students once brought an "Archies" comic book in and showed it to his "Women's Rights" book club as an example of sexism. Betty and Veronica were doing all the cooking and waiting on Archie and Reggie as they sat back with their feet up, watching football. "That's how TV and movies always portray males and females," Connor said, "But, in my family, my mom works as an actress all day and my dad cooks all the meals. Why can't you ever see that in a TV commercial or comedy?"

Students like Connor, who are deeply engaged in their reading and thinking about a particular issue, will become fired up and begin to see that issue everywhere in their lives, as well as in their texts. This provides more teaching opportunities; you can help students see their own lives almost as other texts, laid out on the table alongside the texts of other authors. Ultimately, you want students to be able to troubleshoot these issues, understanding their complexities and why they are not so simple to solve. Reading across texts, and looking at their own lives as backdrops to their reading work, will help students see that the issues their characters face have multiple perspectives and multiple causes, some of which are not what they seem.