

“Now I See Them as People”:

Financial Inequity in *Eleanor & Park*

“The part of the book that would talk about Eleanor and her normal feelings that everyone has, and then how poverty would get in the way of them made me feel different [about poverty] because it made me realize poverty affects all aspects of life, especially for teens.”

—Josephine, 10th grade

When Josephine (a pseudonym) was asked to focus on a social justice issue in her 10th-grade honors English course, she chose poverty. To establish context for her capstone participatory action research project, she read *Eleanor & Park* (2015) by Rainbow Rowell, a love story in which the protagonist lives in poverty. A case study of Josephine revealed that reading this book with a critical poverty lens can shift a student’s takeaway, resulting in a potentially significant change in their understanding of this complex topic. Therefore, when I read the editors’ call to consider the implications of financial inequity within young adult literature (YAL) and to discuss how educators can support the critical reading and understanding of wealth and poverty and their role in politics and life, Josephine came to mind. This article considers the pedagogical challenges and possibilities of exploring social issues like economic inequality through YAL in classrooms, especially classrooms in communities where discussion about social issues may be driven by conservative ideologies. Using a sociocultural identity framework coupled with a pragmatic approach, I discuss one student’s reaction to a social-justice-based curriculum anchored by a YAL text.

Sociocultural Literacy and Identity

The purpose of this article is to describe an instructional activity that draws upon Gee’s (2010) situated sociocultural approach to literacy, which argues that literacy is about ways of participating in social and cultural groups and needs to be understood and studied in its full range of contexts. More specifically, I argue that complex participation with literacy instruction both shapes and is shaped by the identity of the reader. Gee (2010) states that a culture does not simply teach members of the group to read and write in specific ways, but also to “act, interact, talk, know, believe, and value” in certain ways as well, ways that “go with” how they write and read (p. 4). Gee (2010) calls this shared communication and understanding “big d Discourse,” while Moje, Lewis, & Enciso (2007) define these groups as discourse communities. As people move through these communities (Moje et al., 2007), or ways of being (Gee, 2015), participation within literacies may affect their sense of identity (Gee, 2001; Holland & Skinner, 2008; Moje et al., 2007; Moje, Giroux, & Muehling, 2017). Gee (2001) defines four aspects within core identity: N = natural identity, which one is born with; I = institutional

identity, which one is assigned; D = discourse identity, which is how one performs in one's culture; and A = affinity group identity, which one relates to through shared experiences. When classroom literacy practices blur the lines between these four aspects of identity, students can experience a complicated sense of identity.

Students bring to the classroom culturally influenced interpretations of what ought to be valued as well as knowledge derived from their social and family networks (Heath, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff,

& Gonzalez, 2009; Street, 1984). This includes ideological perceptions of people both within and outside their own culture, including social class.

Although there has been a great deal of work in the literacy field related to race (Akom, 2009; Brayboy, 2005; Thomas, 2015) and gender (Alvermann, 2009; Connors, 2016; Simmons, 2012), there has been little that specifically focuses on social class and literacy

(Finn, 2009; Jones, 2013; Payne-Bourcy & Chandler-Olcott, 2003; Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2012). This may be in part because social class is less visible and more difficult to define than other cultural classifications (Thein et al., 2012). If, however, we are to heed the call to “support efforts by educators to teach about social injustice and discrimination in all its forms with regard to differences in . . . socioeconomic circumstance” (NCTE, 2010), it is critical that English language arts (ELA) educators consider the ways they choose texts and construct curricula in order to value a more diverse range of cultures, including social class, than is traditionally presented in the classroom.

Why YAL- and Activist-Oriented Curricula?

While much of our current ELA instruction focuses on standards-based strategies and skills, we can encourage students' self-discovery and future growth needed to explore difficult social issues, such as financial

inequity, by using discussion-based learning with engaging literature (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Hayn, Layton, Nolen, & Olvey, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lesesne, 2007). Hayn, Layton, et al. (2016) call upon classroom teachers to develop curriculum based “on the concept that YAL has much to offer in improving and enhancing literacy skills” (p. 14). This idea is furthered by Ivey & Johnston (2013) when they write that “engaged reading offers the possibility of expanding the capacity for social imagination in the reader's own life, potentially changing readers' social behavior” (p. 257). This change in behavior may be attributed to increased levels of empathy, which can be positively attributed to narrative fiction (Alsup, 2015). Conceptually, the use of narrative YAL coupled with discussion-based learning can open the door for students to begin thinking about social justice issues.

When considering financial inequity, it is more critical than ever that we work on nurturing the empathetic reactions that young people have in response to people living in poverty. As Hill & Darragh (2012) discuss, poverty-based discussion is often divisive. The Reagan-era image of the welfare queen is pervasive, as reflected, for example, in US Senator Orrin G. Hatch's recent statement about “people who won't help themselves, won't lift a finger and expect the federal government to do everything” (Black & Sprague, 2017). The need for further discussion is exemplified by the choice of *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* (Edin & Shaefer, 2015) as the 2017 One Book Bakersfield. The book is being read at the local university as well as in Kern County High Schools and may begin to answer Hill and Darragh's (2012) call to “foster sensitive, constructive conversations on an issue that will not begin to go away until we have such discussions” (p. 86).

YAL is particularly well suited to initiate these sensitive conversations. When students identify with characters or situations portrayed in YAL, they may be able to extend those connections to their own lives, or at least begin asking questions about their own perceptions (Alsup, 2015; Alsup & Miller, 2014; Glenn, Ginsberg, Gaffey, Lund, & Meagher, 2012; Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2011). Additionally, as students use novels as entry points to discuss the politics of daily life and ultimately move toward action and social justice, they must think critically about the literature they are reading, which allows them to question both

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their own and the characters' identity (Freire, 2005; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). In our increasingly fragmented society, I believe the ability to think critically and the need to develop empathy for others must become our clarion call as educators. The use of YAL and activist-oriented curricula may be one way to move toward this goal. In the next section, I describe a curriculum and activist-oriented approach one teacher took and my methodology for researching the potential impact of such an approach.

What Does This Look Like?

Curriculum

The classroom teacher and I co-created a curriculum that adopted a critical literacy approach, defined by Lewison et al. (2002) as "(1) disrupting the commonplace; (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 383). Students in this class selected a social justice issue from a list of ten topics paired with young adult novels that touched upon or focused upon each issue. As Connors and Rish (2015) state, YAL may perpetuate ideologies situating teachers as power brokers. Providing students with choice was intended to partially alleviate that issue. Additionally, the student-centered curriculum of literature circles (Daniels, 2006) and individualized research distributed power within the classroom.

Prior to reading, the students watched Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," to begin the work of disrupting the commonplace and interrogating multiple viewpoints. Students wrote in their online journals as a way of engaging with the TED talk before beginning to delve into their chosen social justice issue and novel. While reading the novel in literature circles of 3-5 people, students researched the social justice issue and identified an outside person or organization that was trying to solve the problem. Additionally, students responded to journal prompts each day while they were reading their novels. They had four weeks' worth of repeating entries, as follows:

Monday: What character do you most identify with?

Tuesday: What emotions did you feel reading this section?

Wednesday: What aspect of this portion of the novel do you feel was most significant?

Thursday: How do you feel the book is portraying social injustice?

Friday: What would you do to solve your issue if you had all the power in the world?

After reading the novel and conducting the research, including contacting the person or organization they had identified, students were asked to develop and implement an action plan that addressed the social justice issue on which they were focused. The students had a great deal of latitude in developing and implementing these final projects, which resulted in various commitment levels to action. For example, some students chose to use social media to spread awareness among their peers at their school, while other students started clubs on campus or wrote letters to powerful, local, relevant authorities.

Methodology

RESEARCH PURPOSE, CONTEXT, AND PARTICIPANTS

This project's overarching goal was to identify how YAL influenced students' relationship with social justice issues. Specifically, the research explored a) the power of the novel as a source of knowledge, b) factors that impact students' reading experiences, c) the interactions students had with the texts in terms of their identification with the characters or issues, and d) their approach to taking action regarding social justice issues.

DATA COLLECTION

The data collected included ethnographic observations, journal responses, literature circle recordings, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. The project began immediately after Labor Day and continued until the semester was finished. The interviews occurred after students finished their novels. The interviews were transcribed, and all written material was initially coded (Saldaña, 2013) using NVivo. Utilizing the lens of sociocultural theory (Moje

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et al., 2007) and identity (Beach, Johnston, & Thein, 2015; Gee, 2001; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016), I looked for patterns throughout the data. The following section discusses Josephine, whose story addresses financial inequity.

Poverty and *Eleanor & Park*

In Rainbow Rowell's (2015) *Eleanor & Park*, Eleanor is an awkwardly dressed teenager who is desperately poor and made fun of at school. She meets Park on the bus on her first day, and after a rocky start, a romance blossoms. Eleanor has recently returned to live with her mother and abusive stepfather, Richie, after being kicked out for a year, and Richie continues to terrorize the family. Throughout Eleanor and Park's romance, Eleanor tries to hide the reality of her home life from Park and ultimately tries to keep Park at arm's length so he won't discover the depth of her struggles.

While Rowell writes a beautiful love story, the nature of Eleanor's financial life looms over their futures and ultimately dooms this budding romance. The overwhelming poverty that Eleanor experiences removes most options that would allow for Eleanor and Park's relationship to continue.

While *Eleanor & Park* is typically billed as a romance, I have learned that taking a critical literacy approach and using a critical poverty lens to read this piece exposes a much darker component of the novel. The students who read this novel were asked to notice the ways that poverty was portrayed and to consider how they might potentially attempt to solve this social issue. Foregrounding this reading with a critical lens allowed Josephine, the student subject of this article, to "creat[e] and re-creat[e] fresh and unrehearsed opportunities to make discoveries about texts, about language, about the world, and about themselves" (Appleman, 2007). In a follow-up email, Josephine wrote that she saw poverty differently after reading "the part . . . that would talk about Eleanor and her

normal feelings that everyone has, and then how poverty would get in the way of them." She explained that "[this part] made me feel different because it made me realize poverty affects all aspects of life, especially for teens." In essence, Josephine recreated her understanding of poverty through the text.

Josephine's humanization of someone in poverty through her self-identification may demonstrate learning through self-discovery, which may ultimately lead to future growth. The following discussion explores Josephine's experiences and perspective changes throughout the course of reading the novel.

Can We Change the Single Story?

Josephine began this unit plan prepared to consider that her understanding of reality might be limited by her experience, as demonstrated by her reflection on Adichie's TED talk (referenced earlier). Josephine wrote:

Chimamanda warns her audience that a single story can create stereotypes[.] That may be true, but incomplete. She warns that single stories can take away people's dignity and provide false representations of certain places or people. Her warning affected me greatly because I realized that for some things I only know a single story. She was not having a pity party for her or any other race, but she was saying how sometimes people's views on others are incorrect. She was not fighting for rights or against racism, but she was fighting against assumptions, stereotypes, and only knowing a single story. Her warning has the chance to make people realize that they can't assume things based off of one story. It has the chance to change people's point of views and make everyone realize that not everyone is the same. I believe Chimamanda is sending out the right message, and I, along with many others, can learn from her words. Although, a single story is sometimes all we are told, it is not all that there is.

Josephine's willingness to see multiple perspectives to a story was critical as she entered this unit that exposed her to ideas that contradicted her understanding of the way things are.

Josephine identified herself as a Republican and wrote in her journal that she agreed with the party's "views on welfare [and] so think[s] charities are doing just fine." When asked about her reasoning for choosing poverty as her social justice issue, she responded with the following ideas in her journal:

I picked poverty as an issue because it seems to be the least controversial, meaning I had little chance of disagreeing

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with the point the author would be trying to get across. For example, I disagree with a lot of feminist views, not because I don't believe in gender equality, but I disagree with what feminists are fighting for. Choosing a book that I had a chance of disagreeing with would have made it possible for me to just get frustrated with it and not learn anything. With poverty, I found that I agree with most of what people argue for. I disagree with certain aspects, but I assumed they wouldn't be included in an English class.

This passage suggests that Josephine had a strong belief system and didn't expect or want to be challenged within an English class. Gee (2001) writes that "when a human being acts within a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain kind of 'person'" (p. 99). Josephine's institutional identity was that of a "good student," yet she experienced tension between her discourse identity at home and her affinity identity with the protagonist. This tension between the sociocultural values of home and those she was exposed to through the curriculum are interesting to observe.

I See Them as People Now

To me, the most powerful moment within this study was when I asked Josephine if the novel had changed the way she thinks or the way she feels about the issue. She responded by saying, "It's kind of weird because it changed the way I think and feel about specific individuals who struggle with poverty, but in general, like the overview of poverty, I kind of have the same idea of it, but I just look at individuals kind of different." When I asked her to clarify, her statement was, "I see them . . . as . . . I see them as . . . this sounds awful, but I see them more as like people now." The guiding factor in this shift can be attributed directly to her initial self-identification with the novel's protagonist.

While reading the novel, Josephine initially identified with the protagonist, Eleanor. In our one-on-one interview, Josephine told me that she also dressed oddly as a middle-schooler and that she could relate to Eleanor's experience as a new student who just did not quite fit in. She stated, "I did identify with Eleanor because in seventh and eighth grade, I had just moved here. I didn't know anyone and I have an interesting fashion sense, to say the least." Josephine also related the following story to me during our interviews:

I remember in seventh grade on the first day, I was so nervous for lunch that my plan was actually to sit by the

garbage can so no one would sit with me, and I remember I walked so fast after my last class to get to lunch so I could sit at an empty table. [That way,] if people sat there that was your choice, but they wouldn't be upset with me because I'd be there first.

Josephine's connection to the main character did not continue once the issue of poverty became more critical to the plot line. Her initial empathy for Eleanor conflicted with her more general thoughts on the poor, which tended more toward a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mindset. The following excerpt from our interview, which was conducted after she finished reading the novel, explains some of her attitudes and ideas concerning people who deal with poverty:

So I think I can do things to help, but I can't stop . . . No one can stop poverty. That's what I think. Me and my parents don't like to give money to the people because we never know if they're being honest. We've done that before and it just goes bad, but you can give water bottles, food, and stuff. I feel like, especially with people on the side of the road, I'm confused because there's homeless shelters and stuff, so I don't know what to do about that type of thing. There's little things you can do though. If I had a business or something, I'd offer them jobs, but I don't have a business.

This statement highlights two important ideas. First, Josephine stated that no one can stop poverty. Since a key component of the unit is to develop an action plan to address the social justice issue the student chose, Josephine's belief that no solution is possible naturally hampered her ability to complete the unit. Students who choose complex issues like poverty may need the teacher's or fellow students' help in identifying less daunting components of the issue to enable them to develop an effective action plan. Second, Josephine's comment about the honesty of people asking for help highlights the conflict between her empathy for Eleanor and her perception of real people in poverty. Josephine didn't provide more details about her family's experience with giving money and "it just goes bad," but her past experience and her concern that people may be dishonest added to the difficulty of coming up with an effective action plan by ruling out the idea of giving money directly to people in need.

Transfer

While Josephine recognized that people who were poor did behave like "actual people" during the time she was reading the book and immediately after, when Josephine considered homeless people as a

component of her social justice issue, she did not extrapolate those initial feelings and apply them to the individuals she saw on the street. She acknowledged that there was a difference in how she viewed this: “It’s kind of weird because it changed the way I think and feel about specific individuals who struggle with poverty, but in general, the overview of poverty,

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I kind of have the same idea of it. I just look at the individuals kind of different.” Her surprise and dissonance, which she described as “weird,” may have come from her sense of affinity with the protagonist in her role as an awkward high school student. In her one-on-one interview, Josephine stated, “I just saw her as a person because she was the main character in the story and it was like, ‘Oh, that probably stinks.’”

Additionally, during the same interview, Josephine claimed, “At this school, there’s poverty here, but nothing bad.”

This is an interesting choice of words. Had she said “that bad,” it might have indicated that Josephine believed classmates living in poverty weren’t as bad off as Eleanor, but Josephine did not qualify her statement. She simply said the poverty experienced at the school was not bad. While the school is located in a middle-income area and is not a Title 1 school, it is not a wealthy school. My conversations with other students in the class regarding the novels they had chosen revealed that there was indeed real poverty at the school, as evidenced through revelations that some students were living with more than 10 people in a house with three rooms. One might imagine such a circumstance would qualify as “bad” to someone with Josephine’s upbringing, but I did not question her further on this statement.

In reflecting upon her interview response and comparing it with her journal responses, we see a

correlation between who she knows and what she believes as well. In her journal response, she wrote, “The few kids I have met that are poor have been rude and nasty to me, so I never really sympathized.” As a result of these negative interactions, Josephine had not had an opportunity to truly get to know someone who suffered from significant poverty and was unable to develop a nuanced understanding of poverty within her community. Josephine had the ability to rely on her sociocultural understanding of what it means to be an awkward teen, which allowed her to identify with Eleanor, but her cultural experiences around poverty didn’t allow her to fully identify with the protagonist.

Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

In a conversation with her teacher, Josephine said that “her political views don’t allow her to try to fix poverty, but she wants to shift the perception of poverty.” Her experience with this book created productive discomfort due to her political stance and the issues that the book portrayed quite realistically. Through her reading, she came to care about these characters, yet her political beliefs, which likely influence her sense of identity (Gee, 2001, 2015), make it difficult for her to consider ways to take action to attempt to solve this issue.

Josephine experienced conflict when considering an action plan, as shown through her ongoing journal entries and interviews. Her feelings toward and lack of awareness about poverty as well as her perception of the government’s role in our lives ran counter to her newfound empathy for Eleanor. This conflict is apparent in the following excerpts. Josephine’s original plan was to hire people on the street to perform work that volunteers would typically do. When I asked her to clarify what types of jobs she meant and how it would work she said:

Just easy things like cleaning up the community and stuff, but, if you provided, . . . you could get homeless shelters and whatever, you could get them involved so they could let people know, and then you could get the company to fund it. I think that’s going to be the hardest thing, because I don’t know. It would be good for a company’s name but I don’t know if they’d actually want to give that much money.

Her original intent was to start her own fictional company that would fund this work. When I asked her how she would make this work financially, her

response was, “I don’t want to get money from taxes. I don’t want that.” This adamant refusal to try to get money from the government gives us a sense of the importance of self-reliance that is a part of her sociocultural understanding of society. She reiterated this belief several times while we discussed how she might achieve her goal of creating productive yet attainable employment for people in poverty. A different student might have planned to help people in poverty by informing them about available services, assisting them with accessing government assistance, advocating to government officials for policy changes to address poverty, or even raising money for direct assistance. Because of her sociocultural beliefs, however, none of these options were tenable for Josephine’s action plan.

Her initial plan to help homeless people was to create a documentary, with the intention of changing people’s perceptions of homelessness. Eventually, she came to see that as unrealistic in our one-semester timeframe, so she decided to write a book instead, although that was an equally daunting project in the course of a semester. She had also concluded that the only people who could be helped might be young adults or children. In the focus group interview, she stated:

After that . . . I was going through and I was researching [how] to start the program, and I kept coming across statistics. It said that more children were struggling with poverty than adults, so I kind of changed my mind. I’d rather focus on children, and usually when adults are stuck in poverty, they just don’t want to change their lifestyle. So it’s easier to get to children. Then I was going to write a research paper and then put it places, but I just changed it to writing a book, and I’m still working on it.

The statement that adults “just don’t want to change their lifestyle” is again indicative of the internal discomfort she experienced. Her word choice indicates the rationalization and justification she was making to maintain her view of homeless people or those in poverty. When one considers the reality that, according to the Arizona Department of Economic Security’s (Wareing, 2007) report, 24.2% of homeless individuals are dealing with mental illness and 23% of the homeless population are veterans, Josephine’s ideology becomes complicated; it is this information that may be missing from Josephine’s inclusive experience. Additionally, her statement that adults don’t want to change their lifestyle seems contradictory to her earlier statement

that she wanted to “shift the perception of poverty.” Josephine appears to be grappling with several ideological tensions, which may have paralyzed her ability to imagine an action plan and carry it out. Ultimately, a student’s sociocultural identity may significantly impact the student’s ability to follow through on an action plan.

How Can YAL Affect Perspective?

While Josephine’s social perception of poverty is likely to remain a part of her core identity, in her final reflection on the novel, she indicates the power of YAL in her perspective change. She wrote:

My feelings changed slightly, *only because of the book I read* [emphasis added]. I’ve never been really close to poverty, and I definitely never have been inside someone’s head that lives in poverty, like Eleanor. . . . All I used to think is having a hard life makes you mean, but now I know what it really can be like.

The powerful impact of “being inside someone’s head” is further explored through her earlier discussion of her action plan, in which she writes:

People need to change their mindset on poverty and start thinking of those who live in it as people just like everyone else, instead of outcasts. In my documentary, I want to go to soup kitchens or shelters, and maybe a church, to ask about their stories on poverty. I think people’s individual stories will make others realize just how similar we are. Just because they didn’t get dealt a great hand doesn’t make them so different from anyone else.

These written responses speak to the potential of YAL to shift sociocultural understandings. Josephine began this unit with a clearly entrenched sense of poverty, yet this novel simultaneously disrupted and affirmed those beliefs. In considering the differing aspects of identity delineated by Gee (2001), we might be able to understand how these competing ideas can co-exist for Josephine. What is important is that Josephine’s previously held notions were challenged, and she was able to consider a new perspec-

What is important is that Josephine’s previously held notions were challenged, and she was able to consider a new perspective through this approach to YAL.

tive through this approach to YAL. Helping a reader to “get inside someone’s head” is a unique feature of engaging narrative literature. It is my hope that Josephine’s productive discomfort and empathy will continue to manifest itself in her future encounters with people in poverty.

Success or Failure?

While Josephine identified quite strongly with the novel in the beginning, her ability to empathize and connect with the protagonist shifted as the realities presented in the novel began to conflict with her personal world view. The cognitive dissonance that Josephine experienced through reading this perspective on poverty created a sense of paralysis for her in that it did not allow her to identify a feasible action plan to address poverty and prevented her from making significant strides in her goal of raising awareness surrounding poverty. Her inability to complete the action plan does not mean that the curriculum was not successful, however.

Josephine complained about the limited time (one semester) the students had to complete this curriculum. When questioned about the effectiveness of the curriculum and whether or not she agreed that the teacher should continue with this curriculum, she said, “I do agree. I wish I didn’t, but I think she should do it again. I just think there’s people who tried really hard to go all out, and they didn’t get it done, like me.” This statement brought up some interesting questions. I wonder how she defined “going all out.” Would it have meant generating a different plan to solve poverty issues, or would it have been more along the lines of finishing the writing of her book? I also wonder why she chose to focus on writing a book. Technically, it was the novel that changed her perception of the issue, so perhaps she wanted to share and spread that understanding with others. Or

perhaps creating her book would have allowed her to process her own thoughts on the issue in a productive manner.

In considering Gee’s (2001) identity framework, this novel created conflict between Josephine’s institution identity as an honors student, her discourse identity as a member participating in her family’s discourse of poverty, and her own affinity identity with Eleanor as the main character of the novel. The sheer complexity of these three competing ideologies may have been the root cause of her inability to create an action plan. In the end, her action plan may have been more self-reflective than activist-oriented, although this result could have had more long-term effects on her individual growth.

Classroom Recommendations

One of the most important aspects of this research is the way that the novel facilitated perspective taking. Part of the power of *Eleanor & Park* is the fact that the novel is not entirely focused on poverty. Since the dominant theme of the novel centers on an awkward love story, students who may hold a similar perspective to poverty as Josephine are less likely to erect barriers to the content right away. It was this sense of affinity with the protagonist that allowed Josephine to be comfortable with discussing a serious social issue despite the fact that it generated ideological tensions for her. Additionally, the fact that poverty ultimately resulted in the destruction of the characters’ relationship demonstrates the significant hardships of poverty beyond food and shelter, which introduces a broader societal context of which students may not be aware. Choosing a novel that takes an indirect approach to a difficult social justice issue may allow students to consider the more human aspects of the issue in ways that do not contradict their sociocultural ways of being.

Teachers may be hesitant to discuss politics and policies that directly impact people of various socio-economic statuses within their classroom. Because Rowell’s depiction of poverty is not the primary focus of the novel, however, and since students have the power to consider what they might do to address this social ill, readers may feel more comfortable thinking about financial inequity in ways that move beyond welfare and social handouts. The freedom to consider other aspects of poverty may allow more reticent

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students to develop independent opinions about the topic, which may lead to rich discussion. I recommend that teachers provide opportunities to discuss the nuances and impacts of poverty beyond food and shelter. Adopting a critical literacy approach (Lewison et al., 2002) to the reading of this novel also allows students to reflect upon their own belief system. The approach Rowell takes to storytelling may not be appealing for all students, however, and I recommend that educators explore Karen Jensen's (2014) Teen Librarian Toolbox and review the detailed discussion and extensive list of other YA novels that address various perspectives on poverty.

Teachers who implement this curriculum will find that not all students come to the same understanding of financial inequity, even if they all read the same book, particularly after considering the various identities that students maintain. Those students who have some prior understanding or experience with financial inequity are likely to respond differently to this novel and, based upon my study with other students, be more able to take action and move to the fourth step of Lewison et al.'s (2002) critical literacy approach. Having a sense of students' identities will allow the educator to evaluate the success of this work in the classroom.

Students will need support in identifying bite-size pieces of significant social issues such as poverty on which to take action. Had Josephine had more support, her action plan may have been more concretely developed, which may have positively impacted her sense of agency. It would have been useful to have her explore different effects of poverty on young people and consider ways to address those instead of poverty as a whole.

While Josephine experienced important ideological shifts through her self-identification with Eleanor, it is unlikely that all students will experience this same level of understanding. While Josephine's response immediately after reading the novel was that she saw individuals in poverty "as people now," her responses to interview questions a few weeks later indicate that this humanization did not transfer to all individuals (i.e., adults) in poverty. While her return to her earlier-expressed sociocultural understandings of poverty was somewhat disheartening for me, the knowledge that her perceptions about poverty had been disrupted is important. I do believe that it might

have been possible to capitalize on Josephine's initial identification with Eleanor if we had managed to help her think about Eleanor's future as a runaway. If we had been able to think through the trajectory that Eleanor was most likely on at the end of the novel together, Josephine may have come to develop a more complex view of adults in poverty. Again, considering various identities in the classroom can allow educators to support their students as they grapple with ideas and concepts that may contradict their worldview.

While conducting this study, I was asked whether the classroom teacher and I had had any pushback from students because we focused on social justice issues. The answer is no. I believe this had to do with the teacher's willingness to accept multiple interpretations or readings of the novels, the introduction

of intersectionality through Adichie's TED talk, and the wide choice that students had in both their topic of study (beyond financial inequity) and the design of their final action plan. The opportunity to allow students to experience different narratives without having an expectation about what students were to produce after reading may have encouraged wider perspectives than may have happened in a more traditional unit with predetermined outcomes for a novel reading.

That being said, the teacher has an important role in this curriculum. The teacher is a critical sounding board and mentor throughout the project. It is important to lay the groundwork of multiple stories as shown by Adichie's single-story message. Additionally, there should be checkpoints throughout the process that could include reading journals, project-management logs, small-group conferences with the teacher, and full-class presentations. The teacher should be prepared to offer suggestions for action plans to support students' work, especially if they intend to take it out of the classroom. Implementing this curriculum is difficult in some ways, but truly rewarding. As the teacher from this study wrote in a follow-up email message to me, "[The curriculum] really

[C]onsidering various identities in the classroom can allow educators to support their students as they grapple with ideas and concepts that may contradict their worldview.

opened my eyes to a whole new level of teaching and making it meaningful for students, which connects to my own teaching philosophy . . . ‘educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.’”

Conclusion

Langer (2013) presents the idea that engaging literature might tap into differing cognitive functions necessary for intellectual development. Additionally, Ivey & Johnston (2013) write that “engaged reading offers the possibility of expanding the capacity for social imagination in the reader’s own life, potentially changing readers’ social behavior” (p. 257). I would argue that these concepts were borne out by this research, as demonstrated by Josephine, who came to identify those who suffer from poverty “as people.” This curriculum showed how at least one student developed a more nuanced understanding of poverty through reading engaging literature, as Hill & Darragh (2012) suggest is possible.

Wolk (2009) writes that in a social-activist-oriented curriculum, “the process becomes part of the content” (p. 666). In order to generate the type of empathetic thinking necessary for social action (Alsup, 2013, 2015; Ames, 2013), the process was as important as, if not more important than, the final project, as demonstrated by Josephine’s thinking. This curriculum followed the guidelines suggested by researchers, including Glenn et al. (2012), Stover and Bach (2011), and Glasgow (2001), in that Josephine had a choice in selecting her social justice issue; she paid explicit attention to the interplay between the issue, the text, and her own life through critical reading; and she researched resources from activist-based organizations. This lengthy and interwoven process allowed Josephine to move beyond reading the novel as a separate piece and then completing an isolated activity. Instead, the novel became one component embedded into a larger, blended unit designed to generate social responsibility, although her final move to action was difficult to achieve.

While addressing poverty and financial inequity may feel apart from the scope of the ELA teacher, as Jones (2013), Finn (2009), and Thein et al. (2012) report, not enough is being done to address social class in schools. This study shows the ways that educators can begin to break down the walls between people who have differing experiences of human-

ity. Josephine’s years of experiences have led her to define poor people as “other,” but reading this novel allowed her to break down the perception she has of an entire class of people in the course of a few weeks. If, as ELA teachers, we expect to contribute to a better future society where all people, regardless of social class, are valued, it is this type of work that must continue in classrooms.

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