A Socially Inclusive Pedagogy: One Teacher’s Approach to a Novel Study

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Introduction

“Has there ever been a time when the world was at peace and not in conflict?” Rashad’s voice quivers as he asks the question in front of his peers who are gathered around the table. An inquisitive student, Rashad (pseudonym) asks the question during a discussion on world conflict. His teacher, Mary Mayne uses historical fiction to explore issues of politics, social justice, and power in relation to race, class and gender with a group of fifth and sixth grade students in one of Toronto’s largest elementary, inner city schools. As I observed the teaching and learning in this particular classroom, I began to understand how historical fiction, as a text for novel study, can be used to foster a sense of belonging for students. More so, I recognized how the teacher in this case thoughtfully used Canadian historical fiction as a way to draw social and personal connections to students’ lives.

The conversations and lessons stemming from this novel study appeared to foster a sense of inclusion for students. That is, students were engaged in the learning process. They were participating in the lessons and sharing ideas; they were thinking about issues of social justice and making connections to their personal contexts.

I wanted to understand how a teacher fosters social inclusion in her classroom through literacy practices because social inclusion is believed to enhance learning. When students feel included they may be more involved in the learning process and therefore more apt to succeed in school (Banks, 1997; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994; Payle, 1992). I chose to study the pedagogy of a teacher whose classroom was situated in the inner city because of the nature of issues that are often associated with inner city schooling; issues related to poverty, language and race. These issues surround power, marginalization and exclusion (Dei, 2000; Kincheloe, 2007). Researchers have conceptualized forms of socially inclusive pedagogy and have described how teachers should implement such practices for students who experience forms of exclusion – often students in inner city schools (Au & Jordan, 1981; Gay, 2000; Henry, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nawang, 1998).

This article extends the research examining socially inclusive pedagogy. I build on these educational theorists’ work on socially inclusive pedagogy by exploring how an urban teacher weaves these pedagogical philosophies into daily practice. I examined socially inclusive pedagogy with the following research questions in mind: (1) How does a teacher in an urban, inner city school foster social inclusion in her classrooms? (2) What teaching methods are preferred when trying to foster social inclusion in the literacy curriculum?

For one school year I observed my colleague Mary Mayne, a fifth and sixth grade, special education teacher, skillfully integrate socially inclusive pedagogy into her literacy program. In the remainder of this article, I define socially inclusive pedagogy and then reflect on Mary’s literacy practice and describe and discuss the ways in which it fostered social inclusion.
Socially Inclusive Pedagogy

Socially inclusive pedagogy, in this case, refers to teacher practices in literacy that foster a sense of belonging for students within the classroom. Teacher practices could take a variety of forms, such as oral instructions, interpersonal approaches, lesson designs, assigned activities, any of which lead to social inclusion among students. The goals of this pedagogy are to increase student engagement and learning through the fostering of inclusion. Teachers interested in socially inclusive pedagogy are interested in student involvement and participation. They are interested in having students engage in the material they are learning about and contributing to it in some way. What does it look like? I looked for students engaged in the lessons – through oral contributions, written expressions, forms of participation and social interactions. I looked for student learning – the contributions made in the discussions, the connections that were made to the content being taught and the overall nature of the work that was produced. Socially inclusive pedagogy is important to student learning. This paper shows what socially inclusive pedagogy looks like in one teacher’s classroom.

Methods

I used a qualitative case study approach to study a teacher’s socially inclusive pedagogical practices in an inner city elementary school. I chose a qualitative approach because I wanted to discover the processes, nuances, and details of daily classroom practice directly from one teacher, in order to make better sense of her socially inclusive literacy pedagogy. Data were collected through extensive observations, in-depth interviews, documents and reflective field notes. The criteria for selecting the participant were:

1. Recognized as thoughtful of social inclusion in their literacy program
   Articulate about her practices
2. Pro-active, trying to maintain her good practices
3. Willing to share their classroom and time with me for the purposes of this study

Mary Mayne was a teacher who showed interest in the study. We met and spoke informally about the nature of the study and the topic of socially inclusive pedagogy. She has taught for several years both in the urban Canadian context and in the inner city of London, England, at the elementary school level. Her experiences in schools and her interest in social justice permeate her literacy program. She is a writer and author herself, and she is interested in learning more about socially inclusive pedagogy. I spent five weeks in Ms. Mayne’s classroom and interviewed her three times in order to capture the nuances and essence of her socially inclusive teaching practices.

Mary Mayne was the resource teacher for the fifth and sixth grade division. Students from the four grade 5 and 6 classes came to her class for instruction. Her reading groups consisted of six identified special education students per group. These students, like most students in the school, are mostly visible minority students. The students at the school come from a variety of backgrounds and mostly from Africa or South East Asia. The school in which she teaches is identified as high level needs in the school board and receives extra funding to support several in-school and community
based programs. “High level needs” is determined by the community’s socio-economic status and the school’s academic achievement levels. The school is located in the downtown area in one of the most densely populated housing communities in Canada. Issues of poverty are prevalent within this community and it is not unusual for students to enter school hungry.

To conduct the data analysis, I read over and analyzed the observation notes and interview transcripts, looking for patterns and themes that demonstrated socially inclusive pedagogy.

Discussion of Results

The following vignettes are pieces from my research that stand out as particularly strong examples of what teachers should expect to see when using socially inclusive pedagogy.

Exploring Point of View

Ms. Mayne used critical-multicultural analysis to generate class discussion that was meaningful to students. Critical multicultural analysis investigates multicultural texts in critical ways and considers how power and inequities affect and influence issues of race, gender, class.

Students reading Joy Kogawa’s (2005) Naomi’s Road, a children’s novel about a Japanese-Canadian family sent to internment camps in British Columbia during World War II, explored issues of social justice and discuss what the issues mean to them. Students considered power relations that existed in relation to race, class and gender in the narrative’s context. As Harada (1998) points out, “This particular segment of history is a crucial slice of ethnic experience... not only for Japanese Americans, who were profoundly affected by their incarceration, but for all groups wrestling with issues of human rights and problems of ethnic identity” (p. 21).

As a way to explore point of view in the text, the teacher created a chart for the students and led a discussion. The chart was divided into three columns: Wanted – But - So. She asked students to think about the different points of view and to fill in the chart. Students had an easy time discussing the point of view of the Japanese Canadians possibly because Naomi’s voice (the main character in the novel) is heard in the text and the experiences and actions of her family are explicit.

The students wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese Canadians</th>
<th>Wanted…</th>
<th>But…</th>
<th>So…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the Japanese Canadians wanted their families to stay together</td>
<td>the war happened and they lost their homes</td>
<td>many Japanese-Canadians died and experienced a lot of tragedy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wanted to keep their homes</td>
<td>the families were separated</td>
<td>many felt sad that they were treated so badly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wanted a peaceful existence</td>
<td>they were sent to internment camps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wanted respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After identifying key points of the text, Mary Mayne had students think about “the need for basic necessities and rights and freedoms.” Some children reflected and shared information from their personal experiences of being refugees and immigrating to Canada while others offered an empathetic perspective. A student shared that what the Japanese Canadians wanted was similar to what most families in Canada want… and what his family wants. Another student asked, “But you’ve got that don’t you?” and the first student replied, “I guess so… but even though there is no war, sometimes I feel sad.” When prompted, he explained, “I feel sad because sometimes I feel treated badly.” Mary often acknowledged and thanked students for sharing their thoughts and moved the conversation to discuss ways of feeling better about situations.

This example of socially inclusive pedagogy is significant because it demonstrates how students can be engaged in their learning – the content is rich and yet the teacher allows it to be relevant to their lives by drawing in the connections. Information from the text is taken and examined by the students and then interpreted in ways that are relevant to them. I recognized this as socially inclusive because Mary emphasized student voice and self expression as part of the meaning making of the text and she validated the connections they made.

Classroom Conversation and Social Inclusion

There are several cultural themes embedded in the text, including nationality, global conflict, racism, and family structure. In terms of nationality, the text is filled with juxtaposed images of culture and what it means to identify with a place. At the beginning of the story, readers are introduced to a middle class Japanese Canadian family. Naomi is dressed in a “nemaki” (nightgown) and her voice is “yasashi”. Japanese words heighten the sense of Japanese culture in the home. The mother tells traditional Japanese stories as she puts her children to bed. The family spends the day at the beach and they do things that seem to cross cultural lines “sitting on their blanket on the grass, listening to the music of the world” (p. 18). Then images are juxtaposed with traditional western images: “Christmas and singing carols and riding up and down on the escalator in Woodward’s Department Store. In the store windows are a big Snow White doll and the seven dwarfs...” and again the author moves back into images of Japanese tradition: “But for Naomi, the very most favourite thing of all is hearing stories that Mama tells her... Naomi always asks Mama to tell the stories which Grandma Kato told her when she was a little girl” (p. 19). The juxtaposed cultural images display the multiple identities Naomi possesses.

The students in Mary Mayne’s class were able to discuss these themes in sophisticated ways. For example, in one class discussion, students explored the idea of national identity and what it means to them. When asked about their own identity, students responded as follows:

1. “Ecuador.”
2. “I was born here, but my parents are from Bangladesh. [So how do you identify yourself?] I’m human.”
3. “Sri Lanka.”
4. “I’m half. My mom’s from Angola and my dad’s from the Congo,” and then the girl continued, “Oh! I’m Canadian too because I was born here.”
This interesting discussion of the ways in which students identified their nationalities demonstrates a multi-layered understanding to identity. On the one hand I was impressed that students were able to share a variety of identities (students thought about their place of birth, they considered their parents place of origin and identified that as being more than being Canadian). On the other hand, I was concerned about their perceptions and whether or not they felt included in the Canadian identity. Through novel study, students were able to discuss and explore their personal knowledge and identities in relation to a national, historical context. I felt this was socially inclusive in that students’ identities were validated and students’ voices were heard as they shared in how they identified themselves.

The discussion of national identity turned to a discussion of global conflict and the history of World War II. The teacher thoughtfully pulled excerpts from the novel to generate critical discussion. In the text war is described as, “the worst and saddest thing in the world. People get hurt and learn to be afraid…. It turns friends into enemies.” (pp. 28-29). Some students began to make reference to other conflicts, both in the past and present. One student asked about similarities and differences between Anne Frank and Naomi. This text to text interaction demonstrated good comprehension. Together they discussed similarities and differences between what had happened to Anne Frank in Europe and to Naomi in Canada during World War II. Another student brought up the conflict with the United States in Iraq. Each group member was in some way engaged and part of the learning process.

The discussion on war led to other interesting topics, such as power and the way race, class and gender are situated within the discourse of power (Botelho, 2004, p. 85). Students asked about Naomi’s father and why he wasn’t with them when the family moved from their home in Vancouver. Students directed the conversation to talk about family and asked what they thought happened to families in war and why. Students explained that families are broken up in wars and from there the teacher asked questions leading to the issue of power: “Why are families split up? Why do you think fathers are taken away?” A student shared his story of his family being separated when they fled Afghanistan and the sadness he felt when his father stayed behind while his mother and siblings came to Canada. Students made global connections to the historical concept of power through reference to slavery in the United States and the breaking up of families in South Africa during apartheid. They discussed the powerlessness people felt when the families were broken up and the men were sent away.

Mary Mayne moved the discussion to the topic of family dynamics and different types of families. She validated all family structures and emphasized the importance of respecting family dynamics. This is another example of what happens when socially inclusive pedagogy is practiced - students sharing and drawing connections to their learning while receiving acceptance and understanding from the teacher.

**Letter Writing and Activism**

In *Naomi’s Road*, Naomi and her brother Stephen face bullying in their new community after leaving the internment camp. For example, in their first encounter with a White girl named Mitzi, Stephen stands up for himself:

“Go ‘way!” the girl shouts.

“Why should I?” Stephen says. “This is a free country.”
“It is not your country,” the girl says.
“It is so!” Stephen shouts back (Kogawa, 2005, p. 66).
Later, Mitzi’s mother and Mitzi approach Stephen, who has the Canadian flag in his hands:
“This is my flag,” Stephen says, “This is my country. I don’t care what you say.”
“Yes,” the mother says, nodding her head sadly. “Of course it is your flag. And it is our flag too. We have come over to say we are sorry for being unkind…” (p. 74).
This passage is filled with critical discussions of nationalism, identity, bullying and race. As Mary Mayne was reading this section she sensed unrest in her students. Students turned the discussion to issues of violence, as there had been a recent period of escalated violence in their neighbourhood. Students were stressed and afraid of the violence happening around them. A discussion about their lived experiences ensued where the class sat in a circle and students shared what they were feeling. Mary Mayne called this discussion, “circle time.”
During circle time, students had the right to pass and not share their thoughts; however, most students shared their concerns and fears. Some expressed worry about their fathers who worked night shifts driving taxis and who were being threatened by drug dealers. Others talked about their mothers being attacked in the laundry rooms of their buildings, about cameras getting spray painted and others talked about drive by shootings.
Students decided to write to the mayor, to share what was happening in their community and to offer suggestions for change, since they felt that little was being done. In their letters, students suggested hiring people from the community to police the grounds, more cameras, greater police presence and hiring people to accompany people walking at night. Mary Mayne mailed the letters. Months later, students received personally written responses from the mayor, himself. The mayor came to the school for a visit and spoke to the students about what was happening in their community.
This was the beginning of social activism for some students. I saw the expressions on some of the students’ faces – an expression that indicated that they had accomplished something. This is socially inclusive pedagogy because students became engaged in the learning process and in their own learning. They shared ideas and voiced their concerns to the mayor. They waited anxiously for a response which indicated to me that they cared about what they were writing about. This literacy process included students in the broader social aspect of community. When the mayor came to the school, students were acknowledged as having a voice. Mary Mayne observed that students felt empowered. Her observations underscored Shields’ (2004) findings that when “children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success” (p. 122).

Conclusions

Through the critical-multicultural analysis of a novel, students had opportunities to think about national identity and global issues. These issues were then connected to students’ personal knowledge. Students were able to share their perspectives and points of view. These strategies foster social inclusion because students are making connections to their lives while also addressing the critical aspects of social justice. While the story
itself is fiction, the context in which it is set is extremely powerful. The critical reading of this historical fiction offered students opportunities to make connections between the past and the present, the local and the global, the personal and the public.

Mary Mayne used the text to explore issues of race, class, gender, power, and oppression in historical, global and personal contexts. Students were able to draw on the content and make connections to their own understandings and experiences of issues in social justice. They were also able to extend their learning into action and become involved in projects that drew in the community.

This socially inclusive pedagogy is necessary for all students because it includes their experiences, validates their contributions and connects them to what they read. All children are entitled to the best learning environments possible – learning environments that are safe and welcoming and that encourage student voice, thought and discussion.

References


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Author
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