

LESSON

Examining Stereotypes in Books

This lesson is intended to help guide children to respond to literature with an eye toward social justice.

Grade Level 3-5

Topic: Bullying & Bias, Rights & Activism

Subject: Reading & Language Arts

Social Justice Domain: Justice

Handout: Examining Stereotypes in Books

OBJECTIVES

Activities will help students:

- Think, talk and write about stereotypes—gender, race, class—in literature
- Understand the concept of “implicit” messages in literature
- Work collaboratively to build a deeper understanding of the books they are reading
- Write critical responses expressing their analysis and views about the issues they discover in their reading
- Engage in social action projects to combat the social problems that come up as they read
- Relate what they learn about critical reading of books to critical reading of other texts, including digital texts, as well

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is a stereotype?
- What stereotypes are present in the books we read? How do these books reinforce or break down stereotypes?
- How can reading critically help us become better readers and people?
- How can we as readers challenge stereotypes common in literature?
- How is reading books critically similar to or different from reading other types of media?

MATERIALS

- Book club books
- Reading notebooks
- Sticky notes
- Chart paper
- Handout: Examining Stereotypes In Books

Vocabulary

dispel [dih-spel] (*verb*) to put an end to something

perpetuate [per-pech-oo-yet] (*verb*) to make something last or continue for a very long time; reinforce

stereotype [ster-ee-uh-tahyp] (*noun*) an overly simple picture or opinion of a person, group or thing

Overview

This lesson is intended to help guide children who are already working in such groups to respond to literature with an eye toward social justice. Reading critically does not necessarily involve reading texts dealing explicitly with particular social issues; rather, it means reading with a lens of understanding and responding to the social issues inherent in any text. This lesson works well as part of a unit on book clubs, but can be modified for use in a more general context. The activities can be used during the school year or to support a summer reading program.

Procedure

1. As a class, discuss the word “stereotype.” Talk about what this word means to you, and brainstorm any examples. (*Note: A good way to give examples is to explain that stereotypes are statements about groups of people that begin “All...” such as, “All girls like pink,” “All Asians are good at math,” and so on. It is important to emphasize to students that articulating stereotypes aloud as a way of talking about them is not the same as agreeing with them.*)
2. (*Note: If you want to further explore the concept of stereotypes, divide the class into two groups. Each group should have a big piece of chart paper with a big box drawn on it. One group’s chart says “boy box,” and the other says “girl box.”*) Take 5 to 10 minutes to write in each box everything

- that you think is stereotypically connected with either girls or boys. For instance, in the "boy box" you might write, "likes sports." Then take another two minutes, and on the outside of the box on the chart paper, write a few things that make boys or girls feel "outside the box." For instance, outside of the boy box you might write, "likes to play with dolls." Come together as a class to discuss what you think makes boys and girls feel inside or outside of the box. How does this connect to your earlier discussion and understanding of what a stereotype is?
3. Brainstorm a list of topics (race, ethnicity, class, gender or sexual orientation) that are common areas for stereotypes. Create a chart for each category, with the heading at the top. Create a separate chart for "other stereotypes."
 4. Discuss what it means for a book, author or character to perpetuate (reinforce) or dispel (end) a stereotype. (*Note: Talk about the idea that authors often do this implicitly, by sending subtle messages by the way of character, plot or other story elements. Come up with some examples from read-alouds your class has done in the past.*)
 5. Get together with your book club, and talk about stereotypes that your story is either perpetuating or challenging. Write each example on a sticky note.
 6. Place your sticky notes on the appropriate charts. For example, if you feel your author reinforces gender stereotypes, and you have a specific example on a sticky note, place your note on the chart labeled "gender."
 7. As a whole class, look at the charts you have come up with. Discuss what this activity has taught you about stereotypes in literature. What is your opinion about the implicit messages authors sometimes send in their books?
 8. In your reading notebook, write a letter to your book's author expressing your opinion about the stereotypes perpetuated or challenged in the book.

Extension Activity

1. Reading and thinking critically don't end when the school day does. As you read over the weekend (or summer), continue to think about stereotypes in literature. Use the Handout, Examining Stereotypes in Books, to help guide your thinking. You may want to keep track of your answers to these questions in a special journal or notebook. If you can, discuss these questions with your family and friends.
2. In order for your voice to be heard you need to take action, and writing to the author is an excellent beginning. Individually or with a partner, write a letter to one of the authors whose book you think perpetuates a stereotype or effectively dispels a stereotype. Your letter should be well written, be

friendly and effectively support your perspective. Research your author on the Internet to find out the best way to contact them, including any background information you learn to help make your letter more relevant. Send the author your letter, and share any responses with your friends and family.

3. Spend some time reading a blog or another website you regularly enjoy. Make notes about how the blog or website perpetuates or fights stereotypes. Reading this kind of media is both similar to and different from reading books, but it is important to think critically. Post any comments or thoughts you have to the website, and share any responses you get with your classmates.
4. Create a piece of visual artwork representing the stereotypes or social justice issues that have come up in your reading. Make sure your artwork expresses your own point of view on the issue. You may want to write a poem or reflection statement to go along with your artwork. Share with family and friends.

EXTERNAL LINKS

Social Justice Literature for the Elementary Classroom <http://2009bookclubblog.blogspot.com/>



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