Reading Challenging Texts

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My pre-service teachers enter a quiet, darkened classroom.

I cannot see their faces and they cannot see mine – I have purposely turned off the fluorescent lights. I need to create a mood that helps establish the tone of the story that I am about to read. The classroom feels too modern to receive it, their detachment to history too great that I must bridge it, somehow.

I am about to read Ruth Vander Zee's (2003) *Erika's Story*.

This story is many things: penetrating, soulful, raw, and honest.

This story speaks to broader themes of sacrifice and unity. It also addresses death, a rather taboo topic for the K-8 classroom.

My students find their way to their seats. Tea lights on the tables greet them, flicker and reassure, throwing soft light on an unusual classroom session.

I am but a silhouette at the front of the room.

"Take a seat, any seat," I say softly.

There are some audible giggles and whispers of "What's going on?"

Gently, I tap the xylophone once: ding.

The room grows quiet.

More students trickle in.

Slowly, I turn my rain-stick: *swoooosh*.

Everyone has arrived, waiting and wondering.

Finally, I play a cord on my flute that creates a hollow, haunting sound: *loo-a-loo-a-loo*.

The instruments help to signify that the darkness in the classroom has meaning:

We are sitting in the dark on purpose.

We do not need to physically see each other for this read aloud; we can see one another through the power of story and language. We only need to sit and listen. Listen and be cracked open by someone else's story – or so I paraphrase.

I begin to read Vander Zee's (2003) opening lines, a series of uncertainties:

I do not know my birthdate.

I do not know my birth name.

I do not know in what city or country I was born…

Like poetry, every word counts. And the repetition punctuates many things for Erika. For the reader. For the listener.

I vary my pitch and pace. I pause. I make eye contact, even in the dark.

Erika's Story (Vander Zee, 2003) is a picture book but I do not show the pictures during the reading. Sometimes, the words challenge enough.

The classroom has shifted from quiet to still. The room once dark feels darker yet. Not a cell phone checked, not a wrapper crinkled for its cracker inside.

Sometimes, a story is more important than the words. And, sometimes, the words matter because they can breathe life into a story. My students' slow breathing tells me that they can feel these words. They feel Erika's longing and her parents' agony.

I continue reading. And suddenly, I am done. The story is short but the silence is long. Texts that challenge readers have this effect. They can serve up the most healing medicine if we are willing to listen and see fully.

Students speak up, ask questions in this language arts methods course. Others remain silent, wrapped in a story of loss and hope. They are deeply affected by Erika's life story, her trauma really. "What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene. What makes trauma traumatic is the loss of self and other" (Britzman, 2000, p. 202). Even so, thoughtful instruction acknowledges that a traumatic story has a place in the classroom.

"You read sad stories, Professor Leigh," says one of my students.

It is true; I do.

"I love these sad stories," writes another on an exit slip, an important 5x7 piece of paper where students can reflect on, construct, and extend their knowing (Fisher & Frey, 2004; Preddy, 2008) as a process for thinking deeply about teaching as a

profession (Leigh, 2012). My students are divided, also true. Some love these texts but most wrestle with them.

What my students call *sad stories* I call *real reads*; real, because every story is someone's story. And because I had a student who used to say, "Keepin' it real eh, Professor Leigh" whenever I read a text that called for in-depth listening and discussion; a story that called on students to reach for words other than 'cute' and 'interesting.' And when we frame our questions around texts that promote a rich and meaningful interaction between content and students' ideas, we challenge our students to think (Thomas & Schmidt, 2011). By challenging, I am not referring to what makes text challenging such as vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, etc. In this vignette, I am referring to texts whose content challenges our comfort levels, especially as we read stories aloud in a classroom.

There are many reasons why the pre-service teachers I work with now wrestle with the idea of one day reading a challenging text in their classrooms—the content concerns a topic and/or a demographic that they know very little about; the content addresses a taboo topic (e.g., death); and the content makes them uncomfortable because they have no personal experience with it. Because of their limited experience, the content:

- raises questions, general and specific, that they feel they can only answer abstractly;
- spotlights their discomfort, which can make them visibly embarrassed (e.g. blushing);
- increases their worry that they might anger and be confronted by administration and/or parents.

Their concerns, I believe, are not unfounded. In 1967, American writer and former teacher in the Boston Public Schools, Johnathan Kozol, was fired for having read a Langston Hughes poem in class. While that was fifty years ago, in 2008 a teacher in Indiana was suspended for encouraging her students to read Filipovic's (1999) *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, a collection of powerful stories written by adolescent students who call themselves "Freedom Writers" in homage to The Freedom Riders of the civil rights movement in America (Goldenberg, 2008). In 2012, a middle school teacher in South Carolina was suspended for reading excerpts of Orson Scott Card's (1994) *Ender's Game*, a story about training children to become soldiers (Kain, 2012). And more recently, an elementary teacher in North Carolina resigned after parents protested his reading of de Haan's (2003) *King and King* to a third-grade class, a story about two princes who marry and defy traditional notions of marriage (Schaub, 2015).

Author Stephen King (2000) says that every book is a letter to someone. I believe each time an educator presses against mandated curriculum with a challenging text, that teacher creates with each push, sometimes gentle sometimes hard, spaces for children to hear stories that feel personally relevant. Books as letters, delivered as stories that resonate. "What happens," I ask my students, "when teachers refrain from reading books in class in which students can see themselves and/or their families,

recognize their struggles, feel their worries? What happens to those students' sense of agency in the classroom?" As a teacher of teachers, it matters what I read to my students. By reading texts that are rich in both story and relevance, I empower students to make, see, and feel connections between themselves and the world (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Among my personal list of real reads, Ruth Vander Zee's (2003) *Erika's Story* is the one text that seems to best close the gap between students and their world. Why? Because invariably somebody in the classroom has a connection to the Holocaust, often through a grandparent or distant relative. Somebody is adopted. Somebody is Jewish. Most everyone knows what it feels like to experience loss or to feel unsure of one's life path. It is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the story that strikes the most.

Mines the heart.

Leaves you bare.

Late on a weeknight, this title often pops up in the subject line of my inbox, in Instant Messenger, or a text from former students long graduated with a degree in elementary education and now teaching in a K-8 classroom. Actually, what pops up goes something like this: "Hey Professor Leigh, what's that book called again about the baby thrown from the train? I want to read it to my students."

The thrown baby.

From a moving train.

It is an image that makes you swallow hard. It is a story that you cannot un-hear once you have heard it.

When the read aloud is done, the classroom lights back on, I typically ask pre-service teachers, "How can you use this text to create spaces for dialogue that bring not just awareness of issues present in your classroom, like bullying for example, but also develop empathy and compassion for others?" This changes the conversation for the first-year teacher from which books are safe to read to what books should I be reading that help create a more democratic society.

Until we get comfortable with our discomfort reading challenging texts, children will continue to hear safe stories. Good stories, sure. But safe, easy-to-digest stories. The problem with limiting one's read aloud selection to safe stories is that, like stereotypes, they only offer one perspective. When we limit what we read to our children, they do not see read aloud as a socio- cultural practice through which we can develop compassion and empathy for others. If teachers are serious about developing children's awareness towards others, they need to incorporate children's literature in the curriculum that is both compelling and relevant.

Teachers at the college and university levels who use student-empowering social justice pedagogy in their teaching make it possible for pre-service teachers to

envision what reading challenging texts looks and feels like. When teachers create this kind of space, they can spark enthusiasm and in turn want to read texts that challenge but also unite, inspire, and comfort. True, infant-Erika is thrown from a train in a mother's desperate effort to save her from certain death, hopeful that someone might take her and raise her. But having a thoughtful discussion with students about illustrator Roberto Innocenti's use of line, its thickness and direction, and color to offset Erika wrapped in a pink blanket against a monochrome scene acknowledges that art elements affect our understanding of text (Bang, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

One way to provide opportunities that encourage pre-service teachers in their social justice pedagogy is to ground read aloud practices in what fifth grade teacher Mr. Truong calls the "4Es" (Duncan-Andrade, 2005, p.71):

1. Engage. Provide culturally responsive teaching that validates students' funds of knowledge.
2. Experience. Expose students to various possible realities by presenting narratives that show the perspectives of those often unheard in society.
3. Empower. Use a critical and transformative pedagogy to give students a sense of agency, both individual and collective, to act on the conditions in their lives.
4. Enact. Create opportunities for students to act out their growing sense of agency, learning from and reflecting on their successes and struggles.

The 4Es provide a useful lens for pre-service teachers who see value in texts that challenge and engage readers but are, nevertheless, unsure of how to design their pedagogy around them. But this lens can, and to my mind should be, fluid. Teachers do not have to address all four Es with every text that they read, an important consideration in a teaching climate that is heavily governed by mandated curriculum and standardized testing. When first introducing these concepts, I like to read Eve Bunting's (1999) *Smoky Night*, a story about urban violence that was inspired by the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s. It is an ideal text because while most of my pre-service teachers, themselves Millennials, know very little about the Los Angeles riots, they know a fair bit about the 1967 Detroit riots.

Using this emancipatory pedagogy, which emphasizes change in one's perception, I ask questions to create spaces and directions for their thinking:

- Engage. "What do you know about the 1967 Detroit riots? What stories did you grow up with that concern this violent time in American history? How might they be similar or different than the Los Angeles riots? What does it mean to have cultural capital and what is your cultural capital?" Ask questions that engage students to talk about their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992) that they bring to a read aloud experience.
- Experience. "*Smoky Night* is just one model of someone's reality during a very difficult time; Daniel and his mother lose their home to an apartment fire. What other realities do you know of that are like Daniel's that we can give a

voice to so that we might expand and deepen our perspective on terrifying experiences and loss?" Initiate a dialogue that invites reflection and sharing.
- Empower. "What social conditions do you see in your community and surrounding neighborhood that *Smoky Night* makes you think about? Can you identify some ways to dismantle some of these conditions?" Provide spaces, in small and whole group settings, for students to fully express and feel the vibrancy of their ideas. Empowerment is born from feeling heard.
- Enact. "What kind of feelings does this story surface for you? How might you use your emotional responses to become an agent of change in your home and school community?" Use a Visual Thinking Strategy (Ritchart et al., 2011) such as color, symbol, image (CSI) to help students access their feelings. Emotion is inextricably tied to enactment.

Students do not send me last-minute-late-night messages about books for nothing. I believe they make contact because they want their children to experience that feeling you get, that they got, from listening to a story that delivers on affect and offers a model of reality unlike their own.

When these pre-service teachers eventually have a classroom of their own, I figure whatever they read--be it Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) *Visiting Day* about a girl who visits her father in prison, or Monica Gunning's (2013) *A Shelter in Our Car* about a widowed-mother and daughter who make ends meet from temporarily living in their car, or Margaret Wild's (2007) *Woolvs in the Sitee* about an adolescent boy who finds himself homeless--it matters that they delve into stories and characters' experiences that are unlike their own. It may not be their story; it may not be yours or mine. Even so, the desire to read the story acknowledges that it is someone's. In the words of CS Lewis: "We read to discover that we are not alone" (Du Toit, 2010, p. 102).

Author's Note

I dedicate this vignette to J.A.B. and V.A.O. for sharing *Erika's Story* with me.

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