



Content list available at <http://ijltr.urmia.ac.ir>

*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*

BOOK REVIEW



Urmia University

Teaching Equity Through Children's Literature in Undergraduate Classrooms, Edited by Gayatri Devi, Philip Smith, and Stephanie J. Weaver. Routledge, New York (2023). Xi+ 158 pp., ISBN: 978-1-032-42358-6.

Fatima Sadat Yahyapoor ^{a,*}

^aUrmia University, Iran

Teaching Children's Literature with a focus on social justice in undergraduate classrooms is crucial for scholars. The lack of literature addressing minority groups and social justice has left a noticeable gap. For instance, *Teaching Children's Literature: It's Critical!* by Christian Leland et al. (2023) focuses on the perks of implementing Children's Literature in the curriculum and provides teaching tools to "turn ... students on to reading" (p. 35). Gunn and Bennett (2023) also highlight the importance of using multicultural children's literature "to include inclusive texts to affirm many voices, experiences, and identities" (p. 201). Moreover, in a recent article, Can and Durmaz (2023) probe the potential integration of mathematics and children's literature, noting its positive impact on "students' communication and connection skills, their conceptual understanding, attitudes, and self-confidence" (p. 490).

Teaching Equity Through Children's Literature in Undergraduate Classrooms offers strategies to teach children's literature with attention to social justice and impartiality in undergraduate classes. The book features contributions from experts in the field, including voices from minority groups. It aims to help educators equip their students with a keen eye on equity issues in literature and the broader world. The book is divided into two sections and includes eight chapters, with four chapters in each section and a comprehensive seventeen-page introduction providing an overview of the chapters.

In the editors' introduction, Devi, Smith, and Weaver highlight the ongoing historical and legislative context surrounding education, particularly addressing moral concerns regarding the inclusivity of controversial topics such as race and gender in Children's Literature. They also criticize the rise of "conservative governing boards" (p. 6) in universities whose job is to observe academics avoiding topics that do not follow conservative agenda. The editors advocate for a de-politicized and neutral representation of disciplinary practices to create an environment where

* Corresponding author: Department of English Language and Literature, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran

Email address: f.yahyapoor@urmia.ac.ir

© Urmia University Press

10.30466/ijltr.2024.55080.2644

students feel free to express their ideas without fear of harassment. Following a literature review, they provide a summary of the book's sections and chapters.

Chapter one examines the value of teaching children's and Young Adult (YA) literature to undergraduate students. Erika Romero discusses the reasons for including children's and YA literature in the curriculum. First, children's and YA literature's content is simple and accessible for the target audience, and they sublimate a more complex meaning. Next, the texts are familiar for the college students which may enhance both students' interest and perception of the texts (analytic reading). In addition, media adaptations of these texts may be an incentive for students to engage with the texts and to create "a multidimensional critical experience" (p. 28). Lastly, Romero emphasizes the role of fanfiction as a creative outlet for students to have their adaptations.

Chapter two addresses the problem of the racial epithets in early African American children's folktales, particularly focusing on the use of the "n-word". Lashon Daley shares her embarrassing experience of teaching the n-word in the classroom and proposes an approach that encourages open dialogue and contextual understanding among students. She uses her three identities (intersectional, educator, and research) to deal with racially charged texts. She decides to begin her classes by asking her students to discuss their personal narratives about the n-word to express their feelings. For Daley, to censor the n-word is to lose a great deal of knowledge and it is "a missed opportunity" (p. 43) on the historical context fit for research.

In chapter three, Tharini Viswanath advocates for an engaging literary pedagogy that encourages critical thinking about social issues. Viswanath shares her experience of teaching a course on gender and sexuality in children's and adolescent literature, highlighting interactive activities such as sticky writing paper, keeping journal entrées, note activity, and torn paper portrait activity to foster critical engagement among students in terms of gender and sexuality. For Viswanath, "Engaged pedagogy encourages active learning" (p. 55).

Elizabeth Laura Yomantas, in chapter four, explores transformative learning through YA literature during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on Rodríguez's culturally sustaining curricular model, based on three "signposts" of counternarratives, cultural literacy, and self and social responsibility, Yomantas discusses the ways to strengthen the analysis of YA texts in the classroom. She explains how to employ these signposts and their results, as well as making "space for exposure, for dialogue, for the authors' voices, to create, and for activism" (p. 64) in order to engage students transformatively. Through micro-action planning in YA literature and small actions, instructors and students can make a difference in the world slowly but steadily.

Woodstein in the fifth chapter explores the benefits of storytime and reading aloud for students. She extends diverse and inclusive book selection techniques to decolonize her curriculum, class discussions, and student feedback to critically engage students. Woodstein explains that asking students to read aloud is an excellent performative activity that helps them confidently present in front of others and turns a private experience into "a communal activity" (Woodstein, 2023, p. 83) during Corona pandemic. Students have formative read-aloud assignments and are free to choose from their favorite childhood books, crossover texts, key missing texts in the syllabus, and self-written texts.

In chapter six, Noah Mullens discusses the advantages of using 'queer kid lit' in writing courses as part of his personal experience. Mullens, a queer educator, draws on LGBTQ picture books and argues that they are pedagogically conducive for creating "a cohesive understanding of writing" (p. 96), having a nomadic view of norms, and forming more sophisticated thoughts. After considering the challenges of such content, Mullens explains the ways it can help students

understand how different individual identities inform one's writing. In his opinion, the classrooms should change into a space where minorities can write openly about their sexual orientation. Mullens uses children's picture books with LGBTQ content in his classroom to reflect on gender and sexuality. The last section represents Mullens' model for teaching the texts.

In chapter seven, Gabriella Lee, a Philippines teacher, criticizes cultural colonization inherent in the teaching of children's literature in the Philippines college classrooms. Through the use of "primarily white, middle-class Anglophone" (p. 107) "pedagogical practices" of children's literature in the Philippines college classes, students internalize white discourse. She asks for diversity by choosing diverse texts that reflect childhood experiences within and outside the Philippines. She suggests decolonizing the reading process to make space to negotiate local identities and to incorporate a wide range of experiences of young Filipino writers into the classroom. In the end, Lee explains the challenges with "decolonial" ways of teaching and how to overcome them. She provides five modules to decolonize her pedagogy covering gender identity, off-limits topics, social justice, and sex education.

The last chapter introduces the Children's Literature Resource File (CLRF) as a teaching tool for selecting and compiling a virtual bookshelf of diverse texts. Lemanski et al. discuss the development and implementation of CLRF as an equity-centered teaching tool to counter systemic racism and institutional injustice in the United States' education system. They make a CLRF that draws on diverse experiences to promote empathy with different cultures. For Lemanski et al., students grow critically aware of how to evaluate texts by employing papers from academic journals and blogs made by notable children's literature scholars. Finally, they clarify the CLRF syllabus components of tasks, checklists, and assignment sheets which vary according to the class's needs. They also provide tips to help students be more successful and close the chapter with the benefits of CLRF.

The division of the book into theoretical and pedagogical sections, along with its diverse range of voices, strengthens its impact in addressing social justice and inclusivity in children's literature. The techniques and strategies discussed are varied and helpful in the field. The Editors include the diversity they advocate in their book, which seems to be a point of strength. This inclusion is not only about the main topic and its major concern which is 'equity', but also the multiplicity of voices that share their classroom experience. It would have been better to include the lived experience of religious minorities such as Muslims and the diaspora too. The book's outspoken advocacy for the inclusion of taboo contents, such as same-sex relationships in teaching children's literature to undergraduate students, challenges ongoing bans and promotes critical dialogue in educational settings. Overall, *Teaching Equity Through Children's Literature in Undergraduate Classrooms* offers valuable insights and strategies for educators to promote equity, social justice, and inclusivity.

References

- Can, D., & Durmaz, B. (2023). An analysis of teachers' beliefs about the integration of children's literature into the mathematics education. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education, 21*, 489–512. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10763-022-10255-9>
- Gunn A. A., & Bennett, S. V. (Eds.). (2023). *Teaching multicultural children's literature in a diverse society*. Routledge.
- Leland, Ch. H., Lewison, M., & Harste, J. C. (2023). *Teaching children's literature: it's critical!* (3rd ed.). Routledge.