

NAAEE 2005 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

* Conference Strand: Society

TEACHING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Eun-ju Lee

The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

The field of environmental justice (EJ) education has been developed by several researchers. All of them partly answered what to teach and how to teach about environmental justice. However, few studies have been done focusing on children. In this paper, children's literature is used as a way of addressing EJ themes to K-12 students. For this purpose, strengths of using literature for EJ teaching were discussed. One of the challenges in teaching environmental justice to young students is in relating the concepts of justice or injustice to students' life experiences. Literature can address controversial issues in a meaningful and less-threatening manner. Regarding the key concepts of EJ education, Bowers's eco-justice pedagogy was reviewed to guide the contents of children's literature with EJ themes. Some exemplary children's books were selected for EJ teaching based on discussed eco-justice themes.

INTRODUCTION

The field of environmental justice (EJ) education has been developed by several researchers. For example, Bowers (2002), Zehle (2002) and Hill (2003) discussed key concepts of environmental justice education which included not only ecological but cultural, economic, and political processes. Meanwhile, Cheng-Levine (2002) and Warren (1996) suggested ways of addressing EJ themes to their college students. Cheng-Levine (2002) used literature of EJ

focusing on gender issues in her gender studies course, and Warren (1996) brought her white students to a community of color with an environmental hazardous facility to teach about environmental racism. All of them partly answered what to teach and how to teach about environmental justice. However, few studies have been done focusing on children. In this paper, children's literature is used as a way of addressing EJ themes to K-12 students.

WHY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

One of the challenges in teaching environmental justice to young students is in relating the concepts of justice or injustice to students' life experiences. Fortunately or unfortunately, many of our students, especially middle- and upper- income youth, are emotionally and demographically isolated from the extreme poverty and injustice of the world. On the other hand, some students from marginalized groups are accustomed to the injustice, but may have little chance to experience the brighter side of the world. Literature can address controversial issues such as social/environmental justice issues, in a meaningful and less-threatening manner to both sides' students (McCall 2004). The outstanding books can most effectively provide a context for students to critically examine their own world views and also alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations (Kruse 2002).

According to Moller's research on the effect of group discussions of literature with

social justice themes in the 4th grade class (2001), there are some clear implications of EJ education using literature. She found that students who struggled with developing awareness of the world as a conflicted, often unjust, place found ways to begin to connect their knowledge of the past and present into a meaningful whole; and students who struggled with relating to peers and to book characters who were less privileged than they were had opportunities to grapple with alternative viewpoints and to move beyond two-dimensional print to create a multi-dimensional experience in the group.

Meanwhile, there is the growing trend of environmental themes in literature for children. Recent children's literature on Nature does not draw readers out of society, but rather draws them into it. That is, by encouraging the child to understand the relationships between Nature and society, these texts appear to ask the child to use his or her position in society (Wagner-Lawlor 1996).

Lastly but not the least, teaching opportunities can be found within a standards based curriculum (Pohan 2000). It is important to see the standards-based curriculum as not an obstacle, but as an opportunity to teach environmental justice issues. The following standards in the table show the possibility of teaching EJ through children's literature in the formal school settings. Through this connectedness, we can expect to promote students' critical thinking and

reading skills, as well as sense of justice and environment.

Science Standards

Personal and community health

Environmental quality

Natural and human-induced hazards

Social Studies Standards

social and economic effects of environmental changes and crises resulting from phenomena such as floods, storms, and drought;

alternative policies for the use of land and other resources in communities, regions, nations, and the world;

persistent, contemporary, and emerging global issues, such as health, security, resource allocation, economic development, and environmental quality;

activities to strengthen the “common good,” based upon careful evaluation of possible options for citizen action;

Reading & Language Arts Standards

impact of authors’ decisions regarding word choice and content on bias

the function of point of view or persona

stereotypical characters as opposed to fully developed characters

WHAT TO TEACH ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

As one of the most elaborate discourses on environmental justice education, Bowers (2002) discussed eco-justice pedagogy and suggested three main focuses of environmental justice education: environmental racism and class discrimination, recovery of the non-commodified aspects of community, and responsibility to future generations. It provides us with an idea of what we need to teach about environmental justice.

Bowers's Eco-justice Pedagogy (2002)

Environmental racism and class discrimination. Students need to learn how different groups are differently influenced by the contaminated environments, and how the politics of environmental discrimination works. An eco-justice oriented education needs to teach about the politics of toxic waste disposal, along with overusing chemicals, which “not only encompasses minority and working class communities but also crosses national boundaries” to the undeveloped regions of the world (p.30).

Recovery of the non-commodified aspects of community. According to Bowers, learning about the non-commoditized traditions of ethnic minorities should be involved in environmental justice curriculum. Many of these cultural groups have survived economically and politically repressive environments because of their ability to be less dependent upon the consumerism that more privileged groups took for granted. There is “a need to use the educational process to regenerate the skills, knowledge, and relationships that enable individuals, families, and communities to be more self-reliant and thus to have a smaller ecological impact” (p.30).

Responsibility to future generations. The intergenerational perspective that contemplates the justice issues for the sake of unborn generations is necessary for meeting “the increasing

environmental demands of a growing world population” (p.31). For this, an eco-justice curriculum needs to emphasize on self-limitation for future generations. However it is not a type of self-limitation that “undermines the student’s well-being; rather it represents an expansion of relationships and opportunities to develop personal talents that can further enrich the community” (p.32).

THROUGH WHICH BOOKS?

Above three areas were discussed as the key concepts of EJ education. These areas, thus, can guide the contents of children’s literature with EJ themes. There are many books on environmental issues for children. Researcher selected two or three exemplary books for EJ teaching based on Bowers’s eco-justice themes.

Environmental Racism and Class Discrimination

The Great Kapok Tree (Lynne Cherry 1990). It is a story of the Amazon rain forest. There were two men in the forest. Larger man told small man to cut the tree, and then he left. When a small man try to cut the kapok tree, all living things come to him and explain why he must stop cutting the tree. Here, larger man may represent developed countries which need

natural resources and small man may represent developing countries which have to sell/destroy their nature. So this story can be related to environmental justice issues beyond national boundaries

Common Ground (Molly Bang 1997). The tragedy of commons is behind this story. In the story, individuals do not have the same number of sheep. As a result, some people use more of the commons, while others use less or none at all. It could bring the inequity issues.

Recovery of the Non-commodified Aspects of Community

The Shaman's Apprentice (Lynne Cherry 1998). This is a story about a boy who wants to be a shaman. When the Western medicine cures his tribe's sickness, called malaria, traditional shaman loses his place of honor. However, another western person came to his tribe and explained the medicine came from the forest people of Peru and wanted to learn from the shaman's wisdom. It emphasizes the traditions of ethnic minorities in a positive and friendly tone.

Buy Now Pay Later (Thompson Yardley 1990). It is not a story book, but it introduces the way to be a better consumer. So it can give an opportunity to rethink consumer dependent

lifestyle prevailing in dominant culture.

A River Ran Wild (Lynne Cherry 1992). It is based on true story. As time goes, surroundings of river changed. It clearly shows how native people lived in the nature, and how “development” affected the river.

Responsibility to Future Generations

Just A Dream (Chris Van Allsburg 1990). It is about a boy who has not pro-environmental attitude. When he saw a girl next door watering a tree, which was her birthday present, he doesn't understand why anyone wants a tree for a present. But after dreaming about the future of earth, he has been changed. He also asks a tree for his birthday present.

The Dragon and The Unicorn (Lynne Cherry 1998). A dragon and a unicorn live in ancient forest, but people steadily destroy the forest. It has a similar story line with the Great Kapok Tree. But when dragon and unicorn try to stop the people by explaining the value of the forest, people realize all the years past and all the years to come. They come to have the intergenerational perspectives.

MORE CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING BOOKS

There are still many books in children's literature you can use for EJ teaching. You can look for such books with EJ perspectives. In addition to Bowers eco-justice themes, there are more criteria for choosing appropriate books for children. Quality of the text and illustrations should also be considered (Rule & Atkinson 1994). Other criteria include:

- Positive tone
- Non-stereotypic portrayals
- Appropriate illustrations
- Story appeal
- Developmental appropriateness

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