Actionable Project

Storytelling: Inclusion in the Music Classroom

By Chantel Vallier

Rationale

The spark for this project was the multitude of connections I was able to make between the readings and the context in which I work. There was one particular article that stands out as exceptional in my mind from the readings we did in the inclusion class. Even after class zoom meetings have finished I continue to think about why this piece of writing moved me? The article is Rie's Story, Ryan's Journey: Music in the Life of a Transgender Student by Jeananne Nichols. The subject matter and the plight of a transgender student searching for acceptance and a way of being in the world resonates with me on an emotional level. It speaks to how social constructions of gender identity put limitations and conditions that hinder our way of being in the world. If I can be as bold as to say, stop us from reaching our full potential, trapped in a body we are born into. Butler (1999) speaks to the idea of gender and sex as social constructions that pressure individuals to fit into the moulds that social "norms" create (as cited in Abramo, 2011 p 466). I'm left wondering why this type of gender-conforming thinking was able to evolve? Who benefited from this? How deep of a historical context is behind this way of thinking? I know it even permeates language, such as the codification of words as feminine and masculine in French. Nichols' choice of narrative writing is monumental for many reasons. The title of the article sets us up to know that Nichols is telling another person's story and framing it with Ryan's words. By using Rie's words and following a critical storytelling approach Nichols is shifting the power balance of the researcher and subject role. They are empowered to take agency in the story in a way that is truthful and honest to the person's lived experience. By Nichols (2013, p.264) interviewing Rie, she was able to give voice to an underrepresented community. Taking the approach of storytelling in the classroom will provide students with the opportunity to draw from their experiences. Student voice will be valued and heard, giving the readers insight into how students view the world through their perspectives. In this context writing stories will give everyone the ability to speak and be heard by others. Rich discussion possibilities in the context of inclusion would be explored.

I was fascinated with the Rawling's arts approach that was presented to the class from Dr. Don Devito. I hadn't thought about the integration of the arts and the positive impact that could have on improving student scores on standardized tests. While I do not agree with standardized testing, it is a reality in most school systems. In the Rawling's approach, (2020, p.4) it is mentioned that generational learning was connected when exploring the cultural music of students. I identified with the writing example lacking detail and reasons why the student feels that way (p. 9). Some of the written responses I read from students will say it is cool and that is all it says. To speak to the student that has written an answer like that they can articulate why with prompting questions. The discussion techniques the Rawlings educators used would help me in getting students to use more descriptive language in explaining their thinking.

In my context, we have 3 specific school goals in the school improvement plan. Working within the medium of storytelling will touch on two of the three specific school goals. The two goals are: Students will develop their writing skills, engagement and stamina. Students will demonstrate a positive growth mindset to persevere with complex mathematical and written tasks (G.W. Zavarella, personal communication, July 21, 2020). I have also used data from the Education Quality Accountibility Office, but the data is currently unavailable to publish.

Purpose

In the classroom, topics can be introduced and discussed through picture books. This approach is appropriate for elementary school students. Topics such as race, gender, disability, religion and culture can be opened up through presenting it as a story. Meaning could be made through text to text, text to world and text to self connections. Telling stories is a way that adults make sense of the world. In McCarthy's article (2007, p. 4), she quotes Thelen (1989) "From this perspective the present needs of the storyteller impact how she constructs her memories, it also emphasizes the audience as influencing the choice of memories and how they are organized and made public." Like all projects of this nature, sensitivity is necessary and difficulties may arise as students could disclose sensitive situations. This project should only begin when students have bonded and a positive classroom culture has been created. This project can be taken in many different directions. It could be school-wide or done in individual classrooms. As a school-wide project, this would be a powerful way for students to begin to talk about their own experiences and family stories. Collaboration between educators is encouraged and I hope that through collaboration many perspectives will be openly presented to students. I've chosen to sketch some sample lessons into what could potentially be a yearlong project. This is an idea, a starting place. Take these ideas and adapt them to your teaching situation. While the focus may be on writing, I want to include oral storytelling traditions and invite first nations peoples into the classroom. There are many different purposes for telling stories. We tell stories to remember events, for entertainment, to pass on life lessons or traditions, to inform or persuade others. Educators need to explicitly teach students how to discern the purpose of a text and what it's messaging may mean to them to be able to determine the purpose. The goal of this project is to involve student autonomy and voice while providing an avenue for dialogue in an inclusive environment. Through this effort, students will engage in meaningful writing tasks and apply their knowledge to real-world applications in writing. We have yet to examine the consequences of quarantine on children, perhaps writing about music and life will give youth an outlet for expression and a voice to be heard.

Lesson Ideas

Media portrays those as disadvantaged as inspirational stories to us all. It's another way privilege can be visible from a place of social-economic standing (Sensoy & Di Angelo, 2017, p. 93). I'm suggesting that we as teachers have the power to shift the narrative and offer different perspectives on stories. To begin this lesson I would show a picture of a landfill full of trash and families picking through the trash. I would start by asking students what they see. After we would move on to what are you wondering? I would then introduce the picture book Ada's Violin by Susan Hood. Possible topics that could be brought up are consumerism, poverty, invention, environmentalism, values and the need to make music. Show students a video clip of the orchestra in Paraguay. Students should create a blog entry reflecting on the story and their reactions to it. In part 2 of this lesson, you can give students snippets of melodies and ask them to arrange them in a new way to create a song. Just like the community in Paraguay was able to look at the trash in new ways students will be able to look at the melodies and create something new. This could be done in collaborative groups or as individuals. It could be given on paper or in a digital audio workstation. Older students may want to record their instrumental playing. Keep the task open so that there are many entry points for students to add to the assignment. Students should write a blog entry documenting this experience. This project could be shared with the community digitally through a twitter post or on a teacher website. Grades 4-8 would be the suggested age group for this lesson.

Play for students the music video or just audio for I Cry by Usher. Check with the administration before showing the music video because of the graphic nature of the images portrayed such as lynching. Read the lyrics as a choral reading. What does this song mean to you? Encourage students to use the text when explaining their interpretation. This will lead to a discussion on race and current events. Students will need guidance to see that this is not a new issue, but rather one that has a long history. Compare this text to the song Where is the Love? by the Black Eyed Peas. If possible show the music video. Have students complete blog entries about their thoughts and feelings towards this. What song speaks to you about current events? This could lead to students wanting to create covers of those songs. Another entry point for students could be Brown Girl by Aaradhna. Students could read about her refusal of a hip hop award. Lenny Kravitz's song Here to Love has a moving video that can be shown to upper elementary students. This could be another choice of contemporary songs.

Read poetry with students. This is a great place to start when wanting students to create poems and stories. Poetry tends to be less intimidating in my experience when working with reluctant writers because the rules are more freeing. A haiku poem could lead students to create melodies and songs. Poetry offers many voices to be brought into the classroom. Please see the resource section below for websites with book ideas.

Resources

<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/entertainment/2016/11/aardanha-claims-racism-refuses-vnzma-award.html> This website tells the story of Aaradhna refusing her song award in the category of hip hop music.

<https://www.weareteachers.com/best-poetry-books-for-kids/>

In this website, teachers can find many poetry books to use in the classroom for a variety of grade levels.

Walzer, Daniel. (2016). Digital Storytelling in Music and Audio Education: Inspiring Modern Reflective Practice with Relevant Technology. *Topics for Music Education Praxis.* From http://topics.maydaygroup.org/Walzer16.pdf

This resource offers ideas about storytelling as a way of getting students to reflect on their practices at the undergraduate level. I feel that some of the ideas can apply to elementary school students.

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/blog-posts/genia-connell/use-popular-music-improve-reading-and-inspire-writing/> This blog provides practical activities for using song lyrics in the language arts classroom.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/learning/lesson-plans/nine-teaching-ideas-for-using-music-to-inspire-student-writing.html> This website offers some great ideas for using music as an avenue for encouraging writing tasks.

Hood, S., & Comport, S. W. (2016). *Ada's violin: The story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* (First edition.). New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Usher. (2020, July, 4). I Cry [Official Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulqyG0DbAGA>

The Black Eyed Peas. (2009, June, 16). Where Is The Love? [Official Music Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpYeekQkAdc>

Aaradhna. (2016, July, 24). Brown Girl [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnAFtNksXDE>

Lenny Kravitz. (2020, February, 21). Here To Love [Lyric Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lhFhVrANkM>

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