

Something Resembling Hope: Notes on strategies for teaching Canadian social justice literature

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Résumé de l'article

Des membres d'un vaste projet de recherche pancanadien étudiant l'utilisation en classe de textes portant sur la justice sociale au Canada partagent les stratégies mises de l'avant par des enseignants dans l'étude de tels textes. Ces stratégies relèvent autant du projet multimédia que de l'adaptation de chansons. Les textes et les stratégies présentés s'adressent à des groupes d'âges variés et couvrent un éventail de matières, des pensionnats autochtones à l'histoire de la ségrégation au Canada.

SOMETHING RESEMBLING HOPE: NOTES ON STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING CANADIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE LITERATURE¹

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ABSTRACT. Members of a large, cross-Canada research project on using Canadian social justice literature in the classroom share strategies that teachers are using to teach some of these texts. Strategies range from multi-media projects to song adaptations. Texts and strategies suitable for different grade-levels are represented, and cover a range of subjects, from residential schools to Canada's history of segregation.

QUI RESSEMBLE À DE L'ESPOIR: NOTES SUR DES STRATÉGIES D'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA LITTÉRATURE PORTANT SUR LA JUSTICE SOCIALE CANADIENNE¹

RÉSUMÉ. Des membres d'un vaste projet de recherche pancanadien étudiant l'utilisation en classe de textes portant sur la justice sociale au Canada partagent les stratégies mises de l'avant par des enseignants dans l'étude de tels textes. Ces stratégies relèvent autant du projet multimédia que de l'adaptation de chansons. Les textes et les stratégies présentés s'adressent à des groupes d'âges variés et couvrent un éventail de matières, des pensionnats autochtones à l'histoire de la ségrégation au Canada.

“Can I take a few pictures of it, please?” asks one of the teachers.

“Oh, sure. Absolutely,” I say. I stop pulling down the posters and step aside while he aims his I-phone. But in my mind his picture-taking seems unnecessary. I had promised to send the strategies in an email soon.

Maybe he wants them now, though. Maybe something caught his attention and he's thinking about what he could do *tomorrow* with his kids. That's how it is when we encounter new teaching ideas; the possibilities excite us. Because we are fully immersed in the swift-flowing currents of our classroom lives, we don't want to risk letting a good idea slip away.

Perhaps especially when those ideas touch on how to approach difficult, often painful, subjects and stories—of Japanese internment, of forced labour, of residential schools, stories of the underside of Canadian (and world) history.

Hanging in a corner of Naomi's² fifth grade classroom where we meet during our literature circles, the posters are little more than lists of strategies and activities used by teachers in their classrooms to teach social justice through literature, compiled using Mr. Sketch scented markers. Yet they shimmer, and we smile, remembering successful (and less successful) strategies tried, and ones that inspired future lessons.

The teachers present at this particular gathering, Naomi, Jean-Robert, and Lisa, come from two different elementary schools and one university in Montreal, Quebec. They are members of one of two monthly "literature circles" hosted by McGill University. These two literature circles are part of a broader project bringing together teachers and university researchers across Canada. Currently there are 7 literature circles from Newfoundland to British Columbia, all exploring the use of Canadian literature for teaching social justice in the classroom.³

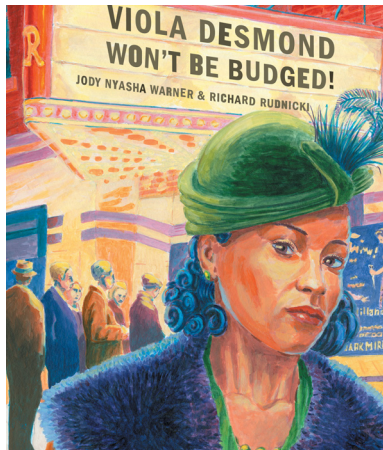


FIGURE 1. *Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged*. Groundwood Books

At a meeting with teachers from our second site, Jared brings in letters his grade one students wrote in response to *Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged* (Warner, 2010). Each letter links history with the present imagination of each student, suggesting the development of a "Canada" that is more complicated and compromised than maple leaves, wheat fields, and poutine.

Wait. Social justice? In the *first grade*?

Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged vividly recounts the true story of Viola Desmond, a black woman from Nova Scotia who, in 1946, was jailed for not leaving a

segregated movie theatre. Her story is evocative of Rosa Parks' much more famous "refusal to budge," but in a Canadian context, reminding us that Canada has its own shameful history of racism towards black people. As several of the teachers in our study pointed out, we as Canadians tend to assume that stories such as *Viola Desmond* are the provenance of Americans, part of *their* fraught history of racial intolerance towards black people. We forget that our national past has its own share. For Jared, this often overlooked chapter of Canadian history is something that he believes is very important to teach. This year he had first and second grade students. After reading and discussing the text, he invited his students to write illustrated letters to Ms. Desmond, thanking her for what her actions made possible

In response to my invitation to share successful strategies, Lynne Wiltse, a researcher with the project from the University of Alberta, writes about a teacher, Ann, who invited her students to explore racism and oppression from the perspective of escaped slaves who arrived in Canada.

Elijah of Buxton (Curtis, 2007), a fictionalized account of a settlement of runaway slaves near the American border, tells the story of 11-year-old Elijah, the first child born into freedom in Buxton, Ontario. As Elijah is the narrator, readers learn about the horrors of slavery through a child's first-person perspective. Ann felt that her grade six students, primarily first or second-generation immigrants, should learn about this important aspect of Canadian history. In addition to encouraging students to make personal connections to the text (especially to the theme of journeying to a new country for a better life), the teacher engaged students in a variety of multimodal representations. Students explored the website for the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum which celebrates the Underground Railroad and early Black settlement in Canada, trying some of the offerings of the learning centre: an interactive CD Rom, a game "100 steps to freedom," and a video "The Many Roads to Buxton." The students also participated in a choose your own adventure-style webquest with a slavery theme, and as a culminating project, created "digital quilts," based on the freedom quilts used by slaves as part of the Underground Railroad. (L. Wiltse, personal communication, July 17, 2013)

Multimedia provides opportunities for students to respond in various and thoughtful ways to the often-heavy and disturbing content of the stories. One of our colleagues from Memorial University, Anne Burke, writes about using Glogster, an online visual text, with students:

The children in the classroom respond to the books by writing journal entries as the characters, through group discussion of how their lives are similar and different from the children /characters in the books. The art in these pieces of children's literature is very powerful in its ability to let children see the people and conditions of war torn countries. Their responses to these can be quite deep. The teacher and children decided to make a Glogster the major project for these social justice picture books. The students were to identify the characters and settings of the books, determine the message of the book and find powerful phrases and images that made the book meaningful for them. In

choosing images and words /phrases for the Glogsters, students demonstrated their understanding of the text and the message or theme contained in its text which speaks both to comprehension and critical literacy. The images they chose to include in the Glogster could often be quite abstract and be symbolic of themes like peace, faith, strength of spirit, war, poverty, etc. It was the way the students decided to construct their Glogster that made this process powerful. (A. Burke, personal communication, July 22, 2013)

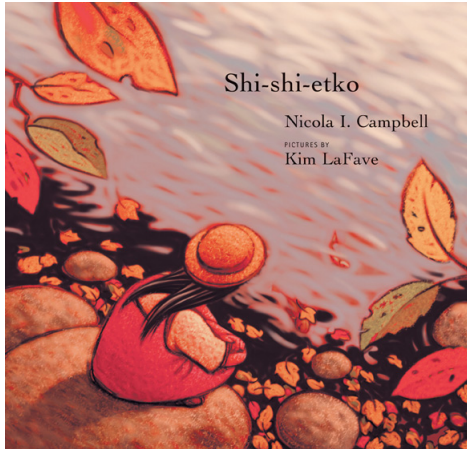


FIGURE 2. *Shi-shi-etko*. Groundwood Books.

Gabriella, a participant with a literature circle in Quebec, draws on quilts for teaching *Shi-shi-etko* (2005), by Nicola Campbell, in her fifth grade class. Beautifully illustrated, like so many of the books in our study, Campbell tells a story of a young First Nations girl, Shi-shi-etko, who's about to be taken away to a residential school. Despite its ominous background, the story itself focuses on the careful collection of Shi-shi-etko's memories, to be kept safe against the vitiating mandate of residential schools. Gabriella, who teaches fifth grade, starts by sharing the forward of the book with her students, and then asking them to relate important memories. After the memories warm the room, Gabriella asks her students to imagine those memories being taken away, forbidden. She asks her students to represent those memories on paper, which she assembles into a quilt, a fitting metaphor for the things that we wrap around us and keep close. Of *Shi-shi-etko*, Gabriella says that her students were deeply touched, and that, on their own, they chose to research residential schools and the experiences of First Nations people. They reported back to her, and the story took on a life of its own in her classroom, becoming a resonant background for other stories and experiences.

Teachers participating at the project's site at the University of Victoria, headed by Angela Ward, use both *Shi-shi-etko*, and its companion book, *Shin-chi's Canoe* (2008). The books offer possibilities for making predictions and comparisons

about life before and after experiencing residential schools. Students also make real or virtual “memory bags” in which they place objects or symbols of their memories, like Shi-shi-etko does in the story (A. Ward, personal communication, July 8, 2013).

Ingrid Johnston, the principal investigator for our SSHRC-funded project, and also from the University of Alberta, recounts the experience of a teacher working with the painful history of residential schools in Canada, but at the secondary level. In her note to me she writes:

The novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) by the Haisla author, Eden Robinson, is a rich family story of grief and survival set in the West Coast First Nations settlement of Kitamaat. The novel introduces traditional elements of storytelling alongside the realities of a modern Aboriginal community and the legacies of residential schools. Stacy, a high school English language arts teacher, explained that she had been teaching the novel *Pride and Prejudice* to her grade 12 students for eight years and wanted to move out of her comfort zone. She felt that the Canadian novel *Monkey Beach* would provide an opportunity for students to read an exciting coming of age story set in a contemporary First Nations context that was unfamiliar to most of her students. She hoped that reading the novel would challenge many of the stereotypes they held about Aboriginal peoples. Stacy introduced the book with the Rita Joe poem “I Lost My Talk” which evokes the loss of Aboriginal languages for children sent to residential schools. The poem led into a discussion with students of the significance of place and culture for Canada’s First Nations peoples and in particular for the Haisla peoples at Kitamaat. As students were reading and discussing the book, Stacy invited Eden Robinson to become her friend on Facebook and to her delight, Eden agreed and interacted with students in the class and responded to their questions. Overall, Stacy found that her students enjoyed the novel despite some challenges they encountered with the magic realism elements in the text, and she was gratified when many of the students selected this novel to write about in their grade 12 provincial diploma exams. (I. Johnston, personal communication, July 11, 2013)

Lisa, from our group of teachers in Quebec, is initially uncertain about how much of the Canadian social justice literature she might incorporate into her K-6 music classes, though not from any hesitation about the content. Indeed, her motivation for joining the project is that she might find additional ways to include this content in her classroom. She is extremely active in raising awareness about social (in)justice through her social justice club and writing. Then, at one of our early meetings, Jean-Robert gives a dramatic, spirited reading of *L’oranger magique* (Agnant, 2003), a traditional Haitian fairy tale. Élise, a young girl who sadly lost both her parents, is forced to live with her stepmother, who treats her cruelly and even deprives her of meals. One day, she runs away and goes to visit the cemetery where her mother is buried. Élise discovers that by singing she is able to make a magic orange tree grow and produce oranges of all sizes. Of course, her stepmother finds out and demands to know where the beautiful oranges were produced. When Élise leads her to

the tree, the stepmother starts to climb and greedily takes the oranges as she climbs higher and higher. The magic orange tree keeps growing taller until it finally cracks and falls, crushing the stepmother. Élise lives happily ever after with her magic orange tree and she is never hungry again. Lisa appreciated the musical potential of the story and found it to be a valuable entry point for raising difficult but relevant issues like hunger and abuse with her students. After she reads the story with her students, she adapts the song it contains for use in her social justice pedagogy for all grade-levels she teaches.

When I transcribe the strategies from our sessions with the elementary teachers, I find myself wondering, what makes teaching *explicitly* with social justice in mind feel so much different than teaching so-called “regular content”?

I can only venture a guess, rooted in my own deeply-felt but often imperfect past efforts to teach social justice using such texts as Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1986) in my own classroom.

A teacher can imagine what meeting his or her objectives or goals will look like in reading or writing instruction; such objectives are made with groups of particular students in mind, students who do stuff in the near-future that we might look at or hold in our hands for evaluation. To teach for social justice? “Objectives” metamorphose into something resembling hope, for what likely trembles in our teachers’ hearts is nothing less than hope for transformation of the unjust and oppressive structures and institutions of our society—an “unsettling,” to quote Roger Simon (2000, p. 13). Many of us in education (like me and the majority of the teachers and researchers in this project) are white and middle class, representatives of the dominant settler culture of Canada. Thus, we may perhaps suspect, as well, that we are, to greater and lesser degrees, complicit in some of those oppressive structures, and thus the “unsettling” is directed not only towards what we know (society) but who we think we are. That is a risky business, but one of compelling importance

With that in mind, these texts and strategies are not offered in a self-congratulatory spirit, but rather as conversation starters, as sparks for curiosity and experimentation. The texts represented are but a small sample of Canadian social justice literature. We would welcome the sharing of strategies and texts for teaching social justice to all grades in the comments section provided below.

Thank you to our colleagues and the teachers who contributed the strategies shared here.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Ingrid Johnston, Teresa Strong-Wilson, Lynne Wiltse, Anne Burke, Angela Ward and Heather Phipps for their written contributions to, or suggestions on, this piece.

2. All names used for teachers are pseudonyms.
3. We are grateful to SSHRC funding to support this research. More information on the project can be found at: <http://www.mcgill.ca/dise/research/canadianlit>
4. Images are used with permission from Groundwood Books, Toronto, Canada.

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