

Units of Study for Teaching Reading
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

FAQ Video Transcripts

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Question: *How do the units support the promotion of social justice in the classroom?*

Mary Ehrenworth:

If you're choosing our units of study, chances are that you, like us, have really big concerns about teaching towards social justice. That when you think about why you got into teaching, you didn't get into teaching because you love rubrics, you didn't get into teaching because you love a progression. You got into teaching because you wanted to make the world better and because you care about kids. So that doesn't happen just accidentally. There's a researcher called Kevin Kumashiro, he runs the Center for Anti-Oppressive Education, and he talks about that if you want an anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-racist curriculum, that doesn't happen by accident. It happens in all the choices you make.

So there's a couple places where the units overtly teach towards social justice, and a couple decisions you can make that can also increase the complexity with which you're teaching towards social justice. So the first is that the issues of representation within classroom libraries, that we're really devoted to having classroom libraries that have tremendous diversity in terms of cultural backgrounds, in terms of different kinds of ethnicities, in terms of different kinds of financial status, in terms of different kinds of families, in terms of different kinds of sexual orientation. We believe in that, we believe that all kids need to see themselves in the classroom library. So that's going to be the first, is just looking at your libraries themselves are an act of social justice.

Second, teaching kids literacy is an act of social justice. Kids will be more powerful, they'll have more access to power in this country if they're more literate, if they're stronger readers. They'll be able to take different courses, the choices of careers and college majors that open up to them will open up because they're better readers. So know that when it feels like you're doing a comprehension lesson and you just feel like, "Really? Did I really get into teaching to teach comprehension?" Know that that is itself an act of social justice. It's a great gift that you give kids. It's really empowering.

And then there's the notion of teaching kids to develop an empathetic imagination, that reading is part of how you begin to see lives that you've never lived, and be in places that you'll never visit, and you live through them in the pages of a book, so that kids are essentially-- Eve Sedgwick, who's got some beautiful books on reading, she talks about how novel readers are apprentice to the characters in their novels. And so part of what we're teaching kids is to develop more empathy for others, but also to think a little bit more about their critical decision making. That when they're

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reading historic fiction and they're thinking about the decisions those characters made, they never know when the day will come that they might make those same kinds of decisions, and that they'll be able to be informed by those acts of courage and acts of justice that have happened in their novels. So we're really thrilled to have you join us in this, it's a quest, to help kids make the world better than they came into it, better than we've left it for them.