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Unit of Study

Young Adult Literature for Minorities and Immigrants

Unit of Study Rationale:

Students who come to the United States during their high school years are academically disadvantaged. They must learn to understand and speak English. Then they must learn to read and write in English. Assimilating to American academia can be very tedious for adolescents. The ideal way to help immigrant teens assimilate is employing literature that illustrates characters who overcome particular challenges that these adolescents may also be experiencing. Through the protagonists in these literary works, they can learn academic skills and grow emotionally and intellectually. There are experiences that can be learned by reading.

An excellent memoir that discusses experiences about poverty, venturing out into a new country, perseverance and surviving violence is *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande. Her book describes her siblings and her endeavors migrating illegally into the United States. The children are impoverished, they undergo severe emotional turmoil due to the absence of both their parents. They experience violence from their alcoholic father, yet Reyna and her siblings persevere through all the obstacles thrown their way. The concept of perseverance is one that I want to highlight to students. Each individual student has their set of struggles that they must face, and since this memoir centers on overcoming struggles it is a good piece of literature for them.

Reyna continues to live with her abusive father in order to fulfill her “American Dream” and remain in the U.S. She finds refuge from her violent home in books and writing, inspired by Chicano@ and Latin@ literature. I want to incorporate this memoir into my teachings so that students who may share Reyna’s experiences may also use literature as a means to cope with their obstacles. After much difficulty, Reyna breaks away from her stern father and goes on to become the first person in her family to go to college. *The Distance Between Us* is a valuable read for adolescents who live as Reyna lives, eager for a brighter future yet disenfranchised and without guidance. The sacrifice Reyna makes in order to continue her education could be inspirational for immigrant and other minority students. Especially since often times they believe that a higher education is unattainable. The text will demonstrate otherwise, therefore further reiterating the notion of overcoming obstacles, in this case within academia. Lastly, *The Distance Between Us* could also appeal to these students because it is a relatively easy read, especially the text that is modified for younger audiences. Reyna’s memoir also includes pictures of Reyna, her siblings and the other characters present in the text. This offers a nice visual to help the students better envision what and who they are reading about, which enhances their understanding of the text.

Launching the unit:

First I’d start off the discussion with an exploratory question:

- What is a minority? What encapsulates the minority experience?
- Discuss immigrants as a minority.

Then I’d allow for discussion questions, I’d go around the room asking students to answer one of the following:

- What do you know about immigration within the U.S.?
- How is immigration dealt with in different countries compared to the U.S?
- Is there an approach to immigration you deem “preferable” or “ideal”?

- Do you as an immigrant feel safe within your community, state, country? Or (if not an immigrant or if students prefer not to disclose status) Do you think immigrants within your community, state, country, etc. feel safe?
- Do you believe any person is “illegal”?
- What is more important ethics or law?
- Is it possible to pertain to various minority groups?
- Do you believe there is impeding factors for the academic success of members of minority groups?

Lastly, I'd have students pick one of the questions presented and respond to it during 20-25 minutes of Silent Sustained Writing. This will encourage students to give a more thorough response and better detail their rationale to one of the questions presented. The purpose of launching the unit with a discussion is because it will help “break the ice”, students will hence feel more comfortable diving into the material.

A great poem to share with students before we begin reading *The Distance Between Us* is “Things We Carry on the Sea” by Wang Ping.

We carry tears in our eyes: good-bye father, good-bye mother

We carry soil in small bags: may home never fade in our hearts

We carry names, stories, memories of our villages, fields, boats

We carry scars from proxy wars of greed

We carry carnage of mining, droughts, floods, genocides

We carry dust of our families and neighbors incinerated in mushroom clouds

We carry our islands sinking under the sea

We carry our hands, feet, bones, hearts and best minds for a new life

We carry diplomas: medicine, engineer, nurse, education, math, poetry, even if they mean nothing to the other shore

We carry railroads, plantations, laundromats, bodegas, taco trucks, farms, factories, nursing homes, hospitals, schools, temples...built on our ancestors' backs

We carry old homes along the spine, new dreams in our chests

We carry yesterday, today and tomorrow

We're orphans of the wars forced upon us

We're refugees of the sea rising from industrial wastes

And we carry our mother tongues

爱(ai), حب (hubb), ליבע (libe), amor, love

平安 (ping'an), سلام (salaam), shalom, paz, peace

希望 (xi'wang), أمل ('amal), hofenung, esperanza, hope, hope, hope

As we drift...in our rubber boats...from shore...to shore...to shore...
(<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/things-we-carry-sea>)

This poem addresses immigration in a compelling manner and conveys ideas about identity. This is an important concept to address since whether they like it or not, an immigrant's immigration status is essential to their identity. Largely because immigrants are persecuted by current laws and by the ignorance and intolerance of others. Their experience in this country is typically different than other peoples because of their status. Similarly, minority students experience this country differently because of the systemic oppression that exists and targets them, such as the school to prison pipeline. Therefore, reading poetry that promotes one's identity such as "Things We Carry on the Sea" by Wang Ping, paves the way for other literature that centers on identity.

Upon reading the poem out loud with the students I will pose a discussion question, “What are the elements of poetry found within this piece?”. I want students to pinpoint the poem's plot and notice Ping's use of repetition. After reading and analyzing this poem I want to introduce the *I Am* poem to the class and have them write their own *I Am* poems. This is a fun way to address and promote one's unique identity.

Method

I Am

I am (two special characteristics)
 I wonder (something you are actually curious about)
 I hear (an imaginary sound)
 I see (an imaginary sight)
 I want (an actual desire)
 I am (the first line of the poem restated)
 I pretend (something you actually pretend to do)
 I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
 I touch (an imaginary touch)
 I worry (something that really bothers you)
 I cry (something that makes you very sad)
 I am (the first line of the poem repeated)
 I understand (something you know is true)
 I say (something you believe in)
 I dream (something you actually dream about)
 I try (something you really make an effort about)
 I hope (something you actually hope for)
 I am (the first line of the poem repeated)
 (<https://www.canteach.ca/elementary/poetry3.html>)

Prior to reading *The Distance Between Us* I would divide the book into sections to be read by the students for each week. As students read *The Distance Between Us* I would make students bring 1-2 quotes from the book from each of the subsections to discuss in class. Students must provide the context behind the quote and the significance of their quote. Students will also be given pop-quizzes on the book to ensure that they are following along with the reading.

Concluding and Reflecting:

As part of the reflecting process on the book students will each have to create a powerpoint presentation discussing a relevant theme within the book and they must specify a particular scene, with quotes from the book that supports their presentation. Within their presentation they must also incorporate their favorite part of the book and provide a character analysis for one of the main characters.

Other books and further readings on minorities and immigrants are referenced below. These include excellent readings to help minorities and immigrant students approach the material more readily. These books depict protagonists who embark on journeys in identity and growth, facing

challenges not often found within the literary canon--one of the exeter qualities. Nonetheless, they are compelling pieces of literature and can grasp the attention of all students, even reluctant readers.

We Were Here by Matt de la Pena

https://www.amazon.com/We-Were-Here-Matt-Pe%C3%B1a/dp/0385736703/ref=sr_1_1/145-1401400-3439114?ie=UTF8&qid=1542368702&sr=8-1&keywords=we+were+here+by+matt+de+la+pena

We Were Here by Matt de la Pena is an excellent book that relates to my unit of study. The story centers on three boys from a group home that come together as a unlikely team. The main character Miguel is sent to juvenile hall for killing his brother. The judge decides he will benefit from some time in a group home. The home provides therapy, group counseling, and education. Miguel meets Mong at the group home and reunites with Rondell, another boy he met while he was in juvenile hall. The boys eventually run away together, on their journey Miguel reevaluates his decision to escape the group home. He realizes he must complete his sentence in the home and participate in the therapy and counseling sessions in order to restore his peace of mind and learn to live without the weight of his guilt and self-hatred. This book is a successful pairing with *The Distance Between Us*, since it incorporates an adolescents decision-making processing. As well as promotes the use of education to obtain a better life.

Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher

https://www.amazon.com/Whale-Talk-Chris-Crutcher/dp/0061771317/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1542368739&sr=8-1&keywords=Whale+Talk+by+Chris+Crutcher

Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher is about a boy, The Tao Jones (TJ), who is adopted, he is of high school age and struggles with abandonment issues. When he was a baby he was severely neglected by his mother in fact, the only decent thing she ever did for him was giving him up for adoption. His adopted parents dedicate their lives to promoting the welfare of abused and neglected children. His adopted parents and his therapist, Georgia, give him the necessary support towards becoming a functioning adult. This book is a great pairing with *The Distance Between Us* because of the various similarities between stories. Reyna and T.J. are both abused and neglected children with abandonment issues. Also, both of these stories center on the development and emotional and intellectual growth of adolescents.

Books highlighted on YAWednesdays' website regarding young adults migrating to America are:

<https://yawednesdays.com/2017/11/24/coming-to-america-a-reading-list/>

The Lines we Cross by Randa Abdel-Fattah. Centers on the experiences of an Afghan refugee.

The Sun Is Also A Star by Nicola Yoon. A story about a Jamaican immigrant facing deportation.
Works cited

Websites:

Online Shopping for Electronics, Apparel, Computers, Books, DVDs & more. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/>

YA Wednesdays. Coming to America Reading List.

<https://yawednesdays.com/2017/11/24/coming-to-america-a-reading-list/>

Books:

Crutcher, C. (2018). *Whale Talk*. Harpercollins Childrens Books.

Peña, M. D. (2011). *We were here*. New York: Ember.