

Literature and the Moral Imagination Seminar

Cultivating Empathy through Character Analysis

Shauna Lucero

Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ)

2023

Author Note:

Shauna Lucero is a K-5 Librarian at Killip Elementary School. Correspondence about this curriculum unit can be addressed to Shauna Lucero at slucero@fusd1.org

Who Am I Writing This for and Who Am I?

I am the Librarian at Killip Elementary School in Flagstaff Arizona. Killip's Student diversity is 91% enrollment of Native American and Hispanic children. My class rotations are alternated between 2 weeks. Week 1 I see Kindergarten through 2nd grade, and week 2 I see 3rd grade through 5th grade; then it starts over again. Each class is 30 minutes long and must include time for students to look for and check out books. On average each class has an hour a month of time spent in the library. With this limited time, I like to manage the class in strict blocks of time such as 20 mins for a lesson and activity then 10 minutes to check out books. I usually select a theme for the month that pertains to Library Science, literature or social/emotional topics, and create two activities that center around it, one for the upper grades and one for the lower grade levels.

This is my 2nd year teaching at the Elementary School. I am a Caucasian Christian woman married to a Hispanic man. It is important to me, as a mother, that my children find and understand their identity as bi-racial. As a teacher, I want the library to be a safe space to promote thoughtfulness with regards to empathy and tolerance of others, self-actualization and self-expression or identity.

My objective is to create a curriculum for 4th grade, but one that can be easily adjusted to accommodate all grades and levels of literary understanding: a curriculum that identifies virtues, and makes text connections that facilitates empathy (putting yourself in the character's shoes) for the characters of the story by means of character analysis. I will be using the book *Core Empathy: Literacy Instruction with a Greater Purpose* by Christie McLean and Mary Knight to guide me as well as incorporating the Diné Character Building and Culture Standards to create an inclusive roadmap to connecting with children's literature.

I envision my library to be a multicultural space where children feel a connection to their heritage and to each other. K'e is one of the core values expressed in the Diné culture and it is to mean that we are intrinsically connected to each other and our environment. "K'e demonstrates that we should treat each other like relatives and that we all have a role in helping and learning from other people. We raise each other up and value the individuality of our collective voice, further extending these teachings into a compassionate community and beyond."

(stopbullying.org) Deep moral values such as this one can be understood cross-culturally and is the very make up of being human and leading a flourishing life. Literature can assist us in strengthening our ethical lenses through which we view the world. I do not presume to be able to teach another about their culture and traditions celebrated in their family; however, I do see myself as the caretaker of my students while they are in the library, and as such I want to establish a sense of community. Furthermore, I can take the responsibility of getting to know each of my students as individuals and knowing the content of my library books. I can responsibly acquire culturally representational and positive literature that I can help them to discover. And maybe my lofty desire that every child will find that one special book that sets them on the path of fulfilling their greatest potentials will be a reality.

Why Do We Need this Curriculum?

Why do we read fiction? For the characters! The characters are the stars of the brain show, and the library has no shortage of characters. There is a lot going on in the world of literature. New books are constantly being released and the once “classics” are being banned from the shelves. We are embarking on a new construct of inclusivity and appropriately representing cultures in all aspects of our lives. Children are now able to see their culture represented in stories in ways that were not necessarily available even a decade ago. What’s more, we are seeing a purge of the books that have negative portrayals and inaccurate cultural depictions of Native Americans. Being the librarian, I feel an obligation to know the content of the books on my shelves, and the ones that I purchase with precious school funds. So, when going through my school’s collection I must have a keen eye. I check reviews on reputable websites and/or read through as many books as I can myself. Many have been removed from my shelves. Books such as *Sing Down the Moon* by Scott O’Dell and *The Girl Who Chased Away Sorrow: The Diary of Sarah Nita, A Navajo Girl, New Mexico 1864* by Ann Turner on the surface seem to be told from the Diné perspective but in fact are filled with inaccuracies and do more harm than good. It is eloquently illustrated by Rudine Sims Bishop in her essay *Perspectives*:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then becomes a means of self-affirmation and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (paragraph 1)... When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. (paragraph 4)

Debbie Reese takes this concept further in her article *Critical Indigenous Literacies: Selecting and Using Children’s Books about Indigenous Peoples* when she states, “I have been adding a “curtain” to Bishop’s (1990) “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” metaphor when I talk or write about Native stories. This is a way to acknowledge and honor the stories behind the curtain—those that are purposefully kept within Native communities. Native communities resisted historical oppression and continue to preserve [their] culture by cultivating [their] ways in private spaces—behind the curtain.” (pg. 390-391) I believe I can use the “mirrors, windows, sliding glass doors and curtains” principle and the Diné Character Building Standards to strengthen students’ moral and empathetic skills through character analysis. According to the book *Core Empathy: Literacy Instruction with a Greater Purpose*, “...many people hold opinions or beliefs about empathy that, until recently, have had very little science to support them. Many believe, for instance, that empathy is something that some people have in abundance while others have it in short supply... Science however, tells us that, except in the

case of psychopaths, empathy is a natural ability that comes with being human, and that, indeed, we can impact its development through conscious practice.” (pg. 14)

Content Objective:

When reflecting on the Literature and the Moral Imagination Seminar, I first delved into the basic understanding of ethics. Moral virtues that my students can identify in literary characters to model “right” behavior. Virtues such as courage, empathy, self-confidence, friendliness, and generosity (and many more) can be used to teach and discuss behavior, feelings, action vs consequence and more specifically empathy. Moral virtues are cultivated and engrained by action and habituation. Literature gives students the opportunity, through their imagination, to identify and practice these character-building virtues without having to wait for a particular situation to arise, similarly, to how role play uses imagination to develop problem solving skills. Intellectual virtues are virtues of thought such as scientific knowledge, artistic understanding and cultural awareness. Through literature we can gain insight and understanding of our world throughout all time periods and of all the people that we share it with. Counter narratives in literature provide vital opportunities to view historic events from multiple points of view. Often from these new perspectives we recognize false beliefs that we may have been holding on to. We learn that what we once focused on as different can actually have more commonality than we realized. Or we learn from our past mistakes and help each other heal as a society. The Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education has a list of character-building standards listed that can also be explored and acknowledged through literature. Killip Elementary School does not currently have a Diné class, and I do not have the knowledge to address these Diné standards in the way that they are intended, but I can incorporate them into my curriculum. In my library, I have established a Diné section that contains a growing number of books written in both English and Diné as well as Diné culture stories and fictional books written by Diné authors. One such book is called *Healer of the Water Monster* written by Diné author Brian Young. This book weaves Diné creation stories, language, and spiritual characters into a very real point of view of a present-day Diné middle school aged boy living through his parent’s nasty divorce, trying to help his uncle who has PTSD, while also being counted on by the water monster. As a non-Native adult woman, I could relate to his interactions with his parents and his view of his uncle because I have gone through similar situations. The culture of this story is also rich and opened my eyes to a new world, more correctly, provided me the opportunity to peek behind a “curtain” to this young man’s world. These kinds of literary experiences are invaluable because not only is the culture and language honored, but others can relate in different ways in turn opening the door to empathizing with the character as a whole and envisioning the story.

When we think about literature, we may think of the many functions that literature can provide such as entertainment, for specific knowledge, or a biography of a particular person (just to name a few). Yet literature’s unique characteristic is that it takes place within and actively engages our mind. Author Judith A. Langer in her book *Envisioning Literature Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction* uses the term Envisionment Building:

We can think of envisionment building as an activity in sense making, where meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its own understanding of a work. There is a constant interaction between the person and the piece, and the particular meaning that is created represents a unique meeting of the two. An envisionment isn't merely visual, nor is it always a language experience. Rather, the envisionment encompasses what an individual thinks, feels, and senses-sometimes knowingly, often tacitly, as she or he builds an understanding. (p.14)

Langer goes on to describe that there is a nonlinear dance that takes place where the reader is immersed in the text, formulating images, opinions, and feelings then the reader steps back to reflect on one's own formulations and then proceeds again of reading and reflecting. Here is where we gather, through imagination, all of our individual personal experiences, prior knowledge, and unique social/cultural/religious placement in the world. This is known as making text to self, text to text and text to world connections.

“Literature also transports us to new times and new places, both real and imagined. Literature provides students with the opportunities to learn more about lives and cultures different from their own and to try on new perspectives and learn to appreciate the multiple perspectives in society, which can lead to greater empathy, understanding and compassion” (Hansen & Vasquez, 2022). Here is where literature and empathy will become fused in my curriculum and I will heavily address the book *Core Empathy: Literacy Instruction with a Greater Purpose* to guide my teaching strategy and instruction:

[the following] are the core empathy goals, skills, and practices students will be cultivating as a result of the CoreEmpathy approach:

I can recognize and express feelings: Students practice recognizing and identifying feelings in themselves and others. This includes developing a feeling vocabulary, practice in “reading” facial expressions and body language, and practice in asking someone else how they feel, as well as how to express their feelings to others.

I can listen: Students practice active-listening as a way to honor each other's ideas and to inspire their own. This includes practice in developing eye contact, keeping the body still yet relaxed, and how to listen for the feelings behind the words.

I can appreciate: Students practice how to notice and express appreciation for the positive qualities in someone or something else. This practice includes expressing appreciation for their teachers and peers, the stories they read, and what they are learning.

I can find common ground: Students discover their similarities with each other and the characters in books as they share their insights and life experiences through noticing, writing, and discourse.

I can empathize: Students learn and practice understanding the perspectives and feelings of others through all the above practices. Through this empathy practice, students will become adept at stepping into another's shoes, imagining what another's life might be like, seeing the world through the other's eyes, and imagining what they are thinking and feeling.

I can act with kindness and compassion: Inspired by empathy, students practice kindness and compassion, learning appropriate and helpful ways to respond to another’s feelings or experiences. Sometimes, this practice looks like an offer to help, words of encouragement or appreciation, simply listening to the other express their feelings, or offering to be *with* the other and not say a word.” (Page 15-16)

Teaching Strategies:

According to *Core Empathy* the Empathy First visual anchor will serve as a visual reference that will quickly allow students to anchor the different parts of empathy’s definition and associate it to everyday language...

“Empathy Is...Imagining What Another’s Life Is Like

It is seeking to understand what they:

See 

Think 

Feel 

I empathize when...

I *notice* by watching and listening

I *imagine* what they see, think and feel

I *act* with kindness and compassion.” (Page 31)

This visual anchor should be a displayed poster so students may reference, and maybe printed as a bookmark to use with their checked-out library book. It is practiced by saying aloud and using hand gestures, which has been proven as an effective learning technique,

“TEACHER: It is seeking to understand what they...

See (*point to eyes*)

Think (*point to head*)

Feel (*tap heart*)

I empathize when...

I notice...by watching (*salute*) and listening (*cup ear*).

I imaging (*tap forehead with your hand then move it up and out*) ...by what they see (*point to eyes*) think (*point to head*), feel (*tap heart*)

I act...with kindness and compassion (*with hand pausing on the heart, extend outward*).” (Page 32)

The next step is to choose an Empathy Rich Story. “The best book choices fall into one or a combination of the following three categories:

1. Inspiring empathy - a story written in a way that the reader is inspired to feel empathy for the character in a challenging situation.
2. Modeling empathy – a story with a character who models empathy for another character.
3. Eco-empathy – a story in which the reader empathizes with a living being or element in the natural world or in which a character models empathy for something in the natural world, demonstrating eco-empathy.” (Page 35-36)

Further integration of this lesson will focus on Diné literature and characters. “...using the empathy lens, readers will have the opportunity to acknowledge, seek to understand, and celebrate a character’s race, ethnicity, beliefs, lifestyle, or capabilities, while also bridging differences through the discovery of common ground. Conversely, students who identify with any of those characteristics will also benefit from seeing themselves on the page.” (Page 37) The following books are recommended:

- Healer of the Water Monster by Brian Young
- Have You Filled a Bucket Today by Carol McCloud
- Empathy is My Superpower by Bryan Smith
- Frybread by Kevin Noble Maillard
- When We Are Kind by Monique Gray Smith
- Finding My Dance by Ria Thundercloud
- Beauty Beside Me Stories of My Grandmother’s Skirts by Seraphine Yazzie

There will also be times that improving students' emotional vocabulary will be necessary. “...the Core Empathy approach begins with a focus on these building blocks of empathy: identifying and expressing feelings in ourselves and others. Many picture books are perfectly suited to this practice, as students look at depictions of characters’ facial expressions and body language as well as reading or listening for feeling words.” (Page 26) Establishing a feeling vocabulary is also important in finding and expressing common ground with others.

Empathy is further bridged to the story by designing and asking connecting questions. This is where empathy and storyline intersect for optimum moments of reflection and discussion.

Connecting Question Guidelines:

- Are asked in moments in the story when empathy shines brightest, connecting story elements with moments of empathy.
- Draw the reader into the main characters' personalities and the setting details within the first quarter of the story.
- Require the reader to notice character motivations and their connected actions in the middle of the story and how these relate to empathy.
- Invite ideas connecting empathy with the central message or theme toward the end of the story.
- Usually include the word empathy or empathizing and inspire the reader to explore a story for deeper meaning.
- Invite thinking around common ground where readers notice similarities between themselves and the characters.
- Often begin with “why” and “how” to invite interpretation, open responses, and interconnected meaning.
- Focus on character's feelings or probe our own feelings as a reader
- Refer reader responses to the different elements of Empathy First Visual Anchor Chart. (Page 56-57)

Classroom Activities:

Classroom Community Building Activities: In the book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* author Daniel Justice writes in the chapter *How Do We Behave as Good Relatives?*

Relationships are storied, imagined things; they set the scope for our experience of being and belonging...Kinship, like empathy, is as much an act of imagination as it is a lived experience and thus an inevitably multidimensional concept...story makes meaning of the relationships that define who we are and what our place is in the world; it reminds us of our duties, our rights and responsibilities, and the consequences and transformative possibilities of our actions...simply put, there can be no true kinship without imagination. The more expansive our imaginations, the deeper our capacity for empathy, and the healthier our relationships and communities will likely be. (Pages 74-77).

Although I do not have the traditional classroom setting and my time with each student is exceptionally limited, I feel that it is vitally important that my students and I establish that connection and sense of community...the K'e in the library. This can be an area of focus established around the start of the school year by getting to know my students and letting them get to know me. Using the book *Have You Filled a Bucket Today* by Carol McCloud I can focus the dialog on behaviors and words that either are “bucket fillers” or “bucket dippers”. I also hand out reading surveys to further get to know what the students are interested in, so I can help them find books that they will connect with.

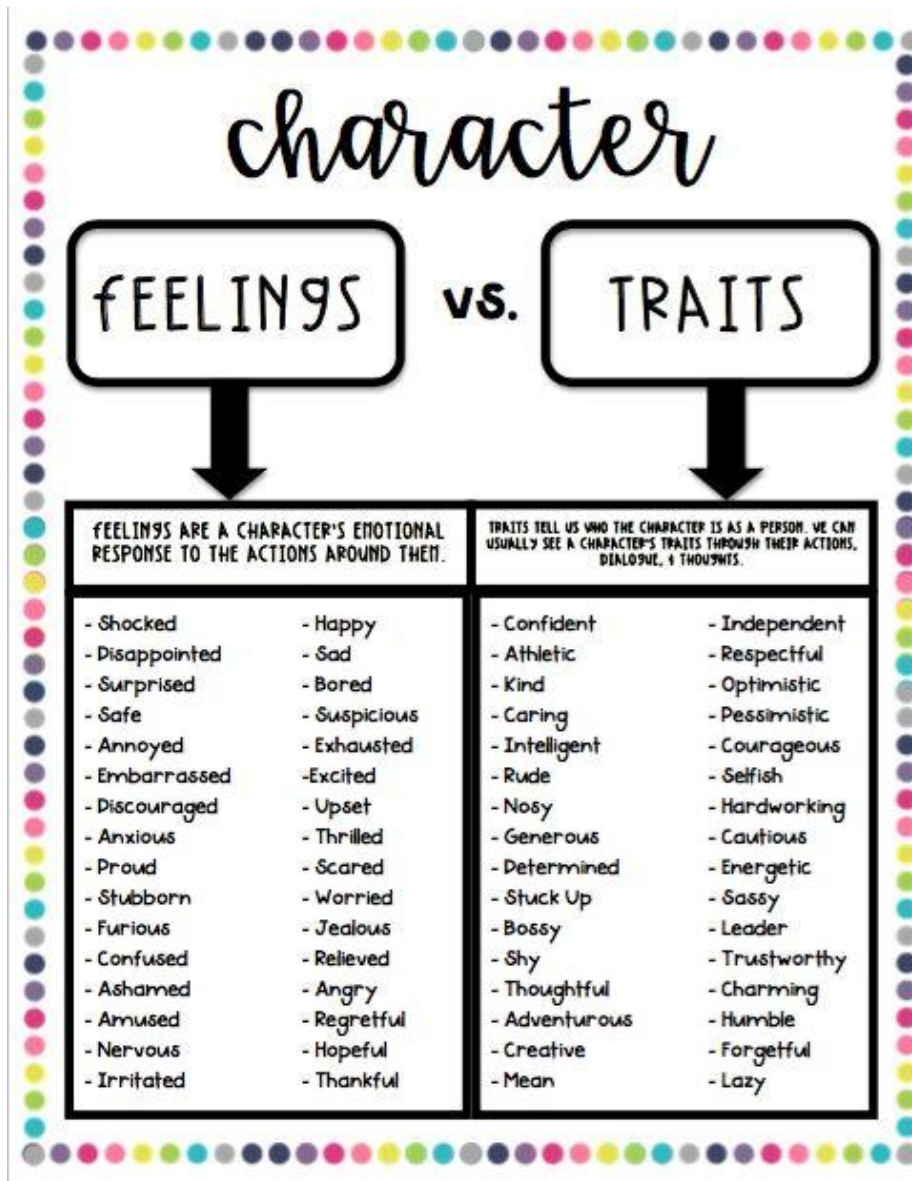
Reading Reflection/connecting questions written or in discussion. These questions, whether written or discussed together, ensure that everyone is on the same page. Using first, then, next and last we can summarize the story and get to the analytical details. We then identify the

message of the story. The next layer is to discern the moments of empathy and connection within the story using the Empathy First visual anchor chart.

Character Traits worksheet Inside vs Outside: Teacherspayteachers.com free resource. This is a good starting point to establish understanding between describing the character's appearance versus the character's personality/traits. I like this free resource because of the reminders at the bottom.



Character Traits vs Character Feelings - Self Made diagram or free resource. This chart builds on the last and helps teach the difference between how the character feels and the characters' traits. My favorite way to describe it is: feelings come and go and can be found in one or two scenes or pages, however, traits are more deeply rooted in the character (i.e. virtues) and can be found across many scenes or pages of the story. This also helps expand the students' feeling word vocabulary as well as recognition of virtues and values that the character holds.



Text to Text Connection: Literacyinfocus.com free resource. This worksheet gets the students to start thinking about how the story relates to their own life and experiences by expanding their imagination to make connections that they may not have initially thought of. I like the fill in the blank style and topics written to the side to assist the brainstorming process.

Name:

Date:

TEXT CONNECTIONS

«« TEXT TO SELF »»

THOUGHTS
EXPERIENCES
TRAVELS
FAMILY
FRIENDS
SCHOOL

reminds me of

because

«« TEXT TO TEXT »»

OTHER BOOKS
CHARACTERS
POEMS
ARTICLES
WEBSITES
BLOGS

is similar to

because

«« TEXT TO WORLD »»

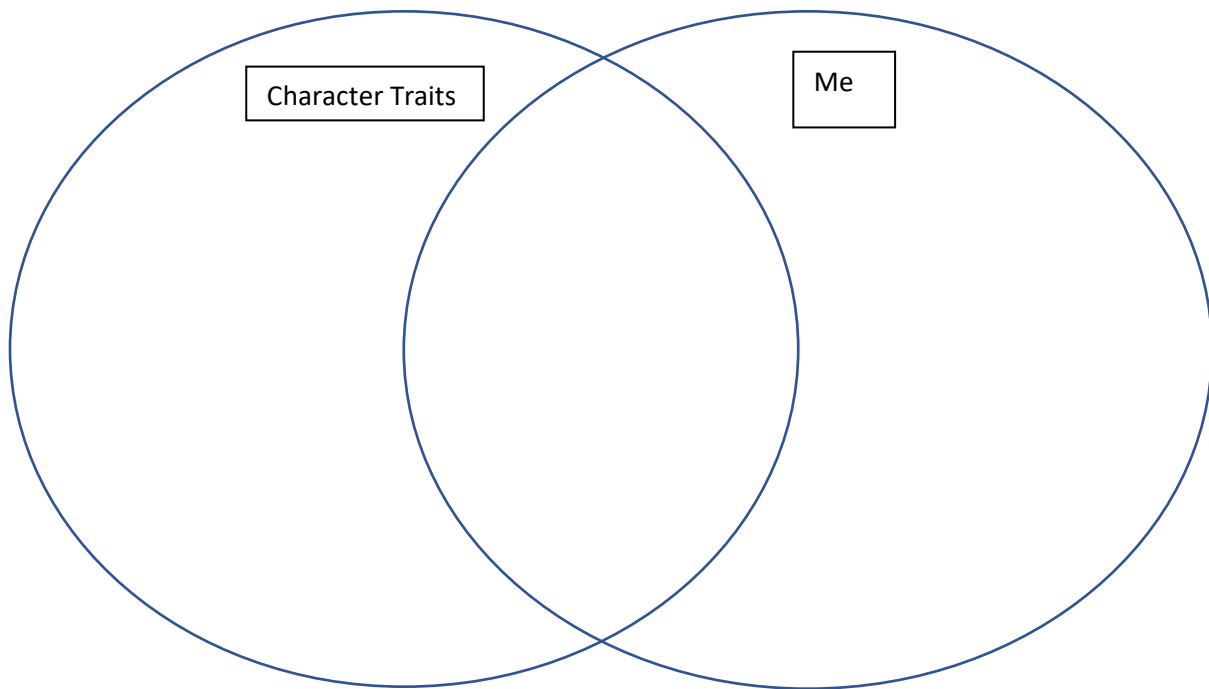
TELEVISION
MOVIES
CURRENT EVENTS
GAMES
NEWS
POP-CULTURE

makes me think of

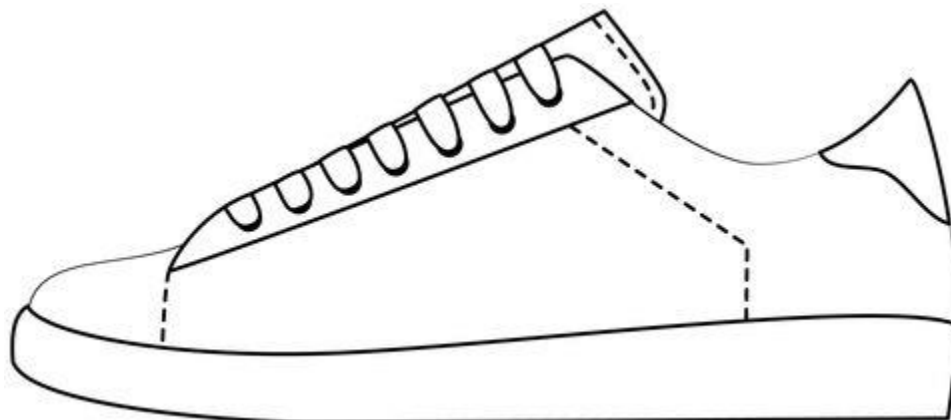
because

©Literacy in Focus (2014-Present) www.litinfocus.com

Character vs Me Overlapping Circles Diagram: Self-made diagram. Once we have analyzed the character and made some connections the students can start to make personal connections with the character. This diagram allows the student to write down differences and commonalities that they feel they have with the character.



Empathy: Free shoe outline template from Google search (there are many styles to choose from). The final goal is to empathize with the character; put yourself in the character's shoes. This can be done in a number of ways depending on what you'd like to focus on. For example, each section of the shoe can contain questions such as: What virtues/traits did (character) possess? How did (character) change from beginning to end of story? I connected with (character) because..., or If I were in (character)'s shoes I would ____ or have done _____ differently.



Student Assessment Plan

Reflecting on Empathy Teaching in the Classroom “A unit on empathy presents an assessment challenge: How does a teacher or other evaluator know that students are developing empathy (or not developing empathy) and how does a teacher know the degree to which this trait has been cultivated during the unit’s activities and discussions? And is it fair or possible to grade a student’s empathetic development?” (*Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times*). I found this quote and it made me reflect on how I am going to assess my curriculum. In my particular situation as the elementary school Librarian, I am not required to assign grades to the students. For the sake of this lesson plan, the activities, as mentioned above, as well as classroom discussions will serve as the standards for satisfactory class participation.

Alignment with Standards

This unit will align with the following Arizona State English Language Arts Standards – 4th Grade Reading Standards for Literature:

- 4.RL.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions)

- 4.RL.9 Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

My curriculum directly involves inspection and discussion of character's thoughts, words, and actions to identify values and feelings. Students will also be using inference and text connections to empathize with the characters and story. Different stories from traditional and cultural (specifically Diné) will be used to not only compare and contrast but to further establish empathy, tolerance, and inclusion.

It will additionally align with the following Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education Character Building Standards Pre-K – 3rd Grade:

- I will identify respectful terms
- I will demonstrate and express kindness

And 4th – 6th Grade:

- I will express critical thinking to establish relationships with the environment.
- I will develop personal goals to express relationships.

These Diné character building standards can easily be discussed with virtues and pointed out within stories. For example, when discussing text to self-connections the students can discuss the traits that are valued and expressed at home.

References

- Sims Bishop, R., (2017). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors.
<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>
- The impact of community in Navajo life. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2016/10/25/impact-community-navajo-life>
- Reese, D., (2018). Critical Indigenous literacies: Selecting and using children’s books about Indigenous peoples. *Language Arts, Volume 95, Number 6, July 2018*.
<https://library.ncte.org/journals/LA/issues/v95-6/29686>
- Hansen, A.L., Vasquez, A. (2022). Teaching literature-based instruction units: From planning to assessment. Routledge.
- Justice, D.H. (2018). Why Indigenous literatures matter. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- McLean Kesler, C., Knight, M. (2021). Core empathy literacy instruction with a greater purpose. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Young, B., (2021). Healer of the Water Monster. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Langer, J. A., (1995). Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction. Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Skerrett, A., Smagorinsky, P., (2023). Teaching literacy in troubled times: Identity inquiry, and social action at the heart of Instruction. Corwin Press, Inc.