

Donald G. Smith writes a thoughtful article outlining the purposes of why people read literature into different categories. He fittingly titles it, *Why Literature Matters*. After reading it, my beliefs were confirmed that reading is so incredible because it offers a different gift to each person that participates. All of the purposes, or “angles” as he calls them, offer explanations as to why the human race continues to read literature as time goes on. His lists include everything from practical reasons such as “the lifesaver angle”, to more emotional ones like “the mirror angle” and seems to cover almost all of the possible motives as to why human beings read. Focusing on a smaller scale and mimicking a repeated exercise used throughout this course, what about why literature matters and what it means to me? How I view and incorporate literature into my life most definitely affects the way I utilize literature in the classroom for my students. Reflecting on this allows me to take advantage of the things I have learned this semester and apply them in order for my students to get the most beneficial experiences from the literature I provide in the classroom.

When I ask myself the question, “What does literature mean to me?”, my mind immediately begins to travel to all of the wonderful memories of my childhood that involved books or reading. I can recall times when I asked my dad to read my favorite book Pickle Things over and over again until the pages began to fall out. It was no matter however because I had memorized the entire book and could still enjoy it. I have the fondest memories of being taken to the bookstore by my aunt every year for my birthday so I could pick out my next adventure. As I got older I still enjoyed reading just as much, if not more, but my experiences and what each book taught me began to change. I started to search for personal connections in my books, I thoughtfully picked novels that I thought would move me emotionally, or teach me something new. Steven Pinker, in *A Velocity of Being*, describes the magnitude of what books can offer. “With reading and writing, language becomes billions of times more powerful...We can learn from people who are dead, and we can teach people who have not yet been born...Reading also allows us to get inside the heads of people who are very different from us...That’s why, of all human inventions, it’s the printed word that multiplies our powers the most” (p.136). Being a teacher that is passionate about literature, I am of course aware of the academic benefits of reading and how it can set up students for success for the rest of their school careers but that is not the reason I am passionate about it. Literature has played such an important role in my life because of the endless gifts that it has, and continues to offer me as a student, teacher, learner, and an all around human being. Reading is something that I have taken from my family members that taught it to me and have carried it with me, adjusting as my needs and interests changed, all the way until adulthood. My goal as a teacher is to instill a love and respect for literature and the power it has to change your life. In addition I aspire to provide my students with a comprehensive library made up of high quality literature that represents all kinds of people and expose them to the different and unique genres of literature. I am limited to only one school year with my students and can only offer them so much. Literature will never stop being a teacher.

When I reposition the question that initiated this paper to center around my students, “What do I want literature to mean to my students?” rather than what does it mean to me, it causes me to become emotional. I want so badly for my students to become champions of their own lives and achieve what they need to live satisfied lives and I truly believe that literature is a

tool that my students will use for personal growth long after I have stopped being their teacher. The experiences I have gained while taking this class has helped me to set concrete goals that will hopefully influence my students to develop their own passion for reading. Throughout this course I have explored different categories of children's literature, examined the many elements that it up, and have discussed and reflected with myself and my classmates about what literature means to me as a reader and also a teacher. These methods have given me a lot of insight into what I aspire to implement into my classroom. Something that has stuck with me during this semester is how purposeful your classroom library should be. It has become clear to me that all literature that comes into contact with students has the potential to make an impression and that should not be taken lightly. An article I've quoted several times in my assignments, *Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum* by Rudine Sims Bishop, tackles the idea of cultivating a classroom library with representation in mind. The reason I have used this piece as a resource several times is because reading it was the first time it clicked for me how the books that students interact with can have such a profound effect on them. "When students are exposed exclusively to literature in which they see reflections of themselves and their own lives, they are miseducated to view themselves and their lives as 'normal', to interpret their own cultural attitudes and values as 'human nature', and to view other people and other lives as exotic at best, and deviant at worst". This thought is absolutely terrifying. Building a culture that does anything but support tolerance of others will never be a goal of mine. It is my firm belief that being intolerant of things that are different than you will only close doors and opportunities for personal growth. Consider the alternative perspective indicated by Bishop. "Students who do not see any reflections of themselves or who see only distorted or comical ones come to understand that they have little value in society in general and in school in particular". It is this particular sentence that haunts me. Putting literature aside, my dream for all of my students is to be happy with themselves and know that they have the power to accomplish whatever they believe to be important. Self-esteem issues that are a result of misrepresentation or underrepresentation of people in literature can destroy the reverence of the act of reading, and even more than that. This brings me to think about another article we read that will always stay with me, " *Just Don't See Myself Here*": *Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature* by Thomas Crisp and Suzanne M. Knezek. In this article a student who openly identified as a gay male stated, "I'm betting almost everything available featuring gay characters in books is here - and they fit on these two tabertops. [Heterosexual kids] have a much better chance of finding themselves or what they're interested in...I just don't see myself here" (p. 76). This comment troubled the authors so much they even used his quote in the title. Thanks to this course, as I continue to teach and further my career in education, I will always be mindful to make representation of all people a priority when choosing books for my classroom.

Something that I struggle with as an educator is how to teach my students the fundamentals of reading while at the same time showing them how wonderful it is. I worry, especially with my students that struggle while learning how to read, that requiring them to read at school, read at home, read in a guided reading group, read with the reading specialist teacher, and so on, will result in a child who associates reading with a chore or a forced activity. This is not something that was brought up or discussed in depth during this course, perhaps

because there is not a clear solution to this dilemma. I know that my students will not continue to make the choice to read unless they find joy in it and that is what worries me so much about the students who enter my classroom already with a dislike for literature. There are several strategies that I've learned this semester that I believe could be helpful, one of them being alternative formats like graphic novels, poetry, and nonfiction literature. I remember reading and really enjoying the graphic novel *El Deafo* by Cece Bell during one of our assignments. It reminded me that joy can be found in many different forms of literature, and that could be key for students who are reluctant readers. Currently there are several students in my class that will only read books from the *Dogman* graphic novel series by Dav Pilkey. The humor and action along with the comic-like images really appeal to students in my class who are reading above grade level, and also students who struggle the most. We also spent a week discussing nonfiction books in this course that could motivate struggling readers to find more about what they are interested in and boost their confidence. Nell K. Duke in *The Case for Informational Text*, writes about a student that showed an increased motivation when reading nonfiction books about topics of interest. "When reading informational books, he was more willing to persist in decoding difficult words, and he applied background knowledge more readily. As he experienced success with informational books, both his overall reading ability and his self-confidence grew to the point where his narrative reading also seemed to benefit". Another form of literature that could potentially aid the struggling and reluctant readers is poetry. Reading and writing go hand and hand creatively. I had a student a few years ago that never wanted to read at school or at home, but always wanted to borrow my Shel Silverstein books. Suzi Parker writes in *Well Versed: Why teaching Poetry Matters*, "The fact that poems are short to read, and that makes it less intimidating to read and write one". This can also make it a great place to start for ESL students. I am hopeful that the strategies I've learned this semester will help my students to find their own love for reading.

Unfortunately not all students will enter my classroom with a love for literature that matches mine. It wouldn't be truthful to say that my own passion for books and reading was something that I came to independently. I have many people to thank for that and I am grateful to those people, my family and my teachers, that modeled their own unique passion for literature that helped to fuel mine. If it were not for them I would've missed out on so many profound opportunities that changed the way I thought about things. I would've felt alone during my difficult teen years, I would never know what it feels like to be in somebody else's shoes, I never would've gone on imaginative adventures through space and time, my thoughts and ideals never would've been challenged and my personal growth would've been stunted. When teachers like me try to relay to families the importance of reading, what is hard to understand is that not only are we championing for the academic benefits, but there is so much more we are hoping for our students by making literature a priority. What I will take away from this course is that there are specific ways that I as an educator can make sure my students get the most out of reading such as providing a comprehensive and representational library and exposing them to many different genres and styles of books. I will make this a priority in my classroom because I know firsthand the magic that a good book can offer. Donald G. Smith says it best, "Literature matters because it is who we are".