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Dystopian Literature: A Reflection of Society Past and Present

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Unit Overview

Throughout my teaching career, I have taught bilingual education and monolingual ELA curriculum. The curriculum that I enjoyed most was the 8th grade ELA curriculum. I had stepped away from said grade level and upon my return this year, I feel elated that I can teach the unit on Dystopian literature. When I think of Dystopian Literature, many titles come to mind. Some YA (young adult) novels that come to mind are *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger*, and *Son* written by Lois Lowry. These books are considered companion novels because these are books that exist in the same world but focus on different characters and tell different stories. Oftentimes, the main character in the companion novel might be a minor character from the previous book. *The City of Ember* written by Jeanne DuPrau, is another example of dystopian literature. In this novel we join the characters in a struggle to flee a dying underground city plagued by corruption and dwindling resources. In my opinion, a popular example of a dystopian society is the one in *Hunger Games*. Students are familiar with this title because they have viewed the movie not realizing that it is a movie adapted from the book of the same title written by Suzanne Collins. In this novel we have a post-apocalyptic world controlled by rulers who use the citizens as pawns in battles to the death. All these titles aforementioned are prime examples of dystopian literature that are accessible to most of my eighth-grade students because they have similar Lexile's that average out to the median Lexile in the classroom. Another attractive feature these novels share is that the main characters are teenagers between 12 and 16 years of age. This is important because even though the stories are futuristic, apocalyptic and dystopian, students can identify with the human being portrayed in the novel.

It is common knowledge that dystopian literature is fiction but we cannot forget that it has a purpose. Through dystopian fiction we can effectively identify, analyze, and address modern day societal problems. Dystopian literature challenges readers to think about current social and political issues. It opens the readers mind to think about what is happening today and if we do not take action or try to change things, our future will be impacted resembling the problems they are reading about in the novels. Students are wise enough to know that dystopian literature has magical elements but they are engaged enough and curious enough to ask how or why things run the course that they do in the stories.

Thesis Eleven (Sean Seeger), writes that dystopian literature is more grounded in social realities than in

utopian literature. Students realize that no human is perfect and because of that a utopia is impossible and can only exist in literature that is sometimes not relatable. Dystopian characteristics illustrate a relationship between the life of an individual and the greater whole of a society's reality. In other words, a dystopian society shapes the individual and in turn the individual shapes society. They both go hand in hand and in order to identify dystopian literature, students will have to look in retrospect at themselves and those around them. The element of individualism is a driving force that creeps into dystopian literature when we are presented with a controlling or ruling group of people throughout the societal hierarchy. Here, the good of those who rule is a higher priority than those who do not. The ruling class uses fear, control, propaganda, restrictive laws and state approved violence to keep their populations under control. This ruling class establishes laws that they do not abide by therefore negating the idea of democracy or equality. In this construct, individualism is not good thing because it does not address everyone's individualism for good but only those in control thus oppressing all others who do not serve the ruling class 'purpose.

Through this unit I am hoping that students are able to identify the dystopian elements in the literature presented and go a step further and relate it back to society, past or present. It is important that students see dystopian issues as a result of a breakdown in society and a futile attempt at making the world a better place. I see one clear, strong connection that the students can identify and that is the relationship of a dystopian society to slavery. This connection addresses dystopia in history. According to the Wall Street Journal "Slavery was a dystopic form of socialism where slaves faced 100% taxation and received compensation only according to their needs as determined by slaveholders." (Feb. 27, 2020) Plantations were set up to resemble a society where a ruling class was established (the white owners) and the subjects (black slaves who were objectified) who had to abide by the rules. The parallels are many and the students will be able to make those connections once they identify the characteristics of a dystopia. Students will also be able to critically analyze slavery and the effect on society when they study American History in social studies. The focus of study is American Colonialism and you cannot study colonialism without addressing slavery. Our country was founded on the backs of African American slaves and oppression. When students are reading to make text to self-connections, I am hoping that they connect dystopian societies with the concept of gentrification as a present day display of a dystopia. Gentrification is something happening in real time and it would offer the students the opportunity to think deeply about what is happening around them and if that is what is best for all or just certain interest groups.

The common thread that all dystopias share is the idea that society is broken and that somehow it needs to be repaired by "people" who know what is best for the good of the masses all while having the power necessary to promote their own agendas. Dystopian literature will give students the opportunity to identify what is wrong and then offer viable, real solutions to alleviate or correct the societal ills they are identifying.

Rationale:

Like many of my students, I am from New Haven. I was born and raised one street over from Roberto Clemente and I attended Hill Central School. Growing up I saw many of the same societal woes that my students are seeing today. Trends, styles, and demographics change over the years but flaws in society remain the same. These flaws ebb and flow over the years but pretty much remain the same. Poverty, homelessness, inequities, political unrest, racism, and lack of medical care just to name a few, are never ending problems that seem to have no solution in sight. As a community, we see the "band-aid" placed on

the problem but viable long term solutions never seem to materialize. When the community talks about ways to solve these issues, other issues come up mainly money or the lack of. Then there is good old bureaucracy, it never fails to show up and halt any plans set in motion. Another issue that we see as a community is corporate or personal interest. Much like this idea of dystopia, these two elements lend themselves to the task of halting any plans or ideas for viable solutions. It fits into the idea of self-serving at the expense of the people. Although the idea of New Haven being a utopia is impossible, the fact that we live with some dystopian elements is unacceptable. Through the study of this unit I want to be able to empower the students and help them see that they are the catalyst of change. As they move on to high school and they begin to observe their surroundings and community more, I want them to be able to see through the smoke and mirrors and hold people in power accountable.

I am fortunate enough to currently teach at Roberto Clemente Leadership Academy for Global Awareness in the Hill section of New Haven, Connecticut. My students are eighth grade English Language Arts students. They come from modest income homes. We have a large population of students from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Syria, and Afghanistan. Many of these students are new to the country and find New Haven to be a nice place because the city was very welcoming when they arrived. Being young and new to the area, these students are not yet aware of issues or problems in their neighborhoods. Some of our Afghan and Syrian students on the other hand come with a unique experience. Some of our students do not remember home but they do remember relocation and or refugee camps. They share that in these camps they had more freedoms and better opportunities than in the country they had left behind. We know that in these camps there are systems in place to maintain order. This alone can reflect dystopia but to them it does not because where they are from was more oppressive than where they ended up. Through literature and discussion it is my hope that these students learn that oppression to any degree is dystopian. They should be able to begin recognizing that dystopian elements surround them even if they come under the guise of a “new and different” culture. It is my hope that at the end of the unit, all students, but in particular the Middle Eastern students develop a voice and express what they think is wrong or not working. In that same breath I want them to be able to provide ideas that provide viable solutions to their specific needs and issues in order to live in a society that better serves them and generations to come.

Each year I find that students are eager to learn and many by the middle part of the year begin asking questions about the community that surrounds them. It is my duty to have students think beyond the neighborhood microcosm. Reading and analyzing dystopian literature will give them that opportunity to see the bigger picture and how societal problems sometimes cause a ripple effect. Creating awareness among the students today can aide in the creation of future advocates. I also think it is important to stress the fact that although teamwork is ideal, leaders are necessary. Teaching them what real leadership looks like versus dystopian leadership is a life lesson that they can carry with them to future endeavors.

By working with my students this year, I am able to appreciate that they want to learn more about advocacy and making an impact in their community. The students also know that community service hours are part of their high school graduation requirement. Being aware of problems in society will help them make a meaningful choice as to where and how they will comply with community service when the time comes. The students have become quite proficient in formulating higher level questions that guide them in critical, analytical reading. I can offer them various novels that illustrate dystopian societies and the fall of that systematic way of living and controlling people. I also think viewing art would be beneficial when discussing dystopian societies. As the saying goes, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Visual arts help stimulate ideas and for students who are visual or language learners, a picture can offer them the opportunity to express what they see and how it fits into the topic of discussion. The art serves as a prompt or sentence

starter which can lead to student discourse. Students should have choice and various vehicles to demonstrate learning. I think one good way of doing this will be to promote a group project. After research and discussion, students will identify problems in society that they feel passionately about. After formulating a list, students will then narrow it down to 5 main issues that they feel they can solve and find creative ways to address them. They will be tasked to work in a group and work to solve it long term. They will need to create a plan that will work from beginning to end making sure to trouble shoot along the way. This will help create stamina and perseverance because in the design of their project they undoubtedly will need to start over when an idea is not viable. I also think it is important to reach out to community leaders who have led and implemented proposals. The benefit of this is twofold. The students will definitely receive a wealth of knowledge but they will also have the opportunity to ask these leaders questions, tough questions that pertain to themselves or their family in regards to improving society around them.

I think that the text to self and text to world connections are important. Dystopian literature provides the opportunity for both in a unique and challenging way. Students are able to read these stories and appreciate how the author is creating a fictional and alternate world addressing problems that exist across time and space. Dystopian literature almost always displays human nature regardless of the fictional elements. The fictional elements are necessary when reading and identifying this genre because it represents the futuristic element that sets this genre apart. The interesting fact is that students can see some of these futuristic scenarios and appreciate that they are not impossible in a lifetime. Students when making this point sometimes refer to cartoons like The Jetsons because of all the futuristic gadgets that have become a reality today. Although this genre may seem far removed from the students, it can help them ask the existential question, "What is my role here in the world? What am I supposed to do with my life?" "How can I create a better future and world for myself and those around me?" In my opinion dystopian literature is powerful and my hope is that through this unit I can tap into that power and help the students become citizens of the world. This topic allows students to find a voice they thought they did not have.

Content Objectives:

Throughout my years of teaching, I've discovered a keen interest among my students to learn more about current events and the world that surrounds them. Because they are quite proficient at crafting higher level questions that guide them in research and reading they can work independently. Through inter disciplinary curriculum, students have become more proficient at building bridges with previous learning and new concepts. My goal with the group of eighth grade students whom I will instruct this year is to create a greater level of interest and curiosity while studying dystopian literature. I plan on exposing them to various dystopian novels, journals, short stories, and photographs related to current events addressing societal problems and what a dystopian solution looks like when implemented by the powers that be. I think it is also important to incorporate maps, helping students get a geographic sense of where we are located in relation to the rest of the world even if the world is a fictional one that at some point in history existed. I think it is important that students study and look at colonial maps as they study the topic of slavery and how this dystopian structure had an actual physical location. Incorporating the opportunity to look at the maps analytically can help students understand that geographic distance is not the most important element when we take into account that human nature surpasses geographic boundaries because people are people. I also think that the study of geographic locations shines a light on communities around the world that may be

oceans away but share similarities that can only be explained by the characteristics we share as humans and citizens of the world.

A fundamental component of the ELA class is research. Students are responsible for gathering information about topics and themes as we encounter them in our literature. I also think the research component early on will help the students explore the topic of slavery as it relates to the thirteen original colonies and dystopian society because that is a major part of their social studies curriculum. Engaging in such multi-faceted learning about societal evolution will enhance their understanding of the tangible historical elements of dystopias.

By this unit's culmination, students will skillfully read, analyze, discuss, and articulate written responses, connecting fiction, non-fiction content, historical and current events. Students will also be able to create a plan or blueprint as to what a plan and proposal should look like when addressing issues that affect them and the world that surround them.

Teaching Strategies:

Although as an ELA teacher, I am aware that pre-teaching vocabulary is a sound practice for all students, I also find it important to bring the word to “life” for students so that they experience the language in context. It is especially beneficial for language learners and students with special needs. Relying on videos, pictures, and art work help students create a connotation of words that they later will denotate using some of the vocabulary graphic organizers that help with vocabulary acquisition: The Frayer model, word map meaning organizers, picture dictionaries, and the vocabulary web wheel. Students will also benefit from using a dictionary to research definitions and be able to see the word in context. Before each lesson, vocabulary should be front loaded in the attempt to facilitate overall comprehension while activating schema. We activate schema by stimulating the students mind with visuals. Activating schema is a way to achieve a baseline comprehension before embarking on a lesson that may not reach some.

In order to continue teaching my unit, activating schema is always important because I need a starting point to begin my teaching. This schema activation will be annotated in a journal. Journal work is so important because students are able to organize their thoughts, how they learn best. Because I have such a vast group of students with different needs, this journal will contain the information they need to continue classwork and increase comprehension. They can choose to use visuals, drawings, key concepts, color schemes, connotations, and ideas in their native language. My end of year goal is to have students express themselves with more writing which is possible because they are using scaffolding techniques. The overall unit questions will be “Who am I as an individual, within my community and as a future problem solver? How can I impact my future and of those around me? What are some issues that I see around me that may not be equitable for some? Can I create a movement that will be noticed by policy change makers? How can I mobilize those around me who identify the same injustices as myself?

Following their journal entries, students will employ the Cornell note template. It is always beneficial when reading and annotating nonfiction texts. Students will formulate questions that they will answer after reading specific articles and literature. This method supports concise note-taking, efficient information storage, and helps in practicing summarization.

Emphasizing best practices, graphic organizers like KWL charts (What I Know, Want to Know, and Learned) and story maps are beneficial, especially for language learners and students with special needs. The graphic organizers are useful because they drive the students to really interact with the readings, thus helping them to recall important information for future use. These graphic organizers help students engage in meaningful dialogue surrounding the topic. Once completed the students can pair up based on what they want to learn and share amongst each other what they already know. This fosters focused classroom discussion, which students do not get enough of. The focus on what they want to learn helps guide their research and be specific to the topic. Story maps make it easier for students to read and keep track of what they are reading. This also serves as a good study guide because all the information is on one page and readily accessible. It also helps bolster confidence in students who do not participate much, because they are not being asked anything they do not know or something that is not on the organizer. Another useful graphic organizer is the Venn diagram. Students are always asked to find similarities and differences between topic and characters who may seem to have nothing in common. The Venn diagram is useful because it gives students the opportunity to compare and contrast, really looking deep into the concept and reasoning their answers to then be able to support them.

The model text also referred to as the core novel that I intend on using is *The Giver*. This novel is part of the current 8th grade curriculum. *The Giver* is a good example of dystopian literature set in a future society that is seemingly perfect, but this perfection comes at a great cost. The protagonist, Jonas, lives in a community that values sameness and predictability above all else. There is no war, pain, or suffering, but there is also no color, music, or emotion. At first it seems an ideal society because they have eliminated all the bad things that happen in society but upon closer analysis we discover that they have also eliminated all the good because the success of the community outweighs individual happiness.

The novel opens with Jonas's twelfth birthday, when he will learn the truth about his future. Jonas is selected to become the next Receiver of Memory, a highly respected and isolated position. The current Receiver, who becomes known as The Giver, is an elderly man who holds all of the community's memories from before the society was created. The elders in the community think that if people had memories of the past, they would commit mistakes and deal with pain and hurt, disrupting the "perfect" society they have created.

As Jonas receives memories from The Giver, he begins to experience emotions and see color, things that are not allowed in his society. He learns about pain, love, and war, and becomes increasingly unhappy with the sameness and lack of choice in his community. The Giver shares with Jonas the memory of a baby who was released from the community, which Jonas comes to understand means that the baby was killed. To add to Jonas's horror, the baby was "released" by his father in a very emotionless, detached matter of fact way. At this point Jonas becomes angry and scared by the cruelty of his seemingly perfect society who see nothing wrong with this procedure.

Jonas decides that he must escape the community, and The Giver helps him to plan his escape. Jonas leaves in the middle of the night, taking with him a baby that was scheduled to be released. He travels through the wilderness with the baby, experiencing hunger and cold for the first time. Eventually, he comes upon a hill and sees the lights of a nearby town, giving him hope that he will find a new, better life beyond the boundaries of his old community.

The novel's ending is unclear because we are left to wonder what happens to Jonas and the baby. We can infer that Jonas and the baby will face challenges and hardships, but that they will also be free to experience the full range of human emotions and live a life of true freedom.

Throughout the novel, the theme of the importance of individuality and the dangers of conformity is explored. The community in *The Giver* has chosen to eliminate all differences between individuals in order to eliminate conflict and suffering, but in doing so they have also eliminated joy, true love, and the full range of human experience. The novel suggests that true happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved through the freedom to make choices whether they cause pain because the message is that you cannot have one range of emotions without the other.

In the book *The Giver*, Lois Lowery develops the characters known as elders who control basic life events that we take for granted and they in turn control society. Family units are assembled, created by the elders. Babies have birth mothers, who upon giving birth have to hand the baby over to the nurturing center. These mothers are denied the process of bonding with the babies. The way families are created in *The Giver* go against what students recognize as family units and these elements in the novel inspire dialogue amongst students because it is a topic they can relate to and have knowledge about. This is an ideal starting point because the family unit is seen as a foundation of society. Students can relate to Jonas because they are the same age and throughout the novel, Jonas is questioning life around him much like the students in my class.

Classroom activities:

Lesson One Objective: Students will be able to define the terms 'utopia' and 'dystopia' and the characteristics of each society.

Creative Writing Prompt: The Dystopia Unit lends itself to creative writing. Students will write in their "Creative Writing Journals" or write in their free write notebook that has writing prompts as warm ups to stretch their imagination skills prior to instruction.

Lesson Two: Students will be able to reflect on their beliefs regarding the topics of family, government, love, war, and individualism in society and draw conclusions about each topic by composing "I believe..." statements that encompass their perspective and point of view.

Anticipation Guide: Facilitator will have students reflect on their ideas regarding the topics of family, government, love, war, and individualism.

Turn and Talk: Facilitator can have students engage in discourse in order to push each other's thinking to complete the anticipation guide as much as possible.

Composing "I believe..." Statements The purpose of this activity is to have students produce clear statements for their beliefs. These statements will prove to be thought pieces over the course of their reading, and will return to them to close the unit. These belief statements will help students be able to articulate the reasons why they believe what they believe, looking at the positive rather than the negative aspects

Lesson Three: Students will be able to outline and create a hypothetical dystopia from their own imagination and identify the societies' central issue, the societal flaw that has caused it, and what the dystopia seeks to teach their classmates. They can choose to create a visual project or write an essay.

Lesson Four: Students will be able to discuss whether or not current society is dystopian.

Dystopia in Our Society: Facilitator can engage the class with the reading of an informational text that explores the idea that our current world as dystopian.

Facilitators can encourage a formal discussion using the Socratic Seminar or they can open up the questions so that students can speak to their peers informally in a Turn and Talk, Stop and Jot and Chat, or a teacher-led informal discussion.

Lesson Five: Students will be able to work with a partner and brainstorm two societal needs that they can address and improve through community service hours. Students will identify the problem, who is affected, how can they address to resolve or help alleviate the issue. What outside sources or people can they contact and solicit help. How can they recruit help from peers and other adults. Students will also take the opportunity and use a map to identify places of need and analyze how close or far from us does the problem exist.

Lesson Six: Students will be able to identify changes in their original beliefs documented at the beginning of the unit with the Dystopia Anticipation Guide and discuss what caused there to be a change.

Anticipation Guide: Facilitator can provide the students with their Anticipation Guide from the beginning of the unit for them to retake in order to identify change in their mentalities. The students need to support their findings in writing with at least two pieces of evidence.

Resources:

Student reading list:

The Giver by Lois Lowry

The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau

A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle

The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm by Nancy Farmer

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley; John Sutherland (Introduction by)

1984 by George Orwell

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess

Animal Farm by George Orwell; Christopher Hitchens (Introduction by); A. M. Heath

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

Materials for Classroom Use

- Computers
- Student Journals
- Cornell Note Template
- KWL Chart
- Chart Paper
- Maps
- Colored Pencils
- Highlighter
- Poster board/poster paint
- List of Sentence Starters
- List of Meaningful Dialogue Prompts
- Team-Role Graphic Organizer
- Dictionary or Pictionary
- Depth of knowledge question wheel

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. Students will use the anchor curriculum text to explicitly show examples of concepts discussed in the unit.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue. Students will use all information gathered on the various forms of graphic organizers completed from different sources in order to complete discussion questions, class discussions, and oral presentations.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2

Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments. Students will apply this standard when working with the Cornell Notes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3

Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes). Students will identify the idea of community unity and provide evidence to support their finding.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content. Students will be required to write an expository essay where they must apply what they have learned throughout the unit.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2.D

Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic. Students will be required to use terms and new vocabulary acquired in their reading and writing in order to explain the topic of their writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. Students will engage in the writing process when working on the essay assigned. The essay preparation is heavily reliant on peer editing and revising. Instructor input is given at different stages.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. Students will be afforded the opportunity to participate in class discussions where they will be required to be active participants.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1.B

Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed. Discussion ground rules will be created by the students and they will post them and hold each other accountable for following established protocol.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.3

Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not. Students will practice this standard through informal class discussions as they listen to differing opinions.

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Booker, Keith M *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Greenwood, 1994

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