

Comprehending Poetry with Social Justice Themes

Tara Concannon-Gibney

In this teaching tip, the author shares her practice in relation to comprehension strategy instruction and poetry through a social justice lens.

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As a child, I took great delight in poetry and when I began teaching, poetry was always a stalwart teaching tool that I kept close to hand. It can be a wonderful motivator for all students, particularly those who struggle, due to its brevity, its rhythm and musical qualities, and its ability to paint pictures in our minds in just a few words (Edwards, 2014). Poetry can help develop a student's reading comprehension ability, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and pleasure in the printed word (Nichols et al., 2018).

Poems that take on social justice themes can help students to understand the experiences of others, to feel the emotions of others and thus improve their ability to interpret life and the challenges it can pose while also providing space for discussion of possibilities and opportunities (Damico, 2005; Nichols et al., 2018). This reflects Bishop's (1990) metaphor of windows (their own experience), mirrors (the experience of others), and doors (new possibilities). Poetry naturally lends itself to repeated readings which encourages students to delve deeper into the language and to comprehend the meanings inherent within a poem (Rasinski et al., 2016). Visualization can be used to see and *feel* an event or experience within a poem. Repeated reading can facilitate inferences and meaningful connections that unlock a poem's message, and this can be a powerful reading experience for young students (Eva-Wood, 2008). Kozak and Recchia (2018) has highlighted the importance of extending reading instruction to include a focus on social competence, that is, the ability to empathize with others' cognitions, emotions, and motivations. Thus, poetry can offer teachers and students an opportunity to "stretch their awareness, adapt their perspectives and construct new knowledge" (Eva-Wood, 2008, p. 584).

In this teaching tip, I will discuss how I used poetry to teach comprehension strategies while also exploring social justice themes. I focus on the comprehension strategies of visualizing, drawing inferences, and making connections in poems related to themes such as bullying, homelessness, and climate change.

Poetry as a Vehicle for Curriculum Integration

When I was teaching third grade, I often felt overwhelmed by a curriculum that was "overloaded" (NCCA, 2010, p. 25). Despite having considerable autonomy in relation to teaching decisions (Salokangas et al., 2020), I still had so many subjects and topics to teach, a large class of 31 boys and girls in a middle-class suburban school and, limited resources for teaching literacy. For reading instruction, we had basal readers and workbooks that were uninspiring and often tedious. I had a lively class of that enjoyed discussions and I felt that my literacy teaching should do more to encourage and develop their reading abilities as many struggled with reading comprehension despite having good decoding abilities. As I had always had an interest in poetry, I decided to explore a range of poems that could enhance their reading comprehension while also encouraging meaningful discussion on cross-curricular themes that had a social justice emphasis. In this way, I could enrich my reading instruction, enhance their reading abilities, and address the need for meaningful curriculum integration in my classroom.

I decided to teach the comprehension strategies of visualizing, inferring, and making connections using poetry that reflected social justice themes. Visualization requires students to draw on their senses to create images in their mind and as poems are highly descriptive, they encourage visualization. Poems, by their nature, are not generally fully

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Tara Concannon-Gibney is a Assistant Professor in the Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland; email tara.concannon-gibney@dcu.ie.

explicit and so require reader inference to ensure comprehension and social competence requires one to make inferences about others' experiences (Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). Making connections to poems enables children to empathize with the poet's experience, which is essential in reading comprehension and in the development of social competence.

Exploring Bullying through Poetry

The first poem that we explored was *Left Out* by Celia Warren which focuses on bullying—an important issue that is highly relevant to all children. This poem focuses on a young girl who feels isolated from her peers. While some children may have experienced this first-hand, exploring this experience through poetry can help others to consider the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of others which is essential in building social competence (Slee & Mohya, 2007). Discussion on a poem like this may help to develop children's moral imagination (McCollough, 1992) and the ability to understand and care for others in meaningful ways (Noddings, 2005).

At first, I read the poem aloud to the children while displaying it on a chart to model appropriate prosody and to allow the words to sink in. The children read it themselves silently and then we began a discussion guided by the following questions:

"What is the poem about?"

"How do you know?"

"Is this a happy poem?" "Why not?"

I then modeled a visualization of the start of poem using the grid in Figure 1 below. Taking a line or two at a time, I sketched what I saw in my mind's eye. Then I pondered, "what feeling do I get from this image?," which had to be inferred and "have I felt this feeling recently?" which encouraged me to connect to that piece of the poem and empathize with the poet. I then invited the children to engage in guided practice. I asked them "how can I draw this line?," "would anyone like to infer the feeling it evokes?," "would anyone like to make a connection and share a time when they had this feeling recently?" As I noticed the children were growing confidence with their contributions, they got a grid to work on with their partners. They asked

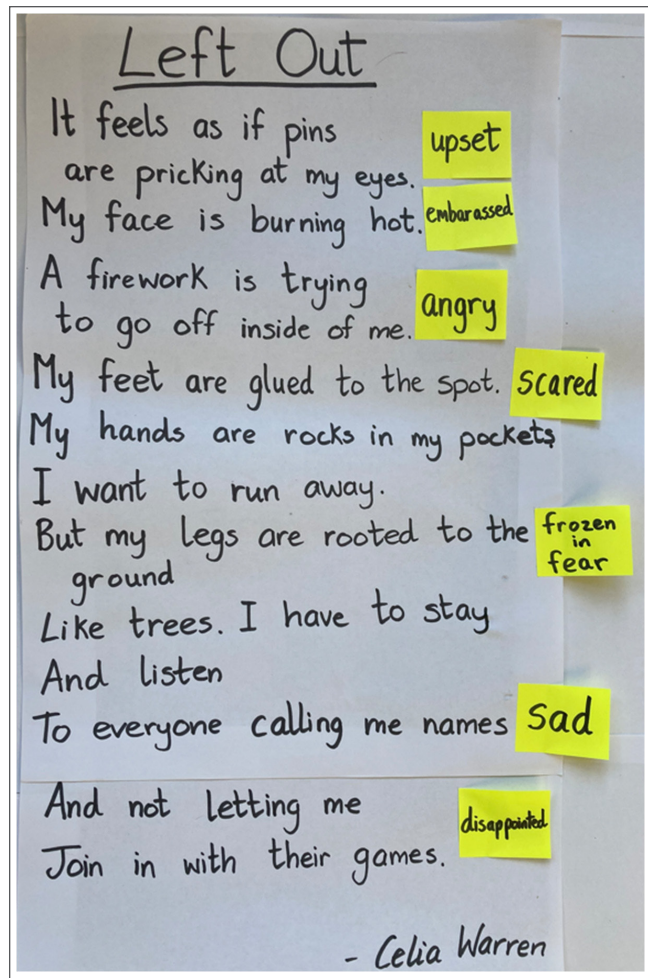
Figure 1
Left Out: Strategy Grid

	Sketch	Infer feeling	Make a connection
<i>It feels as if pins Are pricking at my eyes.</i>			
<i>My face is burning hot.</i>			
<i>A firework is trying To go off inside of me.</i>			
<i>My feet are glued to the spot.</i>			
<i>My hands are rocks in my pockets. I want to run away.</i>			
<i>But my legs are rooted to the ground Like trees.</i>			
<i>I have to stay And listen To everyone calling me names</i>			
<i>And not letting me Join in with their games.</i>			

each other, “how will we visualize this part?,” “what feeling can we infer?,” “have we felt like this recently?”. Lively discussion followed. Then each pair shared their work with another pair. They compared their visualizations, their inferences, and connections. They were keen to share with the whole-class what they had in common with another pair of students and how their interpretations differed.

At this point in the lesson, we began to explore how our inferences might affect a subsequent reading of the poem. For example, for the first two lines, we had inferred that the poet felt upset, we discussed how we could read those lines displaying that emotion and whether we would read it fast or slow. I modeled the first two lines and the children engaged in echo and choral reading. But then, a confident child offered to model how to read in an “embarrassed” manner and he led the echo reading (see Figure 2). Then others offered to do the modeling—it was quite infectious! I divided the class into groups and each group rehearsed

Figure 2
Left Out: Poem with Annotations



a performance of the poem. Each group member took a section with a different emotion to rehearse. After several repeated readings, the children were eager to perform it for the class. Such was their enthusiasm, that each group visited another class in the school for an additional performance. After this excitement, we reflected on the experience, we discussed “how did we interact with the poem today?,” “How did visualizing, inferring, and connecting help us understand the poet’s experience?,” and “what messages can we take from this poem?”

Exploring Homelessness through Poetry

The next poem that we explored was *Sitting in a doorway* by John Foster. This poem focuses on the plight of a homeless person. Sadly, homelessness is quite a prominent feature of Irish society, and the children were quite aware of this social justice issue. We began the lesson by displaying title of the poem on the board. I asked the children if they could infer the subject of the poem from the title. Then I displayed the full poem and I read it aloud to the children. They had an opportunity to read it silently. We began a discussion that required them to draw inferences:

Who is this poem about?

How do you know?

What feelings are in the poem?

What words create these feelings?

The discussion on feelings encouraged the children to engage in close reading of the poem (Young et al., 2015). They enjoyed thinking about the poet’s word choice in this way. We recorded our discussion on the chart in Figure 3 below using post-its.

We then attempted to visualize the poem (see Figure 4 below) and I encouraged the children to add color to their visualization to illustrate the feelings evoked in the poem. The children were interested in comparing their visualization—what gender had they chosen (I had not revealed the poet’s name), what position were they in (sitting, standing, leaning), what colors had they chosen, where were the colors placed?

We then looked to extend the inferences that we had made earlier. I asked the children to read the poem again and to consider their visualization and to infer what the poet might be thinking. I modeled some examples (see Figure 4). I made sure to support the content of my thought bubbles with references to the poem, so that the source of my inference was clear. For example, when I added the thought bubble “Everyone has forgotten about me,” I explained how the lines “back of the line...end of the queue”

had inspired me. I then encouraged the children to insert some thought bubbles into their visualization. Again, they enjoyed sharing their inferences with their peers. At last, I asked the children if they could connect to this poem in any way. I modeled a text-to-text connection of the book *The Little Matchgirl* (Andersen, 2001), a harrowing tale that fascinated me as a child. Many of the children shared text-to-world connections as many of them had observed homeless people in our town, in the nearby city or on the news. Others talked about how they had participated in charitable fundraising for the homeless. Some made text-to-self connections of times when they had felt very cold or when they had felt despair. We then reflected on the experience and discussed the poet's message and how inferring, visualizing, and connecting helped us understand that message.

Exploring Climate Change through Poetry

The third poem we explored focused on climate change. In this lesson, we began by examining the title of the poem.

Figure 3
Sitting in a Doorway with Annotations

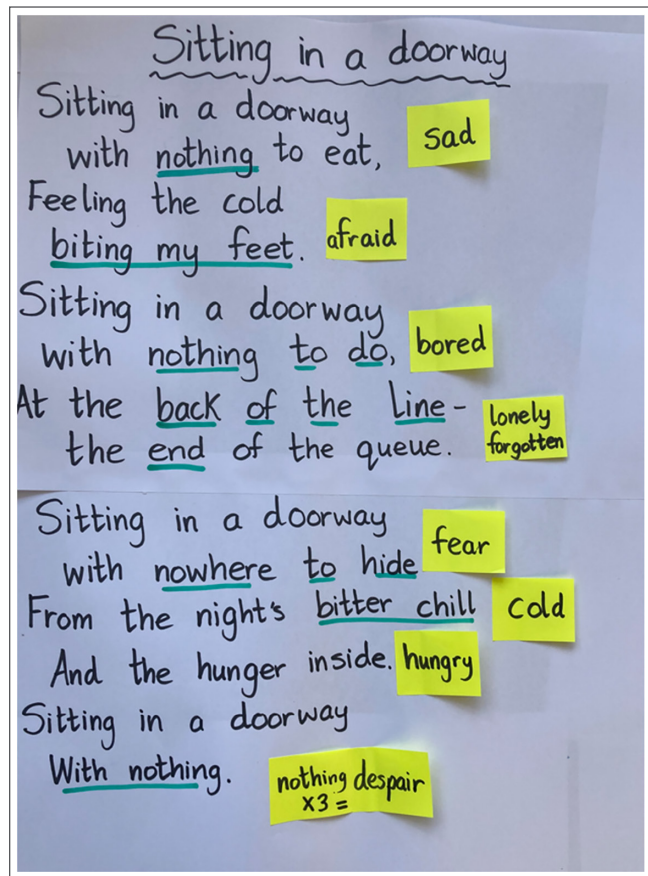


Figure 4
Sitting in a Doorway Visualization



We discussed what would *Captain Save-the-Planet* do? What would he look like? Then, I displayed the poem on a chart, and I read it aloud to the children. I told the children that were going to visualize *Captain Save the Planet* and to do so, we would need to look for clues in the poem to help us add detail to our visualization. Armed with pencils and their own copy of the poem, I asked the children to read the poem silently and then underline any words or phrases that describe him in looks or qualities. The children shared their findings with the class, and I highlighted them on the chart (see Figure 5 below).

I then asked the children to hunt for words that imply that this character is a "good guy." We discussed why we inferred that these words made us think he was an admirable character. We then looked for words or phrases that implied that the other characters in the poem were "bad guys" (see Figure 5). The children then added the other characters to their visualization. We then discussed the connections that we could make to the poem. When have we felt like "planet saving superheroes? We discussed what other 'planet saving superheroes' might do or look like. To conclude the lesson, we reflected on the poet's message and how the comprehension strategies of visualization, inferring, and making connections helped us to understand this message (Figure 6).

Figure 5
Captain Save-the-Planet (Annotated)

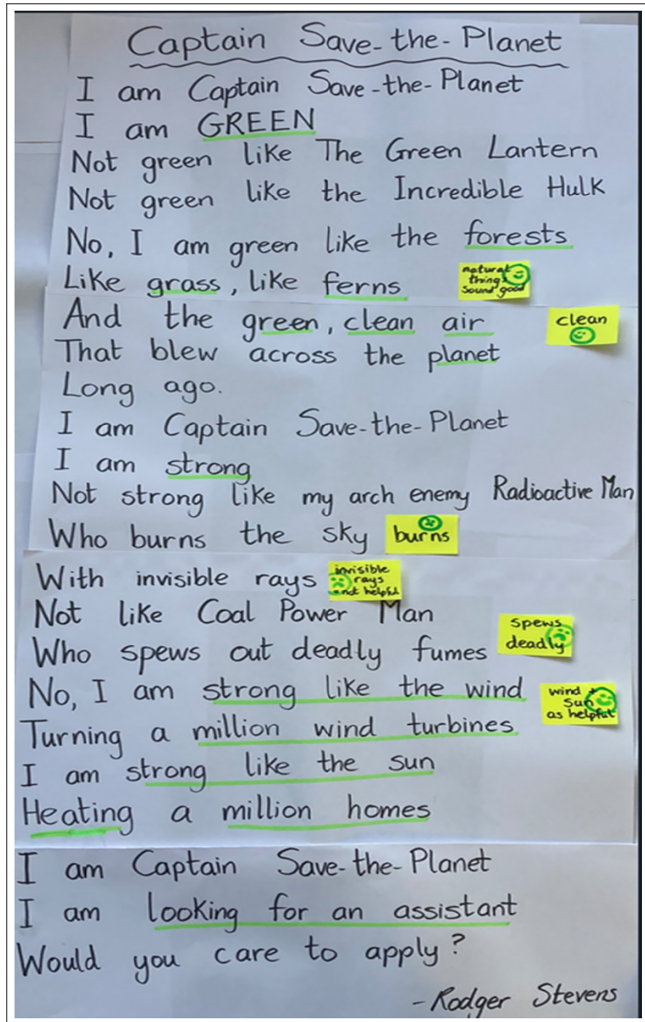


Figure 6
Captain Save-the-Planet Visualization



Final Thoughts

This teaching tip explored comprehension focused lessons based on poems with social justice themes. I chose these themes as I felt that the children in my class would be comfortable engaging in these discussions. It is important that teachers choose social justice themes carefully as sometimes there may be children who are directly affected by the

Figure 7
Recommended Books

Recommended books/websites	Social justice themes
<i>Be the Change: Poems to Help you Save the World</i> (Brownlee et al., 2019)	Climate change, environmental care
<i>If you could wear my sneakers</i> (Fitch, 2017)	Children's Rights
<i>Funky Chickens</i> (Zephaniah, 2018)	Racism, pollution
<i>Overheard in a tower block</i> (Coelho, 2017)	Bullying, social class, inclusion, poverty
<i>On the move: Poems about migration</i> (Rosen & Blake, 2022)	Refugees and migration
https://allpoetry.com/poem/12550569-Educate-a-Girl-Child-by-Jerusha-Melanie https://shesthefirst.medium.com/to-be-born-a-girl-4d336bbba629	Educational Equality

themes and may be sensitive to the content of the lesson. Other social justice issues that might be explored in this manner include children's rights, gender stereotypes, migration, and cultural diversity. There are many other poems on the themes discussed in this article and other social justice issues in the volumes recommended in Figure 7 below. I currently work with student teachers and in-service teachers, and I encourage them use poems that appeal to them and that will engage the students in their particular teaching context. The experience explored in this article reinforced the importance of including powerful poems in the elementary classroom and the value of extending literacy instruction across the curriculum to engage our students in meaningful discussions on texts. Indeed, according to Huck et al. (1993), "poetry does delight children, but it also helps them develop new insights, new ways of sensing their world" (p. 452).

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