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Literature and the Human Condition in Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The benefits of literature are countless. Social workers, however, are usually not inclined to count the teaching and practice of social work among its beneficiaries. We believe that literature is one of the ways to enrich vital components of social work knowledge, attitudes, and skills. In this article, we begin by calling attention to a historical precedent for the use of literature in social work education and practice. We then examine recent research on the impact of literature on human behavior, empathy, and critical thinking and consider its epistemological roots. Next, we review evidence from social work journals on the use of literature in teaching and practice. Having examined the relationships of literature to professional knowledge and practice, we devote most of the article to illustrating how, as social work educators, we are and can be using literature effectively in the teaching of social work.

KEYWORDS

Literature; social work knowledge; teaching techniques

The benefits of literature are countless. Social workers, however are usually not inclined to count the teaching and practice of social work among its beneficiaries. From its inception, social work has depended primarily on the social sciences for its knowledge base. Nevertheless, we believe that literature also can contribute to that understanding. “If one wants to know about human relationships, about the formation of people’s character,” writes a historian of science, “the novel may be a better way of arriving at understanding than any sociological surveys” (Mazlish, 2007, p. 119). We do not think it necessary to establish a hierarchy among disciplines that illuminate human behavior, but we consider literature one means of enriching that bedrock of professional practice—as well as other vital components of social work knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Reading literature, moreover, is a particularly pleasurable way to enrich knowledge of the human condition because it involves storytelling, a form of expression integral to us as human beings and one associated with some of our earliest, deepest, and often happiest memories.

In this article, we first call attention to a historical precedent for the use of literature in social work practice. We then examine recent research on the

impact of literature on human behavior, empathy, and critical thinking and consider its epistemological roots. Next, we review examples from social work journals on the use of literature in teaching and practice. Having examined these various relationships of literature to professional knowledge and skill, we devote the remainder of the article to illustrating how, as social work educators, we use it in teaching.

Historical Precedent

With her colleagues at Hull House, pioneer social worker Jane Addams contributed significantly to the development of academic sociology and, at the same time, recognized the importance of the humanities to the emerging profession of social work. Addressing the National Conference on Charities and Corrections in 1911, Addams acknowledged that the field needed both orientations, but as the following excerpt shows, she leaned more toward the humanities:

Much as we need economic study and forceful as is the sociology student in the problems pressing for solution in the depressed quarters of the city, personally I have found that some of the best things are found and put forward by the man or woman who looks at life from this humanistic point of view. (p. 371)

Consequently, Addams (1911) made this recommendation: “To any young person who wishes to go into the social ... field, I say bring with you all that you can that softens life, all the poesy; all the sympathetic interpretation” (p. 371).

From Addams’s own work comes an example of how literature nourished her “sympathetic understanding.” This was an attempt to understand the Pullman strike of 1894. The Pullman Palace Car Company president George Pullman had built a model town for his employees but ruled it autocratically, refusing to negotiate with workers who wanted a reduction in rent following layoffs and lowering of their wages. According to her biographer, Addams “resort[ed], as she frequently [had] before, to literature” to deepen her understanding of events, by comparing the despotic George Pullman to Shakespeare’s King Lear. “Shakespeare’s great drama brings her closer to a sympathetic understanding of Pullman and of his striking workers” (Elshtain, 2002, p. 111). In her essay “A Modern Lear,” Addams (1912) wrote that the comparison “modified and softened all her judgments” (p. 131).

The function of art, Addams wrote, is

to preserve in permanent and beautiful form those emotions and solaces which cheer life and make it kindlier, more heroic and easier to comprehend; which lift the mind of the worker from the harshness and loneliness of his task, and by connecting him with what has gone before, free him from a sense of isolation and hardship. (as cited in Elshtain, 2002, p. 139) [sic, for the use of masculine pronouns by this early 20th-century feminist]

From this we infer several functions of literature. First, as one of the arts, literature helps us to comprehend human experience, to aid in what Addams referred to as “sympathetic interpretation.” It is this essentially hermeneutic function of literature that we draw from as we point to specific examples of literature that contribute to social work knowledge and to social work education. The second function of art that we infer from Addams’s formulation is to help workers in the social work field to cope with the emotional strain of their work, its harshness, isolation, and proximity to poverty, deprivation, suffering, and death. Recognizing that entering the world of the destitute, the dying, and the deprived can be emotionally wrenching and lonely, Addams recommended the solace, the comfort, and the joy of art. As teachers we can encourage our students to draw on the attributes of art for self-care in order to reduce the emotional and physical strain of their work, as well as to deepen their understanding of social realities. In current parlance, one would say that the arts can reduce the risk of burnout.

Empirical Evidence

To Addams’s rationale for according literature a place in the “social field,” contemporary neuroscience adds several physiological reasons for its use. Recent research in that discipline offers empirical evidence of the value of reading literature (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013; Djikic, Oatley, Zoererman, & Peterson, 2009; Oatley, Mar, & Djikic, 2009). Currently available imaging techniques reveal the impact of narratives on structures of the brain, which until recently were thought to have no role in the interpretation of written words (Lacey, Stilla, & Sathian, 2012). Scientists believe this is why the experience of reading can make us feel so fully aware and alive. For example, reading words like *lavender*, *coffee*, and *perfume* elicit responses in our cerebral cortex related not only to language processing but also to the sense of smell (Gonzalez et al., 2006). Words that describe motion also stimulate several regions of the brain: those devoted to language processing and those in the motor cortex linked to our body’s movement and coordination. Textures evoke a similar multiplicity of responses. Neurological imaging reveals that the brain makes little distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life. The same neurological regions are stimulated. Thus, reading alone can greatly expand our experience.

Through neurologic observation, it is now recognized that literature allows us to enter worlds far beyond our own and to become intimately acquainted with people we would otherwise never know. Studies show that fiction offers an especially fine example of what written words can do to impact the reader’s emotional experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011). This effect, scientists have found, is distinctly different from reading nonfiction (Fong & Mar, 2011; Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, Dela Paz, &

Peterson, 2006). Entering fully into the thoughts and feelings of the characters we meet through colorful imagery, evocative details, and rich narrative description is a personal experience like no other, unique to each of us, and more significant in its effects than what was previously thought.

In recent research on the networking of the brain, Mar et al. (2011) concluded that there is substantial overlap between networks used to understand stories and those used to navigate interpersonal interactions, especially when we are trying to be empathetic. This capacity of the brain to construct a map of others' intentions has spawned a new area of research in psychology and social work called "theory of mind." In recent work, Dr. Mar's team found that the more stories preschoolers were read, the more keen their theory of mind and their capacity to know what others may want or need (Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2010). This finding builds on earlier research in which Mar and others found that individuals who read fiction seem better able to empathize, understand, and share the perspectives of other people (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). It is precisely this ability to step into the shoes of others—to empathize—that is so important in social work practice.

Epistemological Perspectives: Literature as Uncertain Science

Literature, according to Mazlish (2007), takes up the same task as the natural sciences, that of understanding our place in the universe, but carries it out using literary means (p. 120). Even if we recognize that "literary means" does not meet some of the criteria of science (particularly identifying and verifying the sources of data), we nonetheless can include literature as *one* source of our knowledge.

Novelists employ observation and experience as a means of understanding the human condition. For example, 18th-century English novelist Henry Fielding called his works "histories," and in the preface to his great novel *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding (1742/1967) told his readers that "everything is copied from the Book of Nature and scarce a Character or Action produced which I have not taken from my own Observations and Experiences" (as cited in Mazlish, 2007, p. 118). Novels often are autobiographical in that the author not only copies from the "Book of Nature" but is either himself or herself (or a close relation or friend) an identifiable character, such as the victim, or the object of central actions in the narrative. The works of Charlotte Bronte in the 19th century are thought to be particularly autobiographical (Bronte, 1902), and Ha Jin's (2004) excellent *War Trash* is a powerful memoir of his experiences in shifting identities and allegiances.

Written in the first person by distinguished Israeli novelist Amos Oz (2004), *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is so autobiographical that it blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. In this work, the novelist's ability to empathize, even with an adversary, is powerfully illustrated when Oz and the older Israeli, Ephraim, are preparing to defend themselves against the

possibility of a marauding Fedayeen. The young Oz asks Ephraim if he had ever, in the War of Independence, “shot and killed one of the murderers” (p. 435). Ephraim’s response:

Murderers? What d’you expect from them? From their point of view, we are aliens from outer space who have landed and trespassed on their land ... and while we promise them that we’ve come here to lavish all sorts of goodies on them—cure them of ringworm and trachoma ... we’ve craftily grabbed more and more of their land. ... What do you think? That they should thank us? That they should come out to greet us with drums and cymbals? (p. 435)

At the same time, Oz, founder of the Israeli movement for two states, Peace Now, expresses both an Israeli point of view and the instinct for self-preservation. “In that case,” he asks Ephraim, “what are you doing here with your gun?” Ephraim responds: “Where is the Jewish people’s land if not here? Under the sun? On the moon?” They would have to defend themselves and hope to prevail; but, says Ephraim, “if we take even more from them someday, now that we already have something, that will be a very big sin” (Oz, 2004, p. 436).

Assuming that the great 19th-century French novelist Honoré de Balzac was speaking of his own powers in describing the narrator of his story “Facino Cane,” the literary scholar Peter Brooks (1984) pointed to “his capacity to delve beneath the surfaces of other people’s lives, to discover the stuff of their hidden stories” (p. 219). This extraordinary power of observation and empathy gave the narrator “the facility to live with the life of the individual on whom it was exercised, allowing me to substitute myself for him” (as cited by Brooks, 1984, p. 219).

“Literary means” sometimes can bring us closer to understanding events than more conventional forms of social science. *In the Time of the Butterflies* is the story of the martyred Mirabal sisters (*las mariposas*, or the butterflies), who were leaders in the struggle to overthrow Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. In a postscript to her novel, Julia Alvarez (1994) explained why fiction was her genre of choice: “I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination” (p. 324).

According to scholar and critic Harold Bloom, “strangeness” is an important mark of originality in outstanding works of literature. Excelling in this characteristic, Bloom wrote, are such writers as Dante, Shakespeare, Whitman, and the first author of the Hebrew Bible, whom Bloom (1994, p. 4) thinks may have been a woman in the court of King Solomon. Strangeness may seem to obviate science—until we recall the adage “Truth is stranger than fiction.” Listening to our own stories, those of our clients, indeed those of our fellow human beings, we social workers may be inclined

to conclude that knowledge of the human condition requires the insight into strangeness that literature can illuminate.

Literature in Contemporary Social Work Education

Social work education in the United States has been slow, perhaps even reluctant, to make use of literature in the teaching of our craft. Using several databases to search articles published in American journals during the 30-year period of 1985–2015, we found only 10 articles that discussed literature's use in teaching social work. Four focused on using literature to illuminate social policy or human behavior and the social environment (Cnaan, 1989; Link & Sullivan, 1989; Mendoza et al., 2012; Monroe, 2006), two highlighted the use of children's literature to teach child-oriented social work practice and lifespan development (Collins, Furman, & Russell, 2005; Corcoran, 1999), one suggested the use of literature to deliver content to expand cultural competence among social work students (Averback, 1998), and one reported using literature to illustrate social work theory (Tice, 1993), emphasizing the complexities of life from a human perspective that reaches across the boundaries of culture. None fully explicated an underlying conceptual rationale for such work. Two articles of the ten require further discussion here.

A recent article superbly explicated use of the novel *PUSH*, written by Sapphire, by social work faculty in a Human Behavior and the Social Environment course (Mendoza et al., 2012). Framing the value of literature as primarily that of developing a critical consciousness, the authors documented the way in which this was supported and encouraged in the social work classroom through a variety of instructional methods, including round-table discussions in small groups, assignments that encouraged self-reflection, and the building of illustrative case studies that helped students apply theory to practice while challenging their assumptions. Through these innovative methods, the authors saw an enhancement of their students' understanding of social injustice, or their preparation for the realities of practice, and their capacities to begin thinking critically about their practice.

We found only one illustration of research that documented the use of literature to teach critical thinking to social work students (Noer, 1994). A study was designed to discover if literature, when compared to nonfictional texts, could enhance critical thinking. A teaching intervention based on literature and narrative theory was introduced to 15 undergraduate social work students. Results of the one-group pretest/posttest exploratory investigation indicated that all 15 students demonstrated increased levels of critical thinking and use of professional social work skills, and they grew more likely to identify multicultural issues and ethical dilemmas in field experiences.

Social work educators outside the United States have a longer history of appreciating the use of literature in the teaching of social work and have recently

taken the lead in developing the use of literature in social work education and training. Margaret Turner (1991) was one of the early investigators to examine the way in which literature informs social work. She showed that the reading of literature by British social work students developed their sensibility and led to enhanced understanding, self-awareness, and responsiveness. Its value, the author concluded, lay in the sustaining and vitalizing power that literature has for social workers as persons. More recently, Linda Turner (2013) described the professional growth she saw in students in Australia when they were required to reflect on and use literature in a social work assignment.

International social work educators recently presented a dialogic educational model known as FIKTIVE (fictive voices to reflective practice), designed to be used as a tool for helping develop the capacity for critical thinking among social work students in Finland (Fagerstrom, 2014). The model used Fook and Gardner's (2007) pedagogic principles of critical reflection for developing assignments in which participants wove personal reflection on fictive stories into social work theory. Australian researchers (Giacobbe, Stukas, & Farhall, 2013) have offered evidence that imagining an interaction can reduce prejudice toward stigmatized groups just as effectively as actual in-person interactions. In light of this finding, narrative fiction, and the structured imagination it provides, might be a helpful tool for combating prejudice. A recent conference of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature affirmed the international leadership in this arena. Indeed, 14 of 16 presenters were from outside the United States. Canada's leadership dominates in developing the psychology of fiction through the pioneering work of Raymond Mar at York University and Keith Oatley from the University of Toronto. Their excellent website resource titled *OnFiction* (<http://www.onfiction.ca>), using theoretical and empirical perspectives, endeavors to understand how fiction is created and how readers and audience members engage with it.

Applications of Literature in the Teaching and Learning of Social Work

Next, we wish to explore ways each of the authors of this article has used literature in developing and teaching social work students: helping students understand human behavior and human development through a better understanding of themselves, increasing their capacity for critical thinking by sculpting a sense of identity and empowerment, and teaching social policy through graphic portrayals of the conditions experienced by characters in a novel.

The Use of the Novel in Helping Students Understand Human Behavior and Development

We believe the merits of using literature in the classroom to help social work students properly understand and appreciate the human condition are many.

In this section we share some examples of ways we believe literature has helped students broaden their contextual lenses, deepen their capacity for empathy, stimulate new insight, and develop their own personal morality—all while enriching self-understanding.

In assigning literature to social work students as part of the required readings for a Human Behavior and the Social Environment course, we have seen how it has helped them better imagine the possibilities of life circumstances that often had never occurred to them. Nearly any novel by Charles Dickens, but especially *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, 1837), captures in rich and stunning detail what life can look like during a period of economic calamity and family loss. Literature illuminates the edges (and edginess) of life situations in ways that no other medium can. How better to truly understand the harsh realities of social dislocation than to read John Steinbeck's (1939) *The Grapes of Wrath*? The contemporary bestseller *Room* by Emma Donoghue (2010) deftly documented the horrors of human imprisonment and the oddities of child development for a captive child with haunting, realistic imagery beyond what likely could be portrayed in other media. Mark Haddon's (2003) popular *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* ingeniously enables readers to see the world from the point of view of an adolescent whose behavior is on the autistic spectrum. Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart* and Barbara Kingsolver's (1998) *The Poisonwood Bible* are both excellent depictions of the clash of community and cultural values. Louise Erdrich's (1984) *Love Medicine* illustrates harsh, contemporary Native American realities with unyielding authorial force.

Novels richly explore the emotional, spiritual, and social life of people in a way different from other media, and in so doing they often serve to deepen the reader's capacity for empathy. One excellent novel to help social work students appreciate the essence of empathy, and the importance of context in decision making, is Toni Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*. In that novel, human behavior that otherwise seems incomprehensible and deviant—the murder of one's own children—may become understandable within the context of oppression, in this case, preventing their reenslavement. Good novels have allowed our students and ourselves to identify what often causes so much drama in our own lives, and in the society in which we live: personal longings and frustrations; behavioral motives; social behavior with those we love and those we hate; power and politics; clashes in thinking about race, class, and gender. Through Harper Lee's (1960) famous novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we experience racism firsthand. Lee's technique is to have her readers witness the trial of a Black man falsely accused of raping a White woman through the eyes of two children who, unblemished by racism, are utterly shocked by his conviction. Such novels expand our perspective while clarifying and challenging our values and helping develop our personal morality. In the same way,

Ta-Nehisi Coates's (2015) brilliant book *Between the World and Me* does this for a new generation.

How very real characters in novels are to their readers is shown by the outcry over *Go Set a Watchman*, also written by Harper Lee (2015) but published 55 years after *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch, the courageous protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was a hero to generations of readers—a White Southern lawyer who bravely defends a Black man falsely accused of a crime. *Go Set a Watchman* readers were deeply disappointed to find him presented 55 years later as a segregationist.

Through capturing the deep experiences of others, students' own constricted place and their own limited exposure can be more sharply defined, whereas the breadth of their experience expands so that they can more likely feel a connection to the larger world. Good fiction is about identifying with and understanding people who are not necessarily like us. Readers enrich their understanding of themselves through a comparing and contrasting with fictional characters, enlarging the human capacity to see the world through others' eyes, and more clearly focusing on developing one's own identity. Literature that helps students relate their own experiences to others (or to more clearly formulate their own) include Chang-Rae Lee's (1995) magnificent *Native Speaker*, Jhumpa Lahiri's (2003) *The Namesake*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Each of these works beautifully illustrates the challenges of ethnic ambiguity, how one traverses competing cultural systems, and the excruciating experience of working to assimilate while preserving one's heritage. In reading works like these, students report feeling known. Harold Bloom (2000) wrote of our "ultimate inwardness" or the reader's "deep self" (p. 226). He believes that it is through reading that we begin to define and grow in self-knowledge, to understand who we are, deeply, for the first time. The finest literature, Bloom believes, "helps us hear ourselves when we talk to ourselves" (p. 226). Franz Kafka (1903) was more graphic when he wrote that "a book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us" (p. 98).

Such qualities were crystalized in a recent discussion of Jean Rhys's (1966) postcolonial classic, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (part of Literature and the Human Condition, a long-running, multidisciplinary social work book discussion series held every semester that was established by one of the authors). In this new novel, the postmodern sequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the narrative of the protagonist, Antoinette (the "madwoman in the attic" in Brontë's novel), is told from the point of view of both Antoinette and her husband (Mr. Rochester). In discussing the novel, participants' perspectives also multiplied. For example, there were numerous interpretations of Antoinette's condition—was she "mad," a survivor of childhood trauma whose mind had been altered from repeated abuse and neglect, or a young woman straddling the borders of her identity as a White creole in a

postcolonial society? Was her husband better characterized as villain or victim? Throughout the discussion, we were transformed by the multiple and complex possibilities of understanding this character within her (and our) sociopolitical-cultural-historical context. The discussion appeared to make participants wiser and more disciplined in their openness to others' experiences and perspectives.

Literature is a cumulative written record of the highs and lows of human experience, as told by gifted writers and storytellers. Reading literature helps develop compassion by educating both the heart and the mind. It can stimulate new ideas and develop new insights. It can stretch the imagination through creating new cognitive experiences while enriching our understanding of our own past experiences. It is transformative as it makes us more human, our lives more enjoyable, and our acquaintances broader. Literature helps us develop a sense of right from wrong, truth from untruth, justice from injustice, the beautiful from the grisly. Good writing can provide a social work student with the push sometimes needed to make her more disciplined and open to the experiences of others. These outcomes all align with what is expected of newly graduated social workers, as set forth by practice competencies outlined by the Council on Social Work Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2008).

Enhancing the Capacity for Critical Thinking

Critical thinking involves reasoning deeply and analytically about the very things we are trained not to question or challenge (Gorski, 2006). As a result, critical thinking helps us to develop a belief system that we can claim as our own, rather than simply accepting what has been served to us (Ore, 2003). An outstanding example comes from Jane Addams's (1903) challenge to conventional attitudes toward dependency and pauperism:

If I wear a garment which has been made in a sweat shop or a garment for which the maker has not been paid a living wage ... then I am in debt to the woman who made my cloak. I am a pauper and I permit myself to accept charity from the poorest people of the community. (p. 120)

The Council on Social Work Education recognizes the importance of educating practitioners to apply critical-thinking skills to inform and communicate professional judgments. Before 2015, this was one of the required core competencies for every accredited social work program in the United States (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Helping students distinguish, appraise, analyze, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based and practice-wisdom-based knowledge, are central goals of critical thinking in social work curricula.

On two levels, the use of literature can help develop students' capacities for critical thinking. Privately, the reader is exposed to complexity in characters,

thought, and language and to multiple truths. Publicly, this can be highlighted by the impressions of other students and instructors via classroom discussion. Thus, literature is one tool for helping students enhance their ability to “think about their thinking,” be reflective in their judgments, explore assumptions, and create and test meaning, all within the context of a story.

Feminist, writer, and social activist bell hooks (2010) stated that “the heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works” (p. 7). Including literature as a part of the curriculum ignites thinking and the imagination, fosters conscious mindfulness, and creates openness to the complexity of the human condition. It has been stated that “reading exercises the crucial dialogue with yourself, the dialogue you must undergo to *become* yourself, to know where on the vista of existence you can place your own identity and awareness (Garibaldi, 2014, p. 19)

Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem by bell hooks (2003) illustrated the connections among critical thinking, social work, and literature. In this exploration of the impact of low self-esteem on the lives of Black people, hooks expressed the pervasive effects of racism on the self-esteem of African Americans in the United States, beginning with the lasting trauma of slavery and concluding with the power of the soul to heal. *Rock My Soul* radiates what author Zadie Smith termed “black woman-ness,” that is, an unapologetic rendition of the strengths, struggles, and vulnerabilities of black women in the context of the United States (Smith, 2009). Throughout *Rock My Soul*, hooks illustrated the benefits and power of literature in deepening the understanding of the Black experience. For example, she referred to Eldridge Cleaver’s (1968) memoir *Soul on Ice* to illustrate the struggle for gender equality among Black females and the proliferation of patriarchal domination. Frantz Fanon’s (1952) book *Black Skin, White Masks* is noted in a discussion about the psychological impact of racism and a decolonized mind-set. Lorraine Hansberry’s (1959) play *A Raisin in the Sun* is used to illustrate conflicts in ethics and values.

Through *Rock My Soul*, hooks (2003) facilitates a critical discussion of language, challenging readers to think about the social constructs that are assumed to be reality and encouraging her audience to risk asking questions about what they assume to be their “truths,” particularly with regard to the construction of race and culture. hooks uses literature as her tool to speak openly and frankly about social justice and the struggle for racial equality. (One of the authors has followed hooks’s example to teach the nuances and intersectionalities of race, culture, gender, religion, sexuality, and class in this way through literature.) One of the novels used, Junot Díaz’s (2007) *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, does a magnificent job challenging students to think about the social constructs of gender—masculinity and femininity—across cultures.

Works by hooks, Díaz, Morrison, and others similarly serve to further critical examination of how people of color, particularly those from multi-racial or multiethnic backgrounds, may adopt language of oppression, which runs counter to the diversity that they embody. Using literature in this way may serve to propel readers to challenge rigid assumptions of racial and ethnic identification that they may come to believe without critical reflection.

Assigning literature by authors of color, such as Alice Walker, Nora Zeale Hurston, James Baldwin, Sandra Cisneros, Junot Díaz, and Gloria Anzaldua, may help students to find their authentic voices. Such literature also can help them find validation, hope, and a sense of universality—all critical components of the capacity for critical thinking.

Teaching Social Policy with the Aid of Literature

Although literature seems particularly conducive to the understanding of individual and group behavior (and hence to direct practice), it also may enhance the teaching of social policy and social welfare history. The dislocations of unemployment are powerfully portrayed in Thomas Hardy's (1885/2009) description of its impact on the future Mayor of Casterbridge, then a jobless hay-trusser: "Being out of work, he was, as a consequence, out of temper with the world, and society, and his nearest kin" (p. 16). In Ernest Hebert's (1979) novel *The Dogs of March*, the protagonist, Howard Elman, didn't know how much his job as a foreman in a textile mill meant to him until he lost it. For Howard, being workless was tantamount to being worthless. At the same time, the novelist showed what social workers should be aware of: unemployment varies in its impact. Howard's coworkers had a range of responses to job loss, depending on their personalities, how life had treated them, what their work meant to them, their employability and skills, family obligations, and ages. The range among Howard's coworkers was great—from one coworker's suicide to an opportunity to prepare for a new career for another.

Economic inequality is an abstraction that is given unforgettable, concrete meaning and contemporary relevance in Charles Dickens's (1854/1986) *Hard Times*. The following excerpt from Dickens's great novel provides a means for teaching that economic growth (and the size of an economy) does not necessarily increase prosperity. The scene is Gradgrind's School, an experiment in utilitarian education, where only the "facts" count. Sissy, an imaginative girl, recounts her "wrong" answer to a question posed to her by the schoolmaster, Mr. Choakumchild:

Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and ain't you in a thriving state?

Sissy: I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. (p. 371)

In presenting this *Hard Times* excerpt to social policy students, one expects them to be able to draw analogies to what they have learned about concurrent growth in the nation's wealth and economic inequality in the years prior to the recession of 2008. One hope is that they would recognize that Sissy's question pertains to the distribution of income as an indicator of national prosperity, not the mere size of the nation's output.

Huckleberry Finn's dilemma over whether to abet or abort the escape to freedom of the runaway slave Jim is a supreme way to convey the meaning of slavery. Jim has been a father to Huck, a substitute for his abusive, drunken natural father. If he helps Jim (or fails to report his escape to his owner), Huck worries that it "would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom, and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame" (Twain, 1885, p. 277). Huck sees himself as "stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm" (p. 277). He considers himself wicked for stealing Miss Watson's property, and he writes a letter telling her where Jim is. He then has second thoughts:

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then, says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up. (Twain, 1885, p. 279)

Having read this excerpt from Twain's great novel, students are asked what Mark Twain thought about slavery. Here one expects the social work student to recognize that Huck's dilemma is a fierce indictment of an institution that treated human beings as property or chattel. Students, it is hoped, will recognize that Twain has portrayed the twisted morality of an institution that makes contributing to human freedom a crime against "property rights."

Conclusions

In this article, we have identified and explored the benefits of reading and teaching from literature in social work education. We have documented both historical precedent and current evidence supporting the benefits of reading literature while inferring other properties on theoretical grounds. What students gain from fiction is not the mastery of empirical knowledge that they may get from a social science journal. Rather, we believe that a skillful instructor can use novels in ways that can lead to profound, meaningful, and lasting changes in students' perceptions, say, about the socially excluded; the effects of social policy on individuals, families, and communities; the multiple dynamics at play in family strife; and the complex texture of poverty. Through the examples presented here, we hope to have illustrated the value of using the novel as a teaching tool to enrich the practice of social work students who can better navigate in and contribute to a dynamic and diverse world outside the classroom.

And isn't that what we should focus on in social work programs? In an era of declining attention to the humanities in institutions of higher education, and at a time when U.S. inequality is at historic levels, it is imperative to use every means available to stimulate social work students' consciences and imaginations. We need to be teaching not what to think or to memorize, but rather *ways* of thinking, vehicles for enriched and changed values, ethical responsibilities, moral orientations, and genuine empathy. We consider literature—now being validated by science—as a valuable yet untapped means of pursuing such educational goals. We hope that more social work educators will add literature to their pedagogical repertoires and that the effects will continue to be tested empirically so that we can assess evidence-based outcomes.

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