

A National Survey of Literature Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. Values of empathy, openness and persuasion are key values emphasized in the teaching of Literature.
2. Cultivating a sense of national belonging is least prioritized in contrast to developing global awareness and engaging with universal concerns through literature.
3. The design and implementation of Literature units related to national belonging is effective in fostering empathy and sensitizing students to issues of discrimination.

BACKGROUND

Throughout the world today, governments and policymakers stress the urgent need to educate students for the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions of the 21st century. The quest to prepare students for the 21st century has raised the question of the role of Literature education in a global age.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This paper highlights key findings from the first nation-wide survey of Literature teachers' beliefs and practices. Following the survey, the researchers formed the 21CC Literature Research Interest Group and worked with teachers to design three units related to "Exploring Asia through Poetry," "Ensemble Drama Pedagogy," and "Exploring Race and Identity through Poetry." The implementation of these units provided evidence of Literature's fundamental role in global education and values education.

KEY FINDINGS

Objectives of Teaching Literature

The survey showed that teachers considered connecting texts to human concerns such as human dignity, inequality, discrimination and suffering, as the primary objective of teaching Literature. This was followed by equipping students to reflect on the connections between the text and their own lives and equipping them to analyze the author's craft. Teachers viewed equipping students to appreciate local literature, to connect texts to issues in Singapore and to be sensitive to issues of discrimination in Singapore society as lowest in terms of priority.

Selection of Texts

When selecting the types of texts to use in their classrooms, teachers tended to focus on how stylistically rich the text was and its potential in providing opportunities for students to conduct literary analysis on these texts. Teachers did not view the selection of texts for study as primarily driven by a need to deepen understanding of their own society even though texts selected from Singapore (95%) far surpassed texts from United States (78%) and United Kingdom (75%).

Instructional Strategies

The top three questions driving instruction were those that required students to analyze plot, character, setting & atmosphere, and themes, to give a personal response to the text, and to analyze the author's style. This

provides empirical evidence concerning the impact of high-stakes examination in influencing the kinds of questions asked in the classroom. Of least concern were questions related to local culture that pushed students to make connections between the text and communities and issues in Singapore society.

Cultivating Values through Teaching Literature

To encourage students to engage with values in class, teachers preferred more bottom-up approaches that encourage students to discuss the values explored in the text and to reflect on their own values as they read the text. In terms of values that were important to the teaching of Literature, teachers prioritized empathy, openness and persuasion. However, teachers emphasized empathy at a distance or empathy towards communities beyond the nation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

The survey showed that more students were introduced to Singapore Literature and were also increasingly exposed to a range of cultures and perspectives from around the world with teachers incorporating a variety of texts from Southeast Asia, Africa, and India among others. Teachers were utilizing a wider range of skills to equip students to critically analyze the author's craft, to question assumptions and bias in a text, and to perceive issues from different points of view. There was an evident shift away from teacher-centric instruction towards teaching methods that encouraged active student participation and engagement. Interestingly, findings showed that while empathy with others was a key value, engagement with questions of national belonging was consistently rated low across survey items.

At the same time, qualitative observations showed that opportunities to integrate aesthetic questions with critical and ethical questions occurred when units were

designed around ethical issues. Explicit discussions of race and identity raised greater awareness of discrimination although this may not necessarily lead to prosocial behaviour of all students and teachers' facilitation of empathy is crucial. Teachers' unfamiliarity with texts and pedagogies dealing with race and identity were mitigated by the authentic stance adopted as well as interschool collaborations. Finally, despite the broader range of texts and pedagogies they had enacted, teachers remained concerned about the teaching of critical appreciation exam-centric skills which remained a priority.

Implications for practice

Given the current push to promote the study of Singapore literature in schools, more resources can be developed around non-Western local and regional texts and professional development opportunities provided to introduce pedagogies such as critical translation pedagogies, comparative criticism and ethical criticism to help teachers explore the ways literature can serve as a platform to engage students with issues of race, identity and belonging to nation and world.

PARTICIPANTS

Altogether, 232 Literature teachers from 47 secondary schools participated in the survey between October 2018 and January 2019. The qualitative phase involved 11 teachers across 10 schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a mixed-methods research where quantitative data was first collected via a nationwide survey to provide a general picture of Literature teaching objectives and pedagogy in Singapore followed by the collection of qualitative data that involved observations of Literature classrooms.

About the authors

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More information about this project and the national survey can be found here: <https://nie.edu.sg/21ccliterature>

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