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Teaching controversial topics through illustrated novels: the role of medium and methods

Controversial topics are issues on which there are multiple conflicting viewpoints, and often contain a sensitive, personal or ideological element. The potential of literary narratives to facilitate engagement with controversial topics is well established (Evans, 2015). However, whilst the potential of using picturebooks to explore controversial topics has been investigated, the same attention has not been afforded to illustrated novels, or to considering medium alongside the methods used to facilitate engagement. I address these issues by drawing on the findings of a participatory case study of five 9-10-year-old children reading three illustrated novels, to answer the following research question: How can illustrated novels effectively facilitate children's engagement with controversial topics? The findings suggest that illustrated novels are particularly well suited to introducing and exploring controversial topics, and illuminate the benefits of a holistic, child-led approach to engagement (in itself a controversial method in many classrooms). Multiple possibilities are opened up by both the combination of images and writing, and the impact of illustrations on the automatic picturing process, leading to 'possibility thinking' (Craft, 2000), which facilitates the exploration of complicated issues. The illustrated novel's fractured narrative rhythm creates moments of reflection, encouraging critical evaluation, and the medium has a heightened potential for emotional and aesthetic impact which enables affective engagement with the personal and sensitive aspects of controversial topics. To capitalise on these affordances, illustrated novels should be treated as complete texts, with the illustrations and words seen as interdependent and of equal value. Extending principles from Philosophy for/with Children, and particularly the work of Haynes and Murriss (2011), I recommend a child-led approach to engagement and discussion which enables children to consider controversial topics without being steered into adult-led, 'approved' conclusions, which tend to shut down enquiry.

Keywords: illustrated novels, teaching, child-led pedagogy, participatory research, case study

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centre around children's interactions with culture, library collections, visual texts, and participatory research methodologies. She has published articles on children reading illustrated novels, the ethical principles surrounding children's participation in collection development in libraries, and digital comics.