

How Banned Books Provide Mirrors, Windows, and Doors for Social-Emotional Learning

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Introduction

Abstract

This is a study on how scholars in a Freedom Schools (FS) program learned about themselves and others through a culturally relevant reading curriculum based on banned books. Two classrooms were observed over the course of the 6-week program. Seven Scholars and a Servant Leader Intern (SLI) were interviewed at the end of the program. Findings show that the books selected, the curriculum paired with them, and the culture of the program together created a space for fostering the skills associated with social awareness and self-awareness in the scholars. This shows first-hand the value that these books hold, supporting the need to act against book bans.

Research Problem

- Research supports the importance of diverse, multicultural literature in children's reading instruction. Multicultural literature serves as self-affirmation for BIPOC students, as well as a tool for fostering empathy and appreciation for diversity (Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Osorio, 2018).
- The increasing prevalence of censorship in Florida's education system, particularly through book bans, disproportionately targets materials depicting the lived experiences of BIPOC communities under the guise that they promote Critical Race Theory. Florida has experienced more book bans than any other state in the country, with over 5,000 from 2021-2023 (PEN America, 2024).
- The aim of this study was to show the importance of culturally relevant and diverse children's literature, especially for developing students' social awareness and self-awareness.

Research Questions

- How do banned books function as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors in the Freedom Schools curriculum?
- How does this curriculum foster the scholars' self-awareness and social awareness?

Research Design

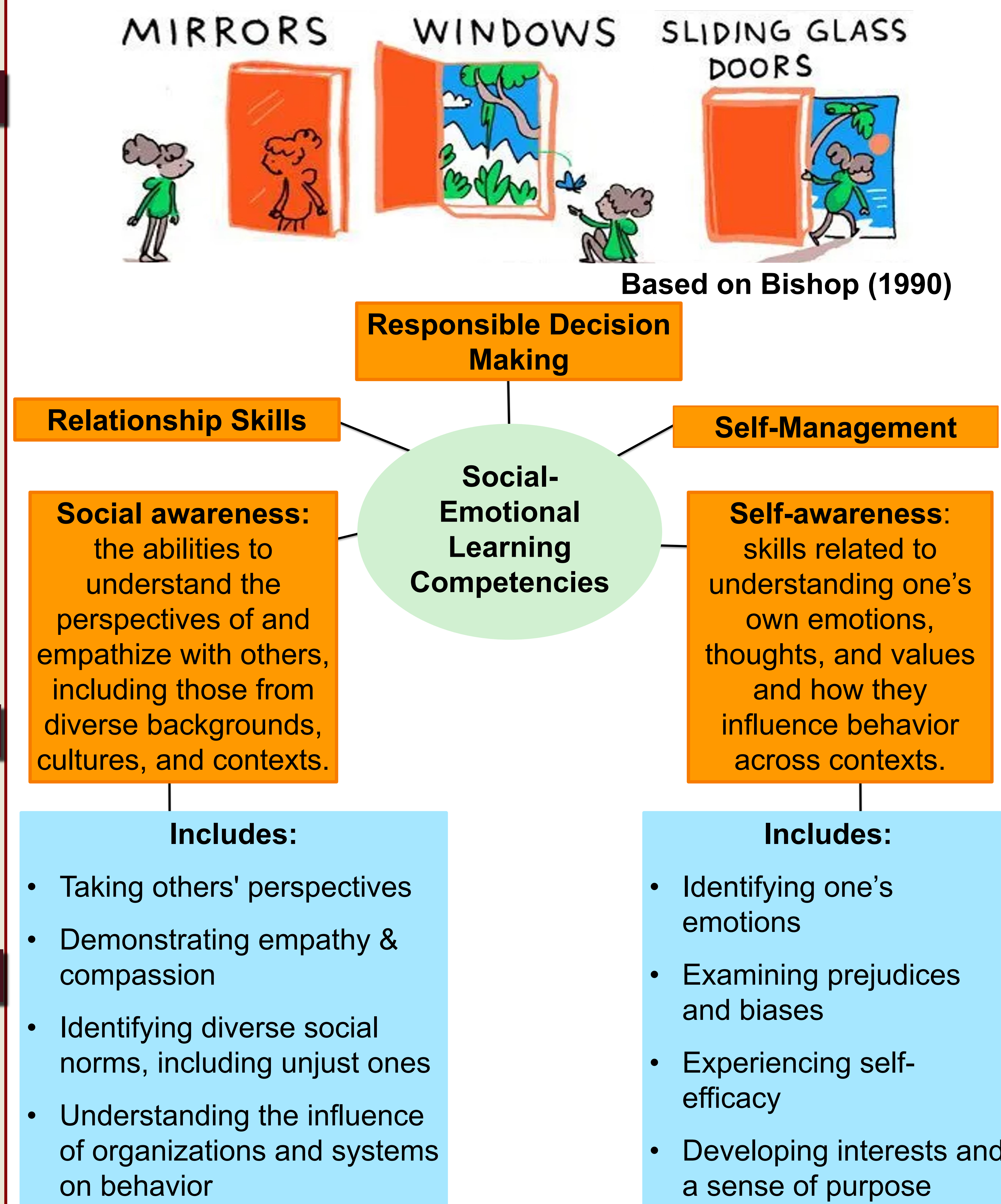
This was a mixed methods qualitative study that utilized observations and interviews. Observations were used to explore how the books were instructed and what discussions arose. Interviews were meant to understand the scholars' and SLI's perceptions of the material.

Method

Participants

Participants were involved in the FAMU DRS Freedom Schools program. A purposeful sampling approach was used. Observations focused on one class of Level II scholars (ages 7-10) and their SLI, as well as a class of Level III scholars (ages 11-13) and their SLI. Interviews were conducted with the same Level III class and SLI. All participants observed and interviewed were Black.

Theoretical Framework



Results

Findings

Books were **mirrors** when they depicted characters whose identities matched the scholars'.

- Books focused on the lives of Black people during slavery and the Civil Rights Movement: *Corncrows* by Camille Yarbrough
- Books focused on the stories of modern-day Black people, depicting the real-world issues still affecting the black community today: *You Don't Even Know Me: Stories and Poems About Boys* by Sharon G. Flake

Books were **windows** when they showed scholars people, places, and experiences that are very different from them and what they know: *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* by G. Neri

Books were **sliding glass doors** when SLIs prompted scholars to step into the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the characters in the stories through open-ended questions.

The FS curriculum developed scholars' self and social awareness by three mechanisms:

- **Book selection:** culturally relevant and diverse
- **Open-ended questions** encouraged scholars to put themselves in characters' places: "How do you think Yummy felt while on the run?"
- **The Freedom School Way:** love and care, empowerment, social action

SLI (an English teacher at FAMU DRS) reported an increased interest in the books from scholars who she had taught during the academic year.

- "I could tell just with the difference in their questioning. [During the school year] more so "what is this about? Why are we reading this?" Versus at Freedom School more so like "why is this happening? Is this real? How do we change it?"

Implications

The FS books hold high educational value, especially in BIPOC communities. Though the instinct may be to protect children by shielding them from hard themes through banning books, this study shows that children can handle the hard conversations. In fact, they want to have them, and they leave them more well-rounded, compassionate individuals. Future research could focus on how these practices can be applied to broader education settings.



References



PURPOSE
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ORIENTED TO SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION



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