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Research into Practice

Becoming Powerful Readers of the Word and the World:

Promoting Multicultural Readings of Children's and Young Adult Literature

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INTRODUCTION

There is often a conversation in English Language Arts about the selection of children's and young adult literature with an eye toward adding what we call diverse or multicultural texts. We translate that to mean that we want authors from the past and present who represent a wide range of lived experiences, cultural and linguistic heritages. While we would stop at classifying some authors as multicultural and others as "mainstream" we do agree that diversity and difference, as they cohere across a group of authors is important. And underrepresentation and misrepresentation of certain authors and groups need to be addressed in the ELA classroom. The purpose of this article, though, is to ask a different question about the texts we choose to teach to children and adolescents. It isn't what we teach, but how we teach the texts we choose to teach. More specifically, how should we read *all* children's and young adult literature multiculturally?

The multicultural reading approach we present in this paper is very much inspired by the work of scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) and James Banks (1996) who both see as key principles of their work having students empowered to ask critical questions of the written word and the world around them. Ladson-Billings argues for a three-part approach to culturally relevant pedagogy that includes academic excellence, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Banks (1996) offers five dimensions of multicultural education, which include: (1) content integration; (2) the knowledge construction process; (3) prejudice reduction; (4) an equity pedagogy; and (5) an empowering school culture and social structure.

Drawing on the frameworks of Ladson-Billings and Banks, multicultural readings of literature should increase student joy, engagement and achievement (Allyn and Morrell, 2016), they should reduce prejudice, they should develop critical consciousness, and they should promote equity and intercultural understanding across multiple lines of difference. We argue in this paper that multicultural readings of texts can achieve these ends when students possess the ability to understand the social and historical contexts of the authors and the texts that they read, when they are able to read the texts closely and critically for what they say and what they leave silent or unsaid, and when they are able to unpack potential biases, and finally, when they are able to act in the real world as writers, thinkers, and change agents informed in their actions by their critical, multicultural readings of texts.

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We are also inspired by the work of critical literary theories that demand that older readers look at texts from a variety of perspectives, whether that be feminist, postcolonial or historical. Rather than limit young readers to a handful of critical literary approaches, we instead present a framework for questioning texts that brings in historical, formalist, and critical approaches to the study of literature.

Ultimately, we advocate for a three-part approach to multiculturally reading children's and young adult literature which we will explore in subsequent sections of this paper; reading behind the text, reading within the text, and reading in front of the text. Ernest was first acquainted with a three-part approach to reading cultural texts through the work of Henry Giroux (1990) and began immediately to think about how to utilize Giroux's framework to help his students read literary texts in the K-12 classrooms where he taught in Northern and Southern California. While Giroux advocated for reading upon, within, and against the text, Ernest thought of inviting students to read behind, within, and in front of the text; bringing in their own perspectives along with those of critical literary theory to substantively engage the canonical and contemporary texts that they read seriously. The reading in front is less of a confrontation than it is a dialogue out of what Toni Morrison (1992) would call a deep admiration and respect for what authors craft. Our three-part approach to multicultural readings is also formed by Aristotle's rhetorical triangle (the three rhetorical appeals) which focuses on *logos* (text-context), *pathos* (audience-reader), and *ethos* (author). Inspired by Aristotle we also look at reading behind the text as an *author-centered* approach, reading within the text as a *text-centered* approach, and reading in front of the text as a *reader-centered* approach.

READING BEHIND THE TEXTS

When students read behind the text, they focus on the author by asking questions such as "who is the author" and "when did he or she write the text"? By starting with these questions, students learn more about the experiences of the author and how these may have shaped how and what the author chose to write. By understanding when the author wrote the text, students are thinking about social, political, and cultural factors that may have influenced the author's choices. When reading behind the texts, students consider the "implied reader", or who the author may have been imagining as their audience and how their audience's values and beliefs may have influenced their decisions about what to write and how to write.

Students should also question the purpose of the text. Scholars such as Sutherland (1985) suggest that all authors bring their ideologies to their work and often this falls into one of three types of political stances: (1) advocacy: "pleading for and promoting a specific cause, upholding a particular point of view or course of action as being valid and right" (p. 2), (2) attack: essentially the opposite of advocacy - "generated by the authors' sense of amusement, outrage, or contempt when they encounter something that runs counter to their concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, justice, fair play, decency, or truth" (p. 4); and (3) assent: "does not advocate in any direct sense, but simply affirms ideologies generally prevalent in the society" (p. 7). In essence, authors write to persuade their readers to share their perspective as to what is right and good (advocacy), to reject what they view as wrong (attack), or to accept dominant narratives whether these are beneficial or harmful to certain groups or society as a whole.

Finally, students can learn more about how the text was received. One measure of a response is whether a book appears on a banned book list, such as the frequently updated list available on the American Library Association

website. Opposition is often initiated and supported by parents and librarians who believe certain books are inappropriate for children. These reactions to a text can tell us a great deal about the dominant social and cultural values at the time of publication. We can also have students think about how texts are received differently by children and adults, what is considered award winning versus what is most popular with children, which can be quite different.

> "A behind the text approach can contribute to a multicultural reading because it shows students that all texts are written from a sociohistorical location."

Key questions one might ask from a reading behind the text approach include:

- Who is the author?
- When did he/she write the text?
- What historical or contemporary events would have influenced the construction of the text?
- Who was the immediate audience of the text? What were/are the beliefs, values of the audience? How did/do they see the world?
- What purpose did the text serve?
- How was the text received? What, if any, were the debates or contentions around the text?

A behind the text approach can contribute to a multicultural reading because it shows students that all texts are written from a sociohistorical location. All authors are, in a sense, biased. They are all members of cultural communities, they hold viewpoints, and they write, as they see the world, from a particular point of view. With a behind the text reading, even young students are able to see culture at play in the construction of the text and they are also able to juxtapose their own social location against that of the authors of the texts they study.

READING WITHIN THE TEXTS

The second approach is reading within a text. When students engage in this type of reading, the text becomes the focus and students can pose questions about elements of the text. For example, if the text is a narrative, students can investigate the plot, characters, and setting. They can identify specific evidence in the text to understand the historical, social, gender, cultural, racial, religious, and/or political life of the times portrayed in the text. Often the time period is different from the time of publication and students should understand that social, political, and cultural norms may have been different. An example of this is Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* which is the story of the Logan family in 1930s Southern Mississippi. The book was published in 1976, so readers would need to understand how many African Americans, like the Logans, experienced everyday life in the South, which was significantly different from the time of publication. Another example of the importance of historical, social, cultural, racial, religious and political life of the time is Pam Munoz-Ryan's novel *Echo*, which weaves together three very distinct cultures, experiences, and places - a boy in Germany in 1933, two white orphaned boys in Philadelphia in 1935, and a Mexican American girl in her immigrant community in Fresno County, CA in 1942. Students would need to understand the historical context of each place - such as the domination of the Nazis in Germany and segregated schools in California for Mexican-American children to make sense of the characters' experiences.

As students are asking questions about and considering these elements of the text, they might dig deeper to identify who speaks and who is silenced and how this reflects the values and beliefs at the time of publication or setting of the text. Likewise, they should consider the social languages used to communicate within the text, such as among characters, as well as to the reader (the author's writing style). Often when a less familiar dialect is used, such as Middle English in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, readers are forced to slow their reading pace to ensure they understand the text. For younger readers, this could be a character such as the cabby in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (Book #1 in the Chronicles of Narnia) who speaks with an old London cockney accent. In other texts, authors may choose to use less "mainstream" or "dominant" dialects or to weave in various languages. One example is the way Munoz-Ryan weaves in Spanish words and phrases in her novel *Esperanza Rising* or to have the same text written side by side in English and Spanish such as Carmen Lomas Garza's book, *En Mi Familia.* This style of writing may force some readers to slow down whereas other readers may feel validated and elated to see their own dialect or language in print. With this approach to reading, the text becomes

centered and students draw heavily on the printed text to support their claims and analysis and focus on the author's style and craft.

Key questions one might ask from a Reading Within the Text Approach include:

- What happens in the text?
- Who are the characters? What takes place in the text? Where does the action take place?
- Who speaks and who is silenced?
- What social languages are used to communicate?
- What are the features of the text?
- What evidence can we find in the text of the historical, social, gender, cultural, racial, religious, and/or political life of the time?
- How is the text structured? What is its style?

A "within the text" approach can contribute to a multicultural reading because it shows students that texts often fit in particular genres because of their characteristics. For example, informational texts use specialized language characteristics such as general nouns and timeless verbs and does not utilize characters through the book (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003); however, the authors, illustrators and publishers make choices about which topics and whose biographies are worth telling and if images of people are included, whether they represent a wide range of cultures, phenotypes, socioeconomic backgrounds, and so on. Likewise, narratives typically include a plot, setting, atmosphere, characterization, theme, point of view and figurative language and literary devices. How authors address these seven elements can contribute to a multicultural reading if their characters represent a range of cultures, ethnicities, languages and dialects, socioeconomic backgrounds, political views, and religions, and are portrayed in authentic positive ways free of stereotypes and essentialized simplistic caricatures.

READING IN FRONT OF THE TEXTS

The third approach places the reader at the center. As they read, students are asking about biases in the text and how certain readers may find the text problematic. Students should consider contradictions or debates that the text has generated or is likely to generate as well as alternative readings or interpretations of the text. One well known example of this would be Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. First published in the United Kingdom in December 1884 and two months later in the United States, Twain wrote the novel as a satire with its blatant use of racist and coarse language and glaring critique of slavery and racism. While some read the novel as racist, which was not what Twain intention, others were able to identify the ways in which Twain was critiquing slavery as a socially accepted system at the time of publication. As students read a text, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, they should be asking how gender, race, culture, or politics affect how readers might respond to the text. They can think about when the text was initially published versus when they are reading and how these might be extremely different.

With this third approach, readers can think about how the text provokes and inspires new thinking and action. An excellent example of this is Kwame Alexander's award winning book (Caldecott Winner, Newbery Honor, Coretta Scott King, Golden Kite) *Undefeated* which is described as "a soaring tribute to the enduring perseverance and achievements of the past and a stirring call to action to 'the dreamers and the doers' of the present and the future." (School Library Journal). Breathtaking illustrations by Kadir Nelson celebrate well recognized individuals such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as families, children, a soldier - and a heart-wrenching black and white image of hundreds of enslaved Africans laying side by side on a slave ship. The book is ultimately a celebration of hope, persistence, and strength and Alexander ends the book with the phrase "this is for us." This poetic picture book is an example of a text that provokes and forces readers to acknowledge the past, to celebrate one another, and to act with hope in solidarity with others.

Key questions one might ask from a reading within the text approach include:

- What are biases in the text?
- How might certain readers find the text problematic?
- What contradictions or debates has the text generated or is likely to generate?
- What are alternative readings or interpretations of the text?
- How might gender, race, culture, religion, or politics affect how readers might respond to the text?
- How might the text provoke or inspire new thinking and action?
- Critical literary theories offer opportunities for reading in front of the text

The reading in front of the text is really the payoff for a multicultural reading. As a reader-centered approach, students are able to levy a cultural critique upon the texts they read; really upon all texts that they confront with the class and outside of class. Students can champion those texts that they feel uplift or are inclusive and empowering. They can call out bigotry, insensitivity, racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-religious bias. Imperfect texts are not a problem for the ELA classroom. Again, I am reminded of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* where she applauds generative authors for being willing to take chances and share with us their imperfections. The imperfections in texts only become a problem when students are not encouraged to call them out. We critique, Morrison argues, as an act of respect. As an act of joy.

> "As a reader-centered approach, students are able to levy a cultural critique upon the texts they read."

Reading in front of the texts can also be a vehicle to real action in the world. With culminating projects, students can engage in youth participatory action research, where they investigate real world issues (Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell, 2016), they can become authors of their own creative texts, and they can become literary critics who ask deeper questions of the literature they read and share these analyses with other students and literary scholars around the world. For example, Ernest was recently approached by a high school student who had created his own literary journal that employed university professors as referees and discussants of student-created literary works and literary criticism. The journal was publishing its third issue and had already recruited distinguished faculty from the most prestigious English departments around the country. This is just one of numerous examples we could share of how students can use their voices to impact the world when we create spaces for them to develop the skills and confidence to speak the truth to power and to share their diverse perspectives with authentic audiences. Nothing confers a sense of agency and value like being listened to by others.

CONCLUSION

We are at a moment where we have a real opportunity to reshape our children's and young adolescent's relationships with the texts they read that increase students' reading identities, that enhances their joy of reading, and that recenters the power relationship between students and all of the texts that they read. We are reminded of the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005) who in *Literature as Exploration* (1938), argued that truly powerful reading happened when the reader and the text met in a space she called the "poem". Reader-centric and text-centric approaches paled in comparison to her transactional model of reading. We feel that this could very easily apply to our three-part approach to multicultural reading of children's and young adult literature. The cultural responsiveness, the power and joy, all happen in the transaction that is guided by the critical questions we empower our students to ask. When bolstered by polyvocal classrooms that honor student voice and student perspectives, we feel that the conditions are ideal for increasing academic achievement, intercultural and social awareness, an enduring love of language, and an appreciation for the very hard and very important work that writers do.

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