

Diverse Learners, Diverse Texts: Exploring Identity and Difference Through Literary Encounters

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This article reports from a yearlong ethnography that examined two urban 10th-grade English classes of ethnically diverse students in which the teachers diversified literature selections for newly designed ethnic literature curricula. The study reports texts students found most memorable and meaningful and analyzes the values students found in their encounters with these literary works. When students identified with characters and texts, they reflected on personal concerns, including family nostalgia and loss; adolescent challenges; and culture, gender, and sexual-identity formation. Literary encounters also fostered discoveries about diverse groups (identified by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation) that helped students move past stereotyped notions of others. Choices of meaningful works were often tied integrally to ways in which the texts were treated during class time – particularly to activities involving the social processes of constructing meaning, exploring interpretation, and openly discussing issues of culture and identity. The results remind researchers of the need to include in curricular theorizing the importance of instruction that fosters students' thinking about literature, identity, and diversity.

ALTHOUGH MANY WRITERS HAVE HYPOTHESIZED positive values of the inclusion of multicultural content in curricula, reviews of multicultural education reveal that little work has documented the impact of such curricular intervention on young people (Au, 1995; Banks, 1995; Mehan, Lintz, Okamoto, & Wills, 1995). When such work has been reported, various limitations have been noted. Methods used to study such interventions have at times lacked the rigor needed to make results noteworthy, interventions frequently have been only short term, and studies have featured children's responses to curricular materials without careful accounting for the complexity of context variables beyond curriculum (e.g., community context, school and classroom culture, and teacher) that shape students' responses (Banks, 1995). Reviewers of research in the English language arts likewise have found few thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of implementation of more inclusive literature curricula and these curricula in action (Beach & Hynds, 1989; Durst & Marshall, 1991; Larson & Bechan, 1992a, 1992b). Finally, few studies of modifications of curricular materials and classroom discourse have investigated classrooms with students from many different ethnic and linguistic groups, settings that make enormously complex the already challenging work described in primarily monocultural or bicultural classrooms (Mehan et al., 1995).

The study reported here addresses these concerns. It draws from a year-long ethnography that examined two urban 10th-grade English classes in which the teachers diversified literature selections for newly designed ethnic literature curricula. Investigations of teaching and learning were relatively long term, occurring over the course of a full school year, supported by follow-up visits and interviews with one class 2 years after completion of the 10th-grade school year and by conversations with both teachers into the third year. Students' and teachers' voices anchored the work, and analyses of the multiple embedded contexts that influence secondary teaching (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993) framed understanding of teaching and learning. Because the two classes in two different schools were multiethnic, the study enabled an examination of how diverse students responded to equally diverse literary works. Informed by the full ethnography, the study reported here asked these questions: (a) When two teachers working in multiethnic settings implemented more inclusive curricula, what did students report about diverse literary works they read? (b) Which texts did students find most memorable and meaningful and why? (c) What functions did their encounters with these memorable literary works serve the young people?

Student Response to Diverse Literary Works

Many factors influence readers' responses to literature. In recent decades, reader response criticism eclipsed the notion of text as a container of facts or fixed themes by advancing views of how the reader makes meaning (cf. Bleich, 1978; Fish; 1980; Rosenblatt, 1978), bringing to reading funds of prior knowledge and

personal experiences, previous encounters with literature and schooling, socially constructed values, and membership in interpretive communities. Tapping prior knowledge, of course, depends on readers' abilities to step into and move through literary works (Langer, 1990; Purcell-Gates, 1991) and to access textual cues and cultural knowledge (Earthman, 1992). Various communities to which readers belong nonetheless shape responses through cultural schemata that influence how material is read and interpreted and how much information is retained after reading (Desai, 1997). Gender, race, and class differences and perspectives constitute social positions that affect how readers value and respond to literary works. Racial and ethnic identity, for example, affect whether readers view racism depicted in stories as a function of individual prejudices or societal and institutionalized (Beach, 1994). As curricula become more ethnically diverse, more students of color may align themselves strongly with literary works and characters, whereas European American students sometimes distance themselves from or otherwise resist troubling accounts of racism or other challenges to White privilege (Beach, 1997; Spears-Bunton, 1992).

In this way, literary response is always situated within social, institutional, and rhetorical contexts (Beach & Hynds, 1990). Plot and character details, for example, are not mere products of an author's imagination but situated in a racialized society, inviting assent for some and resistance for those who find themselves rendered invisible or required to "align with problematic representations of themselves and others" (Enciso, 1997, p. 38). School materials have notoriously left out women and people of color or rendered them weak. Having to confront characters from one's "community" presented as victimized or shameful can disturb readers and invite resistance (Fairbanks, 1995). For gay and lesbian readers, who have so seldom seen themselves reflected in literature much less in positive images, such resistance is the norm: They are always reading against themselves (McLean, 1997). Resistance can also occur when readers confront cultural norms and forms of expression so unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them that they engage in aesthetic shutdown (Soter, 1997).

Despite the challenges in selecting and locating appropriately diverse literary works and the potential problems in fostering positive classroom experiences with such literature for diverse groups of students in quite varied communities, recent work has begun to describe positive effects of such work on young readers. Examining the impact on young children of the study of a unit of Native American literature, Ramsey (1992) found that through their study, students began to alter their basically stereotypical perceptions of Native Americans. In this report and in a longer work (Ramsey, 1987), Ramsey concluded that even when affected by stories, readers only slowly adjust preconceived notions and realign their beliefs. In her study of a European American 11th-grade teacher's efforts at incorporating more African American literature into her Honors English class, Spears-Bunton (1992) found that African American students engaged the literature strongly and linked it to life experiences related to cultural differences. Previously failing African American students strengthened their overall literacy performances. Although European American students first demonstrated distance

from the literature and some of their peers' newly engaged responses, some gradually began to reassess cultural assumptions and social positions. At least one European American student eventually identified strongly with the plight of a literary character, so that identification replaced the act of "othering" African Americans (Spears-Bunton, 1990).

What specific classroom activities and forms of interaction help foster students' engaged transactions with multicultural literature? Recent work provides some answers. McGinley et al. (1997) described how two teachers used wide-ranging literacy activities to encourage their third, fourth, and fifth graders to link literature and life experiences, creating possibilities for literary transactions to serve multiple personal and social functions. In diverse works, some of the African American students in one teacher's class found role models to help them envision expanded notions of possible selves, and students developed greater understanding of social issues related to social inequities (also in McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). When Lee (1993) linked the linguistic power of signifying among African American high school seniors with signifying acts in African American "speakerly texts" (e.g., innuendo and double meanings, rhetorical play on meaning and word sounds, and quick and witty responses), she found gains in students' skills of interpreting fiction. She concluded that when a range of literary works are accompanied with, among other things, culturally sensitive instruction that taps students' prior social knowledge, various interpretative strategies can be practiced and cognitive gains can be made. Miller (1993) studied teachers using a dialogic pedagogy to strengthen students' encounters with multicultural literature by enabling them to reveal biases, challenge prejudices, and honestly explore issues of difference. Space for such responses is essential, because sociological perspectives that reveal historical injustices and inequities can heat up dialogue, leaving many students with the need to express unavoidable anger (Baldwin, 1988; Mura, 1988). Even when some students resist representations of lives in literature, when they are invited to talk back to the literature, fruitful learning can occur, because the power of multicultural literature lies not in its ability to capture truer stories but in its potential to open up dialogues on difference (Enciso, 1997).

Method

Overview of the Full Ethnography

The yearlong ethnography from which the present study is drawn examined two urban, multiethnic 10th-grade English classes in which the teachers worked to diversify their literature curricula (Athanasos, 1993). I selected these two teachers after a lengthy search which included recommendations from eight organizations of 30 different teachers identified as thoughtful about their literature teaching and interested in discussion to support student learning. Preliminary obser-

variations of 10 teachers led to repeated observations of 4, until I felt confident that I had identified classrooms in which curricula would be supported by two features. First, based on preliminary observations, I predicted that I would see instruction grounded in the elicitation of students' own literary responses rather than merely the pursuit of canonical interpretations. Second, I predicted that classroom discourse would support exploratory thinking rather than merely recitation of facts. I hypothesized that these two instructional features would maximize the potential for rich exploration of diverse literary works in classrooms of diverse learners.

Data included observation fieldnotes from two class visits per week per site over the course of a year; 30 audiotaped full-class discussions (15 per site), some videotaped; audiotaped small-group discussions; student surveys and writing samples; and over 60 interviews with teachers, case-study students, parents, and other school personnel. Two years after completion of the classes, I gathered retrospective data from students at one site, including questionnaire and discussion responses regarding memories from their English class and reactions to the class from the distance of 2 years. Across the full study, I tracked curricular and instructional choices, analyzed discussion features, and studied ways students learned about literature and diversity. The many observations and repeated sampling of oral discourse allowed for a study of language use patterns and for examination of how teaching and learning evolved over time.

I transcribed, analyzed, and compared a series of discussions per class staggered over the course of the school year using relevant procedures, including Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) system of analyzing degree of substantive student engagement. Themes and classroom events present in these transcripts stimulated analysis of larger discourse trends across class sessions. My presence in the classrooms over the course of the year, supported by 15 to 20 taped class sessions per site and fieldnotes of over 40 sessions per site, made judgments of typicality and anomaly possible. Pooling data from various sources, including a range of informants from various locations and levels within school and community and from case-study students selected for balance of ethnicity, gender, and levels of spoken and written performances, provided triangulation in data analysis and increased validity of claims.

Data Sources and Analysis for the Present Study

Multiple sources provided data for this study, a subset of the full-length ethnography. In both classes, various forms of data included students' reports of reactions to literary works under study and reasons for likes and dislikes. Forms of data included student interviews, ongoing fieldnotes of class activities and conversations with students, transcripts of student interviews, and student writing samples. Also, in one class, in retrospective surveys and group conversations 2 years after completing the class I studied, I asked students, among other things, if any literature from their 10th-grade English course stayed with them for some

reason or had had an impact on them or their thinking. I rank-ordered reported titles, coded for reasons cited for text choice, and examined links between choices and reasons. From analyses of all data sources, a set of themes emerged as central to students' choices of memorable literary works, tied both to texts and class activities. I repeatedly examined these themes and supporting data and received critical response to the analysis from insiders and outsiders of the study. The full ethnography helped frame these results.

Contexts for the Study

The Schools

Richards and Jackson High Schools are moderate-sized, urban public schools of grades 9 through 12 serving primarily children of low-income families. At each school, teachers credit an authoritarian African American principal (a woman at Richards, a man at Jackson) for having led school efforts to shape a safe school environment, particularly notable at Jackson where four gangs had recently controlled school grounds and teachers and students had feared walking near one part of campus. On state reading tests, Richards students score on the average at the 40th percentile (relatively high for their district), and Jackson students at the 8th (lowest in their district). Both schools struggle with the academic performances of their students. Although little overt racial hostility or violence occurs at either of these ethnically diverse schools, most teachers and students characterize the interethnic climate at Richards as one of avoidance and, at best, tolerance. Few members of the Richards community reported appreciation among students for cultural difference. Also, teachers at districtwide workshops in the Richards school system said they were underprepared in appropriate readings for more inclusive curricula, and many said they feared racial hostility would reach the boiling point in classes when students explored issues raised in literature by and about ethnic minorities in the United States. Members of the Jackson community described a slightly more harmonious climate, but some argued that the school did much to nurture cultural pride but little to foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Both teachers in this study saw the literature curriculum as one occasion to address this need.

The Classes

Two 10th-grade English classes, one per school, served as classes for study, with periodic observations of other classes taught by the same teachers for comparison. Despite the course title, the teachers' "Honors" English classes included students at various academic levels, including nearly one-fourth of students per class who had been identified through counseling offices as academically "at

risk.” Ethnically, the two classes studied approximately matched their school populations. A third of the students in the Richards class were African American, one-third were Chinese American, and the remaining students were of Filipino or European ancestries. In the Jackson class, 85% was Filipino or Latino, the Latino students immigrants from or descendants of immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico; the remaining students were African American, Chinese American, or European American.

Although nearly half of each class spoke a language at home other than English while growing up at least as often as they spoke English, most students reported that by 10th grade they spoke English fairly confidently in class; however, tensions between old ways of home cultures and new ways of 1990s city youth challenged many of these students. Their parents, at times, restricted field-trip participation, the wearing of contemporary urban fashions, and attendance at school dances, fearing such things might endanger their children or make them too unlike youth in the home country. Although culture clubs such as the Mandarin Club, Afro-Academic Olympics, Spanish Club, and Vietnamese Club provided a draw at both schools, some students disliked association with such clubs, because they felt the prejudice of students who viewed immigrants as “less than.”

The Teachers and Their Goals

Reiko Liu, the Richards teacher, experienced culture clash as a teenage immigrant to the United States from Japan and later in marriage to a Chinese American. A self-declared child of the sixties with a vision of a more just and equal society, Reiko studied social welfare and English literature and has long viewed public education as a vehicle for equality. In the year of the study, her 18th year of teaching, she wanted students to learn about the uniqueness of individuals and cultural groups as well as shared fundamental human values, concerns, and behaviors. She required that students engage in cognitive acts of analyzing and making connections across texts, essential in multicultural literature study, so students would understand that works by and about people of color are worthy of rigorous analysis, not merely valuable for inclusion of tales of cultural experiences and oppression. She situated literature study in social contexts, frequently asking students to generate relevant historical background to help explain characters’ actions. She respected students’ ideas and positioned herself as an informed and skilled but nonetheless fellow learner, particularly when students offered personal and cultural knowledge.

Californian-born of Italian and Jewish ancestries, Carolyn Cohen, the Jackson teacher, recalled childhood dinner talk celebrating diversity in the United States. She proudly reported that her grandmother, who fought for women’s rights, was the first female delegate to a national nominating convention. She also recalled stories of her mother feeling the sting of prejudice as an Italian American growing up on the East Coast and of learning that her father had been called “Bobby the little Jew boy” as a child. These experiences deepened her

commitments to addressing diversity in curricula. Carolyn also taught English as a second language and headed school clubs and activities dealing with concerns of immigrant students. In the year of the study, her 8th year of teaching, essential to all of Carolyn's work was the challenge of engaging students in reading and a concern with helping them to link their lives with literature and to experience it fully through discussion, writing, drama, and programmed oral readings. She eschewed teacher-dominated literature study, favoring cooperative learning groups and activities that support students' discoveries of interpretations coupled with care in articulation of these interpretations with support.

Frameworks for Literary Response in Reiko's and Carolyn's Classes

Highlights of the ethnography from which this study is drawn provide frameworks here for understanding influences on students' selections of meaningful literary works. (For elaboration and substantiation of these curricular and instructional frameworks, see Athanases, 1993.)

Curricula of diverse texts. Both Reiko and Carolyn had recently participated in designating the 10th grade in her school or district as the year to focus on the ethnic experience in literature. Both teachers faced challenges of selecting appropriate literary works, searching quickly for available resources, and organizing these into some semblance of curriculum. Although Carolyn did this work on her own, Reiko benefited from a district committee working to construct an ethnic literature curriculum. Ongoing conversations among those committee members strengthened Reiko's convictions about the need for such a curriculum. Because of the constraints of limited planning time and resources, both teachers made use, at times, of excerpts from longer works, as well as independent reading projects and small-group book clubs for which library borrowing and book-store purchases of individual copies sufficed. Neither teacher felt satisfied with her selection of texts, and both found advantages and disadvantages to instructional approaches they used. Nonetheless, both teachers' curricula included authentic portrayals of diversity through a range of genres, and despite limited resources, a key impediment to content integration, both found creative ways to access materials and to make choices that extended the notion of diversity beyond race and ethnicity. Both addressed gender issues, and Reiko also selected texts that explored religion and sexual orientation. Of importance to students' responses, both teachers made clear to their students their commitments to exploring diversity through literature.

Reading as a sociocognitive process. Reading and school curricula transmit ways of thinking, problem solving, and engaging the world (Bloome, 1985). Both Reiko and Carolyn seriously disrupted their students' notions of how to engage literature and each other in talk about literature. Through careful socialization, students learned that in these classes multiple interpretations were valued, and student meaning-making was central. Each teacher presented herself as a fellow

learner on the path of discovering cultural diversity, and interpretive challenges were invited and valued. Through collaborative projects and presentations, students engaged literary works in multiple oral language activities, of which discussion was central. Analysis of discourse confirmed my preliminary observations of these classes: Both teachers fostered substantive student engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) through the use of authentic teacher and student questions (for which there were no prespecified answers in the texts), high levels of cohesive discourse, and high cognitive levels of talk that favored questions of analysis, synthesis, and speculation over questions of report and recall (Athanases, 1993). Students cited memorable class scenes when discussions were engaging and when challenges and disagreements heated things up. Both teachers carefully ushered their students into these discourse communities, scaffolding students' meaning-making through teacher modeling, sample discussion questions, and use of literature logs and journals. Both also gradually relinquished some control of discussion to students.

Personal and cultural knowledge invited and used. Students gained comfort in sharing personal and community stories paralleling those in the literature, creating a fund of stories thematically connected to those in the studied texts. Both teachers encouraged students to explore race issues openly, to bring personal and community knowledge to bear on works, and to make intertextual links. In this way, the classes went against the grain of silence about issues of difference in classrooms. Each class was composed of nearly all people of color very much aware of living in a racist society. Issues of social inequities arose in students' discussions and writings, and all of the students in the Richards class wrote of personal experience with racism and prejudice. Their teachers invited these young people to bring these perspectives into the unfolding discourse that frequently grew animated and dynamic. Students looked forward to the conversations, and they reported how they continued discussions as they left the classrooms, in the hallways, at their lunch tables, and at their dinner tables at home. Cultural variations in the classrooms were honored, and gender perspectives were offered and debated. These features of classroom discussion enabled students to have some extraordinary experiences in their 10th-grade English classes, the first time for most of them that such things were possible in an English class.

Students' Reports of Memorable and Meaningful Literary Works

Through various forms of reporting, Carolyn's students identified *Black Boy* (Wright, 1945) and *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (Auel, 1980) as the most memorable and meaningful works they studied during the year. Various short stories and poems also emerged as memorable works and are discussed in the following

section. In questionnaires and discussions 2 years after completion of their 10th-grade year, Reiko’s students reported on the literature of greatest impact. Table 1 shows the diversity of works students named.

Reiko’s students cited works from the full range of literary genres (plays, novels, autobiographies, short stories, essays, and poems). Most titles were mod-

TABLE 1. Literature of Greatest Impact Cited 2 Years After Reiko’s Class

	<i>Number of students mentioning (n = 18)</i>
Novels and autobiographies	
<i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , Amy Tan	7
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> , J. D. Salinger	7
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> , Maya Angelou	4
<i>House Made of Dawn</i> , N. Scott Momaday	2
<i>The Woman Warrior</i> , Maxine Hong Kingston	1
<i>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</i>	1
<i>The Stranger</i> , Albert Camus	1
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , Harper Lee	1
Short stories	
“The Lift That Went Down Into Hell,” Par Lagerkvist	4
“Chee’s Daughter,” Juanita Platero & Siyowin Miller	1
“Raymond’s Run,” Toni Cade Bambara	1
Autobiographical essays	
“Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish-Catholic Homosexual,” Brian McNaught	3
“A Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” (from <i>Stride Toward Freedom</i>), Martin Luther King, Jr.	1
“How I Started Writing Poetry,” Reginald Lockett	1
Plays	
<i>Othello</i> , William Shakespeare	3
<i>Antigone</i> , Sophocles	1
<i>Oedipus</i> , Sophocles	1
Poetry	
“Dream Deferred,” Langston Hughes	2

ern and contemporary works, although two Greek tragedies by Sophocles were mentioned once each, and three students cited the impact of Shakespeare's *Othello* and particularly enjoyed reading this classic text with a Black protagonist and with an unusual reversal of black and white imagery. Authors and literary characters represented a range of ethnicities. *The Joy Luck Club* elicited a strong match of ethnicity of author/title and student citing the title: Six of the seven students citing Tan's book were of Chinese ancestry, the seventh was Filipino. The seven students citing *The Catcher in the Rye* (three boys and four girls) represented a range of ethnicities, although none was African American. What reasons did Reiko's and Carolyn's students have for citing literary works as memorable and meaningful? What values did these literary experiences provide the young people?

Reflecting on the Self Through Personal Identification With Literature

Not surprisingly, links between literary works and students' experiences had an important impact on response. Students identified multiple sources of experience that influenced their literary preferences, including experiences particular to their families and personal lives, geographic regions, gender, and cultural experiences as members of particular ethnic groups.

Reflecting on family and adolescent concerns. Students reported identification with works because they had had experiences or feelings similar to those of literary characters, regardless of ethnicity of author, character, or reader. Students used literary encounters to recall personal experiences often tied to family-related nostalgia and loss. Angelica, a Chicana in Carolyn's class, admired Genny Lim's "Cancer Ward" (1989), a poem with some Chinese cultural content, because:

my grandmother died of cancer and when I went to go visit her in the hospital this is the way her hospital room looked.... I especially liked "a pint of borrowed blood flows from a plastic bag." It made me feel a little sad inside to think people have to go through this. I never knew what cancer was till one of mine died from it.

"Street Music" by Stephen E. Walker (1985) was Rafael's favorite poem in a collection of 12. The poem reminded Rafael of the days when he and his father would listen to a saxophonist by a wharf back home in El Salvador, and he would beg his father for money to give to the performer. He would say to his father in Spanish, "I'm gonna be a saxophone player, Papi!" When students' selections of favorite works matched ethnicity of author, character, and reader, students likewise at times identified particular family experiences depicted in the literature that they believed explained their identification with the works. This was the case, for example, when Reiko's student Alycia selected as her favorite work Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run" (1972), a first person narrative that captures

the orality of Black English Vernacular, “because the brother had Down’s Syndrome, and my sister is in Special Education.”

Students also used literary encounters to reflect on problematic emotions often tied to the onset of adolescent struggles with peer group affiliation and alienation. These reflections also were stimulated by literature that crossed ethnic lines. Maricela, a Filipina in Carolyn’s class, felt both a sadness and a sense of recognition when she read her favorite literary work, Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” (1959) because:

it reminds me of me. Lately, I’ve been down in “The Weary Blues.” Problems have been arising in my life. School is becoming a bore. Nothing seems to be lighting a spark to motivate myself to improve. When I read this poem for the first time it reminded me of how I was behaving towards life.

The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1951), which depicts the experiences of a privileged White teenager at an elite private school in the 1950s, was popular with many of Reiko’s students. One of these students was Alberto, who is Filipino American, for whom the novel had a lasting impact, “because the main character had flaws and weaknesses that I, myself, needed to work on also.”

Reflecting on pride of culture and place. Beyond adolescent and family concerns, students identified ways in which cultural experiences depicted in literary works sparked identification in them and, at times, a sense of cultural pride and validation. Two of Carolyn’s students found different cultural connections to the same poem, a favorite for each. Genny Lim’s “Winter Place” (1989) uses rich imagery to recreate scenes of bordering Chinese and Italian urban neighborhoods. Catherine, who is Italian American, said the poem, “brought back all those memories from when I used to visit my grandmother in [that neighborhood].” The poem sparked family memory and cultural connection as she recalled walking up and down the streets and how reading the poem made the memories come “rushing back like it happened yesterday.” She admired the poem, because “It is kind of like it is a piece of my past.” Cindy, who is Chinese American, claimed the same poem for its vividness and for its relation to *her* experience living in Chinatown when she immigrated to the United States. She appreciated the poem’s “naked truth of Chinatown’s filthy streets”: “The entire poem brought on nostalgia of the streets and people of my neighborhood.” It resonated so strongly for her that she wrote the poem in its entirety into her notebook.

Identifying culturally with literary events provided some students with pride and special access to the works. Reiko’s student Cassandra grew highly engaged in reading works by African American authors and felt a growing sense of pride in her heritage. She felt a connection with Maya Angelou when she read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969):

I haven’t really experienced anything that’s like what she went through, but when it happened to *her*, it was like ... she was a Black woman and I could just relate to a lot of the things, ‘cause I hear stories, like my mother, my

grandmother, my grandfather tell me, and then ... when I read I be like, "That's the same thing Mama said" or like that.

She felt the same connection, more personally, when reading Reginald Lockett's (1988) essay "How I Started Writing Poetry" about growing up on the streets and feeling alienated in school as an African American youth. Some of his experiences reminded her of things her friends had done: "This poet stayed with me because he was Black and because he was from the area.... It is always a pleasure seeing African Americans doing such positive things." Cassandra had felt she was supposed to respect Martin Luther King, Jr., as a cultural role model, but reading "A Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" (1958) was the first time she had some real understanding of some of the ideas King had articulated. Cassandra felt enormous pride in reading all three of these works and derived strength from the first two, because they presented encouraging "gettin' over" stories of African American youth with challenging lives who found power through learning and writing. In this way, the literary experiences served not only the function of fostering pride but also that of envisioning what McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) have called an expanded repertoire of possible selves.

Developing a cultural identity. Classroom discussion on cultural issues scaffolded readers' private reflections on the development of cultural identities. Sometimes the readers continued to discuss classroom issues on highly engaging cultural themes with friends and family members and sometimes explored them in more private internal reflections. For Alberto, the reading of two short works by Filipino authors allowed him a special connection to the literature that likewise fostered pride. He spoke to his parents about both works over dinner and cited to me features of them that he understood from a cultural perspective. In one case, he knew that a young man's photo of a woman on his dresser in a laboring camp in California referred to the experience of young men being exiled from the Philippines for violating social norms related to male-female relationships, a theme about which he sought confirmation from his parents. Having this privileged access to cultural content and literary meaning engaged Alberto and fostered a sense of validation about his ethnic heritage, helping him to see the part that "my people played in the building of America."

Two years after the completion of Reiko's class, *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 1989) was cited by more than one-third of Reiko's students as memorable and meaningful. Having been introduced to the book through study of one chapter earlier in their 10th-grade year, many read the full book for their group project in May of that year. Having participated in elaborate project work and group discussions on the book, the Chinese American girls in class, in particular, claimed Tan's novel as their story. Shirley stated:

It's a story I can't forget.... written by a Chinese American about Chinese Americans. Before this, I had never read anything like it. This book was an inspiration to me. It made me become proud and unashamed of my culture.

For Vivian, the experience of engaging the book proved instrumental in developing a conscious cultural identity: “*The Joy Luck Club* – first book I read written by a Chinese lady, first book in which I could identify with cultural aspect of the book, could relate to the book.” Vivian told me she had never thought of herself as Chinese until she heard her peers laughing at and criticizing Lindo Jong’s harsh treatment of her daughter Waverley in “Four Directions,” the chapter from Tan’s book that the class had studied together:

Some people thought she was ... trying to hurt her daughter, and trying to sneak her way through it.... But then, while I was reading it, I guess I saw it differently because, well, I’m Chinese, and I sorta knew what was going on in the story ... the way her mother picked on all the negative stuff about her ... because that was what happens to me.

Vivian developed a deeper understanding of what it was that she understood here by the time she had read the entire book and completed her analysis:

One of the major causes for battles between mothers and daughters is the difference in where and how they were raised.... The biggest problem that the mothers and their daughters face is who controls the daughters’ lives. However, being raised in America, the daughter fails to see that her mother only wants to help and nothing more.

She closed with, “But in times of need, the daughters come back to their mothers. This is where there are no barriers and no rules.” The conversation in class had sparked Vivian’s exploration of the mother-daughter relationships in Tan’s book, which continued in her group’s conversations. This resulted in Vivian’s understanding of what it meant to her to be a young woman of Chinese ancestry, just as some of the characters in the book came to similar awakenings.

Reflecting on developing sexual identities. Gender and sexuality occupy much of adolescents’ thinking, and literary experiences in Carolyn’s and Reiko’s classes provided opportunities for reflection on these concerns. Female students in both classes reported identification and validation in reading literary works with strong women characters. One of Reiko’s students cited Sophocles’ *Antigone* for its portrayal of a strong woman who defies male authority, and another reported learning of the hardships of the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* and spoke of how she related to the “beautiful love/hate relationship between the moms and daughters” because of her own relationship with her mother.

For the girls in Carolyn’s class, the reading of *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (Auel, 1980) not only engaged them because of the book’s sense of adventure, but the treatment of the male-female issues of the book during class discussions acculturated them to conversations inside and outside of class about gender issues. These discussions prompted reflections on an expanded repertoire of ways of being a woman. During interviews, they reported emphatically their pleasure in reading of the character Ayla’s life. Viva, who is Mexican American, said that

when the clan cursed and alienated Ayla for defying the clan and choosing to hunt (normally the province for males only):

I was just like turning the pages. I couldn't stop reading it, I was so interested in this part. For once it was the woman who's taking care of herself and nobody's around, no man's taking care of her or anything. She's on her own. In most books or movies there's always the woman in distress, and here comes her knight in shining armor who will save her.... It's nice to see – well, I'm a girl, I like to see a woman who can make it on her own.

Viva spoke of how she and her friend from class would discuss the book and class discussions of it outside of class:

And we're walking and I'll say something like, "Oh, did you hear what Rafael said?" Like in one discussion. And she'll say, "Yeah, he's a jerk," or something like that, 'cause we were talking about the men and women again. And she'll say, "Yeah, but the men always had to do this and women did that." But so what I don't understand, you know, why couldn't they both do it if they do it now? What's the difference years ago?

The Clan of the Cave Bear aroused Viva's wonder about inequities and conflicts related to gender, and like many of her peers, she engaged in discourse about gender inequities in and out of class prompted by the reading and study of a work authored by a woman and with a strong woman as the primary character.

Two of Reiko's students identified strongly with and found validation in reading "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual," in which the author, Brian McNaught (1988), a counselor and speaker on gay issues, addresses Anita Bryant, who had campaigned against the rights of gays and lesbians to teach in Dade County Schools. From the perspective of a loving, religious, family-oriented man, McNaught chronicles his own struggles to accept his being gay and the challenge of maintaining pride and integrity in the face of hateful denials of his civil rights. Cristina, raised a Catholic in the Philippines, wrote about how she identified with the struggle for sexual identity and self-definition. Likewise, Tanisha identified with Brian, positioning herself with all gays and lesbians during class discussion of the essay. As issues heated up and some classmates voiced stereotypes and fears about being around gay people, Tanisha grew impassioned and faced off against five students as she expressed incredulity that anyone could believe homosexuality was a choice, that someone would choose to be part of an oppressed group. She wrote, "Why should it matter if you love a woman and are a woman or if you love a man and are a man? If there is love there and it's pure, why should the form matter?" Two years later, now an out lesbian at school who faced occasional homophobic taunts from students in the halls, Tanisha spoke of how important "Dear Anita" and the lesson had been in her education. Just as she had found strength in her development as an African American young woman in reading and discussing works by and about Blacks

and women, an essay and lesson treating gay and lesbian issues had aided her development of sexual identity.

Revising Notions of Cultural Others

Throughout the year, students in both classes were often reading and studying about cultural norms and experiences in ethnic groups different from their own. Much of this had an impact on the students.

Learning from new experiences and ideas about cultures. For students in each class, some of the stories got them thinking about culture, about diversity, and about social inequities in substantive ways for the first time. Rommel, for example, a recent immigrant from the Philippines, reported that reading *Black Boy* (Wright, 1945) in Carolyn's class opened him up to things he never knew about racism in this country and about the treatment of African Americans in the United States. He had heard in school in the Philippines that there had been problems for Blacks in the United States, but until now he had known nothing about these. He said he wanted to read more about these issues. Viva, who grew up in what she calls a traditional Mexican family, says reading *Black Boy* made her want to read more about:

um, what's that word? Integration. I wanted to read more about ... those Jim Crow laws they had. I wanted to read more about those, what they really were, and just why everyone was like that. Why did that make such a difference, someone's skin color?

For this reason, she chose Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1967) for an independent reading project for class, but although she learned some new things from it, she was disappointed that Cleaver ultimately dealt a lot with life in prison and did not satisfy Viva's desire to learn more about "the life outside." The racism in *Black Boy* and the background information Carolyn shared about Jim Crow laws bewildered Viva and made her want to better understand these issues.

Students born and raised in the United States, including a number of African American students in Reiko's class, likewise had known little about the history of African Americans that they came to learn through the literature during the year. Cassandra and Demar, both African American, spoke of how they had never read anything about African American experiences by African American authors and how they valued this new learning. Like Cassandra, who felt buoyed by new things she had learned through the study of Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X (through her group's study of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1964), Demar felt encouraged by his new knowledge of African American experience as reflected in the literature they read.

Rethinking stereotypes. Some of the literary experiences not only informed students about other ethnic and cultural experiences but promoted rethinking of stereotypes and myths the students had held about cultural others. African

American students in Reiko's class, for example, reported that they had always thought that Chinese families were consistently harmonious and that reading "Four Directions" from *The Joy Luck Club* and hearing Chinese American students in class identify with the daughters in the book who have conflicts with their mothers caused them to think otherwise. Likewise, Chinese American students in Reiko's class reported new empathy for African Americans. As a senior, Vivian chose *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as one of the works from 2 years earlier that had had a lasting impact on her: "I was able to empathize with the character, first book I read in which I was really brought into the world of an African American." Two girls in Reiko's class (one Black, one White) were so stunned by the destruction of Native American culture in the book they chose for their group project that they located two more related books for planning their presentation. They expressed outrage at how the US government had participated in the destruction of Native American cultures. Two years later, both girls identified Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1989) as one of the works of lasting impact. One of them stated, "It showed me . . . how stubborn and stupid people are because they stick to stereotypes instead of finding out the truth." Most of Reiko's students reported the impact of "Dear Anita." One girl talked of how reading about "this all-American guy" made her see his gayness in a nonstereotypical way. LaTonia spoke of being very religious herself and being involved in a Baptist church and having learned that homosexuality was wrong and bad. She reported that by the time she finished reading "Dear Anita" and after hearing the class discussion, she decided that gays have the right to be who they are, "the same as anyone."

Resisting Challenging Discourse and Problematic Portrayals

Some evidence pointed to at least some student resistance to either literary characters or challenging conversations about texts. During discussion of *The Clan of the Cave Bear* in Carolyn's class, for example, a few male students challenged the direction of the discourse about the importance of Ayla's having choices of roles to play in the clan, calling for more traditional women's roles. Viva's earlier remark about Rafael "being a jerk" refers to one of these episodes when four girls, all Latina, who daily sat with and bantered playfully with Rafael, collaborated on a fiery response to his challenge. Rafael later rethought his position.

Reiko chose "Dear Anita" for her class to read because some of her students had expressed homophobic responses to Marguerite's struggles with sexuality during study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Reiko thought it was important that her students make the transition from knowing how it feels to receive racist taunts to imagining being gay in a homophobic society. The lesson grew extremely heated, but most students made some important movement through it. (For a detailed discussion of this lesson, see Athanases, 1996.) For at least one student, however, McNaught's character remained a problematic

portrayal. Celeste, a European American girl who entered Reiko's class midyear, clung to what she claimed the Church had taught her, that she can "condemn the sin [of homosexuality] and not the sinner," a twist on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s comment on attitudes toward racists. She felt McNaught painted Irish Catholics as "rigid and hateful." Celeste appreciated that Reiko opened the discussion that day by inviting her to be the cultural authority on Irish Catholic experience, but she was not happy about the essay. "Fifty percent of me is Irish Catholic," she said, and McNaught's essay was the one piece to represent her ethnicity:

I felt it didn't really have that much positive about it. I thought it was mostly negative, whereas before, she (Reiko) picked like, um, "Pilgrimage to Non-violence" by Martin Luther King and *America is in the Heart*, and "Scent of Apples," and like other stuff that really weren't negative, all negative, about the culture or the ethnicity.

Reiko explained to Celeste in writing that she did not see the essay as depicting a negative perspective on Irish Catholics, that "The author's being Irish Catholic just means that he faced religious and cultural prohibitions against the kind of lifestyle he leads." Celeste's resistance may have been because of her inability at this point in her life to reconcile religious teachings with McNaught's call for empathy. However, the fact that many students who were active members of Baptist and Catholic churches adjusted attitudes toward gays and embraced McNaught's appeal for social justice (an underlying theme of the entire curriculum) suggests another possibility. Celeste's resistance may have been because of her feelings that her one chance of Irish Catholic representation in the curriculum resulted in a work that was problematic for her, a disappointment that other students in class got to feel the pride of being connected to what she considered more positive portrayals. Her resistance also may have been prompted by the fact that she entered class midyear, long after a classroom culture had been established for exploration of diversity. The incident nonetheless marks the sensitivity of representation when more inclusive curricula are designed.

Personal dislikes for literary works sometimes point to larger issues. *Black Boy* was enthusiastically received by most of Carolyn's students, but Felicia seemed uncomfortable with it and expressed a lack of enthusiasm for the book. Felicia identified herself as African American but spoke of some Puerto Rican heritage on her mother's side. She spoke in one small-group discussion about recently exploring this second ethnic heritage. Although she engaged fully in written assignments and class discussions related to the book, Felicia told me she did not like Wright's autobiography:

It wasn't really a very happy story. I don't know. I just don't like stories like that.... It was about a guy growing up in a neighborhood where it was Blacks were separated from Whites, and I never been to anything like that.

Felicia was a highly verbal student, normally elaborate in her responses to class activities and in interviews with me, but I was unable to learn from her why she

disliked the book. No other students in Carolyn's class identified as African American, yet the book was quite popular with the class. Students identified with portions of the work and appreciated learning about Wright's life and the plight of a Black youth in the early 1900s American South. Perhaps the complexities of Felicia's biracial roots raised questions for her of identifying with the Black-White relations depicted in *Black Boy*. Also, as the one student in class perceived by peers as African American, Felicia may have felt discomfort in Richard's victimization. This possibility reminds us of the curricular need to balance depressing tales of oppression experienced by women and many people of color with stories of strong women characters and protagonists of color in empowered states (Bishop, 1992; Pace, 1992), works that move beyond victimization and merely images of oppression (Greene, 1993). Likewise, Felicia's response points again to the need in such curricula for classroom opportunities that invite students to voice their dislike for literature they cannot embrace or that does not embrace them.

Discussion and Conclusions

Much of the literature on multicultural education, including work on diversifying literature curricula, has articulated great promise. Little work, however, has yet examined what occurs in classes where curricula have been diversified or what students report about their encounters with these literary works. This study, however, looked closely at ethnically diverse students' reports of meaningful literary works in two classes of newly diversified curricula. Students had much to say about the literature they studied and found much to like, remember, and learn from in the works they read in these classes. They identified with literary works and gleaned support from stories and characters. They learned about experiences of diverse characters in diverse groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, and they let go of some old stereotypes.

When students identified with characters and texts, they reflected on personal concerns, including family nostalgia and loss, adolescent challenges, and culture, gender, and sexual-identity formation. Students identified with and felt strength from literary characters across racial, ethnic, and gender lines. This result reminds us of an important point: Works by an ethnically diverse group of authors can engage equally diverse groups of students and teach across the lines that divide about profound human experiences. Likewise, this point reminds us of the folly of essentializing authors, characters, or readers, reducing them to mere members of particular identifying groups. Authors, well-etched characters, and readers are complex human individuals who belong to multiple communities and who defy easy categorization.

It does not follow, however, that any literature can and ought to do this work, including a more conventional collection of texts by and about only

European American straight males. For although students in this study identified with characters across lines of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, they also reported a hunger for encounters with engaging literature that reflected their own experiences as defined by these group memberships and that affirmed, expanded, and helped define these realities. For many of the students, their 10th-grade English class included their first opportunity to encounter women and people of color as authors and as strong, thoughtful, and complex literary characters. These encounters had profound impact on many of the students by engaging them in the literature and in literary acts of exploration and by validating their experiences. In addition, these literary encounters provided students with privileged access to certain texts at times, aiding comprehension through quick grasping of cultural cues embedded in the works. The literature and its surrounding discourse as shaped by Reiko and Carolyn served as stimuli as students voiced, rehearsed, and revised their developing cultural identities.

Students found value in learning about difference through literature, as well. They reported how their discoveries about diverse groups (identified by race, culture, gender, religion, and sexual orientation) helped them move past stereotyped notions of others. Principles articulated in the multicultural education literature to help guide selection of diverse texts proved essential in helping students in these classes to revise notions of culture. For example, Cassandra identified with and valued Reginald Lockett's culturally accurate account (Bishop, 1992; Yokota, 1993) of school and community experiences as an African American youth as one textured with authentic detail and feeling, and Vivian and her peers valued finding themselves in the authentic cultural nuances of conflicts between overseas-born Chinese mothers and their daughters in the United States in *The Joy Luck Club*. Likewise, a diverse group of students moved beyond myths about homosexuality and developed some empathy for the plight of gays and lesbians in part because they valued McNaught's insider view, how he provided them with an authentic sense of what it has meant for him to be both devoutly Catholic and gay. Also, in supporting study of Richard Wright's autobiography with background on Jim Crow laws, Carolyn attended to the institutional structures that have perpetuated social inequities (Gibson, 1984; Hilliard, 1974; Mura, 1988). This attention helped Rommel learn how twentieth-century institutionalized racism provides a framing for contemporary African American experiences; it also aroused Viva's desire to read further through selection of another autobiographical work by an African American writer. Although students comfortably voiced dislikes of literary works when they felt these, at least two students, Celeste and Felicia, privately resisted troublesome literary depictions. This reminds us of the importance of inviting students to share their own parallel and conflicting stories of experience (Fairbanks, 1995). Students recognized and valued selections beyond images of victimization, representation of strong female characters and people of color, and powerful voices of authors such as Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, and Brian McNaught as they narrated their stories of overcoming personal and social adversity.

The fact that these classrooms fostered such experiences for these young readers to learn about literature and life is indeed noteworthy. The road was not always smooth. The teachers repeatedly wondered with me if their discussions needed tighter focus and worried about how to engage “the silent five” in their classes. They occasionally had to negotiate conflicts that heated up in part because of racial tensions and in part because of the volatile nature of many adolescents’ emotional states. Nonetheless, in their written reflections and conversations 2 years after Reiko’s class had ended, students reported how enraged they had grown in their senior-year literature course with a teacher who taught almost strictly through lecture, the elicitation of factual information, and the pursuit of canonical interpretations of canonical texts. The students knew, even better now in retrospect, how much more than text selection had made their 10th-grade English course thrive. That different students at times recalled the same moments in class discussions 4 months and even 2 years after they occurred as instrumental in their understanding and essential in creating in them the thrill of discovery testifies to the power of the exploratory talk (Barnes, 1976) of reflective discussion. Such talk provided scaffolding for making literary meaning, where learning on the external plane of talk moved inward to the internal plane of thought (Vygotsky, 1962; Wertsch, 1981). Carolyn and Reiko, of course, monitored the talk of diverse literary works, helping diverse students to engage each other in the contact zone of the classroom (Pratt, 1991). It was through this developing discourse, so rare in public-school classrooms, that these students learned that making connections between the books of school and the experiences of their personal and community lives was valued by their teachers and essential to their learning.

This attention in students’ reports of meaningful literary works to how the curriculum unfolded reminds us of the need in research on diversified curricula to move beyond debates of *what* should be taught, to analyses of *how*—an essential step, because changing course materials alone has not historically yielded humanistic benefits (Applebee, 1974). Parker (1993) aptly noted that “Arguments for an anticanonical multiculturalism have become so canonical a genre unto themselves that the theorizing of *how* to teach multiculturalism has remained underdeveloped and often even unrecognized as a need” (p. 105). Thoughtful educators, however, have no problem recognizing this need. This study substantiates the promise of teaching multicultural literature and marks the need for redirection in conversations on content integration to the essential nature of instruction. Our curricular theorizing must include the voices, preferences, and reported learning of diverse learners and analyses of the essential role of discourse that fosters their reflections on literature, culture, and identity.

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