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MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS: THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS

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Sitting in the back of an eighth grade English classroom on an early winter day, I listened while the teacher and students talked about the Native American short story, "The Medicine Bag." In the story, a Sioux great-grandfather carries on tradition by passing down the family medicine bag to his great-grandson. Because this eighth grade class was part of a K-8 Native American magnet school, the teacher's selection of this story seemed like a good choice for connecting literature to the lives of students. Multicultural literature has the potential to help connect the world of the classroom with lives our students live outside of the classroom. However, in order for this potential to be realized, classroom discussions of this literature must create space for students to connect the literature to their own lives as a primary means for creating significance and understanding.

For Native American adolescents, the search for identity is often caught up in conflicting cultural values between Native American and white society. Mindful of the tensions this disparity causes in the lives of adolescents, Mary, the classroom teacher, sought out multicultural literature, such as "The Medicine Bag," in an effort to make literature relevant to the lives of her students. She viewed literature as an opportunity for students to "bring their own lives" to the texts and to see their lives "in the context of a community [i.e., the classroom community]." As she told me in an interview, she wanted her students to use literature as a tool for "express[ing] how they felt."

Research supports Mary's perspective and has documented how the use of multicultural literature can help develop students' abilities to use multicultural perspectives and knowledge to think about literature, society (Miller & McCaskill, 1993; Rios 1996; Rogers & Soter, 1997), and their own lives. The diverse perspectives found in the voices of cultural groups who have been excluded from literary study can offer "alternative vantage points on the world" (Greene, 1992). In this view, literature by and about Latinos/a, African Americans, Native Americans and Asians can provide teachers with opportunities for meeting many goals of multicultural education, where voices interact and students reflect, think critically, increase cultural awareness, decrease ethnocentrism, and develop a global perspective.

However, as I learned from observing and listening to the students in this particular classroom, in order for multicultural literature to engage students in critical thinking and provide opportunities to connect classroom life to the lives of our students, it is not sufficient to simply introduce multicultural literature into the classroom. We need to think more deeply and critically about the ways students' cultural, social, and community identities and experiences interanimate with the reading and teaching of multicultural literature in language arts classrooms to create meaning. Because students bring their own experiences and perspectives to the reading of multicultural literature, using it in the language arts classroom requires attention to not only *what* we teach when we select multicultural literature but also to *how* we teach it. What questions do we raise for discussion? Do we engage and validate our students' experiences and prior knowledge to help shape meaning? Do we find space for multiple interpretations and understandings of multicultural literature?

Kristy, a student in this particular eighth grade classroom, provides an excellent case study for thinking about these questions and issues. As part of a research project, I had the opportunity of meeting with Kristy several times to talk about her experiences in this English class. As Kristy narrates

her thinking around these experiences, she provides an important perspective of the multicultural literature she read in her eighth grade English class as she connected it to her life.

Kristy

At the time of this study, Kristy was a fourteen-year old Native American girl – a member of the Mohawk tribe which is part of the Iroquois Nation. Tall, with long dark hair and braces she dressed simply in blue jeans, tee-shirts, and sneakers. In her eighth grade English class, she was usually very quiet and seldom contributed to discussions. She was, as she told me teachers in her school expected her to be – “nice, polite, and smart.”

Kristy thought of herself as a poet and, in fact, she was very proud that a poem she wrote about her grandmother had recently been accepted for publication in a New York State student anthology. She wrote her poem, “Ak Sot Ha, My Grandmother,” in alternating stanzas of English and Mohawk, perhaps as representative of her sense of living in two worlds. Much of Kristy’s time outside of school was spent at the Long House, and she was taking lessons to learn to speak and write the Mohawk language. Several years ago, Kristy and her friend planted a traditional Native garden incorporating, as she explained it to me, “the old ways” of planting and sowing and together they were learning the traditional Mohawk meaning behind each of the plants.

Clearly, Kristy’s life experiences as a young Mohawk woman were very significant and a primary social foundation to her sense of self. Because of this, I believed Kristy’s perceptions about the Native American literature she read in her English class would be particularly relevant and revealing for what they might suggest about the role of multicultural literature in the lives of students of color. In one of two interviews I had with Kristy, I asked her what she thought about the Native American stories she read in English class.

Kristy: Sometimes [they] seem kind of fake and sometimes real. Fifty

percent. Sometimes I feel they’re making fun of us. They don’t know any-thing. They’re just talking stuff to make us look bad. ... They be talking stuff they don’t even know about and it just makes...me feel bad. ... And I feel angry because they don’t know anything about it and there’s stuff that wasn’t Native that I learned. Like there’s always two sides [to every story].

Kristy challenged the validity of the texts she read in English class. Her sense was that sometimes the stories were inauthentic saying that they “seem kind of fake” and that “they don’t know anything about it.” Further, these stories left her feeling “bad” and “angry.” However, my analysis of the teaching of multicultural literature in this classroom suggests that Kristy’s sense of the stories she read was directly related to the enacted pedagogy around the reading and teaching of the literature.

Below is a segment of the discussion of “The Medicine Bag.” In this classroom excerpt, students were taking turns reading the story aloud. Mary would stop the reading at certain points to talk about what they had just read. This segment begins with Mary introducing the story, prior to the beginning of the reading.

Mary: How many people in here are learning the Native American traditions? Who are you learning them from?

Kristy: My friends.

Amanda (Mohawk female): My pastor.

Mary: That’s right. You go to a Native American church. Different cultures are probably so integrated, we lose culture. Culture is what we eat, how we dress, our values, the music we listen to. The Native Americans had to retrieve their culture because of it being systematically taken away. It’s similar to Black Americans.

Damien (African American male): Kristy, what kind of music do you listen to?

[Kristy does not answer Damien.]

Paul (African American male): Beating drums.

Mary: You have tapes [of Native American music] don't you?

Kristy: Yes.

Mary: What's the stereotype of Native American men?

Amanda: Tall. Mean.

Mary: How does he wear his hair?

Amanda: Braids.

Mary: At this age, you get embarrassed about how parent and family members look and what they wear.

[This is in reference to the boy in the story who is embarrassed by his grandfather's Native American dress.]

[Mary asks a student to begin to read the story aloud and the student does so. Paul interrupts the reading to ask Kristy a question.]

Paul: Do you know what that means Kristy?

[Referring to the words "Hau, Takoza" in the story.]

Mary: No. Kristy knows Mohawk. This is Sioux. Continue reading Kristy.

[Kristy reads.]

Mary: So do Native Americans show affection in public? [referring to scene in the story where Mom moves to embrace Grandpa and remembers that public displays of affection are unseemly to the Sioux]. No. Is that true now? No. Now, Native Americans like to show affection very publicly.

[Mary calls on other students take turns reading aloud.]

Mary: What might fainting be a foreshadowing of? [referring to scene in story when grandfather faints]

Paul: He's going to die.

Mary: Be aware that when something like this happens, it usually signals something else is going to happen. ... Does anyone spend time with their grandparents? [Many hands go up.] What a wonderful gift! Why?

Tina (European-American female): They're wiser.

Kristy: You learn about the family.

Mary: They pass on traditions, names.

Grandparents accept and love you unconditionally. You don't have to make sure that you do the appropriate thing.

Jared (African-American male): They just spoil you.

Mary: Jared, continue reading. I'm giving points for reading.

[Jared reads.]

Mary: Note what it says about the oldest male child. Even though it's a matriarchal culture, this was something that girls couldn't participate in.

Tina: What if there were only girls?

Mary: I don't know. I'll have to ask the Native American teacher upstairs. Are there any customs in your families that you're uncomfortable with?

[No response.]

Mary: My grandmother prayed the rosary. We weren't comfortable but we did it to honor her. Sometimes there's tension. We'd say the rosary with her but not on our own. Although she thought we did.

[Mary reads the rest of the story.]

Mary: What do you think of passing customs down only to men?

Paul: That's genderizing (sic) or something.

[Bell rings for the end of the period.]

Mary: We'll talk about that tomorrow.

In this excerpt of classroom discussion, there were simultaneously several different purposes for the classroom talk. From the beginning, Mary attempted to acknowledge some students' expertise and personal knowledge by asking who in the class was learning about Native American traditions. Kristy and Amanda responded that they were learning from friends and the pastor at church,

respectively. However, rather than asking the girls to elaborate on what they knew, Mary turned to a definition of culture based on popular conceptions of culture as food, dress, and music. She then opened space for a potentially significant and meaningful discussion when she remarked on the similar ways both the Native culture and the African American culture were both systematically “taken away.” Damien, an African-American boy, perhaps in an effort to take up the connection that Mary had made between these two cultures, asked Kristy what kind of music she listens to. Kristy, though, did not answer to Damien. Similarly, later on, Paul, another African-American boy, asked Kristy if she knew the meaning of two of the Sioux words found in the story. Mary spoke for Kristy when she responded that Kristy knew the Mohawk language and not Sioux. Mary then moved on to make a generalization about Native displays of public affection and any potential for Kristy, Damien, Paul, and the other students to engage with multicultural literature in a dialogue that might help them to make meaningful connections across their own experiences was lost.

This same missed opportunity occurred again around their conversation about the role of grandparents in their lives. Further, at the end of the conversation, Mary introduced the issue of gender bias in the story and Tina posed an interesting dilemma (“What if there were no girls?”) around that issue which, again, was not taken up during this class session or on the following day.

Given the context for discussing multicultural literature in this class, it is possible to construe Kristy’s boredom, referred to earlier, as caught up within the anger she said she felt about the misrepresentation of Native peoples in the literature and her inability to articulate what she knew and felt about Native culture. Stereotypical representations of Native peoples, such as the description of Native men that Mary pointed out to the class, were, at times, *unwittingly* reproduced in the teacher’s own talk. For example, during a review of vocabulary words for a spelling test, Mary used the term “Indian giver” to help clarify the meaning of the word

“rescind.” So, while Mary did attempt to use the literature to help students think more deeply about their own experiences and to offer a social critique of racism, these goals for literature were not elaborated or consistent throughout her teaching.

Consequently, Kristy was never able to articulate her own critical and resistant reading of these texts, based in her own experiences. Recall that in my conversation with Kristy, she said, “I feel angry because they don’t know anything about it and there’s stuff that wasn’t Native that I learned. Like there’s always two sides [to every story].” The point Kristy felt so strongly about was that she had come to understand that the culturally dominant versions of history she had been taught were not, necessarily, the only versions or even the correct versions. Here is the rest of my conversation from my first interview with Kristy:

Interviewer: Two sides to every story?

Kristy: Yeah! I used to like to read about Abraham Lincoln. But when I heard about what he did to some of the Native American people, I kind of hated him then. Like they don’t tell you what he did. They just tell you the good stuff really.

Interviewer: So how did you find out about what he did?

Kristy: I found out when we were protesting in Albany. We were protesting there and I was listening very closely. There were a lot of people there and it was noisy. And they were saying that they killed thirty-two Native Americans [during the time of Lincoln]> And that half of them didn’t even do anything. And at the end when they died, they holded hands together and sang.

Through her experiences outside of school, she had learned there are cultural and historical stories about Native people left out of classroom texts. At fourteen years old, Kristy’s identity as a young Mohawk woman has begun being shaped by an evolving awareness of the ways in which her identity is caught up in the larger sociopolitical structure. Kristy sensed the missing voices and perspectives (the other side of the story) in much of

this literature and it angered her and made her “feel bad.”

As a consequence, the teaching of multicultural literature (in this instance, specifically Native American literature), rather than creating space for multiple meanings and the opportunity to listen to and learn from students’ experiences, reinforced the sense of polarized and oppositional communities – school community was set apart from Kristy’s Native American community. In other words, there existed a disconnect for Kristy between her experiences in school and the significance of her lived experiences outside of school. Ironically, this result was the exact opposite of the teacher’s intentions for this literature. Recall that Mary said she taught this literature because of the opportunities it held for “students to bring their own lives” to the text and to see their lives “in the context of community.”

In fact, students’ experiences outside of the classroom directly impacted meanings they made from representations in the literature as well as classroom talk around the literature and the ways in which they took up and, on occasion, resisted these representations. For example, Kristy was deeply involved with her Native way of life outside of school. She had attended a protest rally in Albany where she learned that Abraham Lincoln, someone she used to admire, had been responsible for killing Native peoples. She told me that her experiences had led her to believe that the Native American stories she read in English class were “kind of fake and sometimes real. They’re just talking stuff to make us look bad. And I feel angry because they don’t know nothing about it.” Yet, because there was no space for the articulation of diverse experiences in the classroom, she had little to say during class.

Mary interpreted Kristy’s silence as reticence. In an interview, when I asked her to describe Kristy her assessment is very revealing:

Mary: She is very poor. She has a learning disability. She’s just a typical Native American girl. Very reticent. But I thought she wrote really

good papers. She really would not articulate verbally. Kristy isn’t very bright.

Implications for classroom practice

The teacher in this study understood the importance of incorporating multicultural literature into her curriculum as a way to make literature relevant to the lives of her students. However, she struggled with how to enable classroom discussion about the literature in ways that allowed students to bring their own experiences and understandings into the exploration of meaning. As a result, she was not able to achieve the positive goals she had for teaching the literature. In fact, as Kristy’s story demonstrates, the inadvertent silencing of her voice and the voices of others contributed to Kristy’s sense of frustration. This suggests the need to develop specific strategies around the teaching of multicultural literature that move students toward connections in their own lives. Such strategies involve allowing students to take charge of their own learning and leaving space for them to ask the questions and entertain the possible responses about the literature they are studying. In this way, students “own” the understandings they make about texts in a way they do not when discussion focuses on the teacher’s questions designed to elicit specific and factual information. When students ask the questions and clarify their understanding, then meaning becomes student-generated while still allowing them to practice their text analysis skills. In the classroom, this can be accomplished in several ways:

1. Form reader response circles where reading is acknowledged as a social activity. In such a circle, students can pick one passage they find the most interesting or important, explain why, and invite others to respond (Daniels, 2002)
2. Form literature study circles. These are different from response circles in that the former is an expression of individual views and the latter is focused more on collaborative construction of meaning

around the texts (Cherland, 1994; Daniels, 2002).

3. Ask students to respond in *writing* to a reading. Some prompts might include what they liked, what they didn't like, what confused them, and what they thought about particular sections of the text.

If we are better able to understand the many dimensions of this relationship between multicultural literature and students' outside lives, we are better able to create the democratic classroom we envision – a place for the articulation of lived experiences and perceptions of those experiences both in and out of school.

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