



Deepening Students' Reading, Responding, and Reflecting on Multicultural Literature: It All Started with *Brown Girl Dreaming*

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Abstract: The use of multicultural literature in the English classroom is important because students need to see themselves reflected on the page as well as need windows into their peers' experiences that are unlike their own. Teachers in middle school classrooms have the potential to positively influence students' ability to engage and connect with multicultural literature. In this article, the authors describe the instructional sequence and literacy experiences offered to seventh-grade students as they read, responded to, and reflected on Jacqueline Woodson's novel-in-verse *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Specifically, the varied literacy opportunities included reading and annotating *Brown Girl Dreaming*; using imitation to teach poetry; engaging in Read-Talk-Write; building background knowledge through allusion research and writing; creating an allusion-inspired poem; experiencing the *Brown Girl Dreaming* Gallery Walk; and writing reflections.

Keywords: multicultural literature, annotating, imitating, read-talk-write, student response, research, reflecting

The use of multicultural literature in English language arts classrooms allows students to see themselves reflected on the page or provides windows into their peers' experiences that are unlike their own (Glazier & Seo, 2011). Furthermore, students deserve exposure to inclusive literature that represents the world, and these texts help break down cultural barriers and allow students to develop greater global awareness by introducing them to past and current cultural issues (Monobe & Son, 2014). Multicultural literature is certainly important in middle schools where students are highly impressionable. Although acutely aware of their peer group and social surroundings, middle school students also value the ideas and opinions of the significant adults in their lives, including their teachers. Consequently, what teachers say and do or what teachers do not say or do is noticed, evaluated, and remembered (Landt, 2007). Teachers influence students' perceptions of fairness, of right and wrong, and of world views. For these reasons, exposing students to multicultural literature in English language arts classrooms is essential but insufficient if teachers do not seek to bridge the gap between reading diverse literature and connecting to the literature. According to Louie (2006), "simply exposing children to multicultural literature may lead to indifference, lack of understanding, and even resistance" (p. 438). Conversely, presenting students with multiple and varied opportunities to engage and connect with multicultural literature has the potential to develop students' understanding and empathy for their own and others' experiences as well as to broaden their conceptions of the world around them and beyond them by dismantling stereotypes through critical questioning and thought as well as respectful listening. These essential literacy and student-centered practices are at the core of this issue of the journal with its theme of "Beyond Boots, Borders, and Books: The Many Faces of Literacy in Texas."

The purpose of this article is to detail a series of literacy experiences that seventh-grade students engaged in as they read the multicultural novel-in-verse *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (2014). This text was chosen because it is set during a time period for which students had limited background knowledge; furthermore, the text served to provide students with a window into cultural experiences that are unlike their own. The literacy opportunities included reading and annotating *Brown Girl Dreaming*; using imitation to write poetry; engaging in Read-Talk-Write; building knowledge through allusion research and writing; creating an allusion-inspired poem; experiencing the *Brown Girl Dreaming* Gallery Walk; and writing reflections. Each literacy opportunity is described along with rationales for its use and purpose within the instructional sequence; additionally, samples of student work and our commentary are included.

Experience One: Reading and Annotating *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson is a memoir told in verse about Woodson's journey through childhood. Set in the 1960s, Woodson weaves the struggles she deals with during her young life—divorce, segregation, religion, uprooting, family illnesses, and death—into a beautiful story that ends with hope as she molds herself into a writer and activist.

When I (first author) select texts to read as a class, I think about what Chris Crutcher—award winning author of young adult books—said: “Here’s how I think multicultural works should be treated in the classroom: the same as any other works. There shouldn’t be a multicultural ‘unit.’ Every unit should be multicultural” (Crutcher, 2000, p. 6). *Brown Girl Dreaming* was selected because it mirrors Crutcher’s philosophy about the importance of multicultural literature and because it is a novel that is composed of high-quality poetry, as evidenced by the fact that Woodson’s poetry books have helped her earn a two-year term as the Young People’s Poet Laureate (Kellogg, 2015).

As 86 students across all sections of seventh-grade language arts read the book, they engaged in the strategy of annotation. Annotation is a strategy that students use as readers throughout the year. In the beginning of the year, students annotated personal reactions and connections to the text as well as wonderings related to factual information of the era in which the text was set. As the year progressed and as students became skilled in employing the strategy more efficiently and effectively, students began annotating for various literary devices and craft moves, including figurative language, sound devices, imagery, and allusions. Thus, at the point during the year in which students read *Brown Girl Dreaming*, they were comfortable employing the strategy of annotation as a natural part of reading and engaging with texts. See Figure 1 for a representative example of students’ annotations (permission was obtained to use student names and samples).

Experience Two: Using Imitation to Write Poetry

After students read and annotated the text, they were asked to write a poem about a personal experience that relates or connects with one of Woodson’s poems in some way. Students were asked to select and study one of Woodson’s poems for structure, style, tone, and other aspects of craft, thus requiring a deeper reading and analysis of the text.

The need to use mentor texts to teach writing was inspired by many writers and literacy experts, but particularly the book *Wondrous*

Words by Katie Wood Ray (1999). Ray writes about the benefit of reading literary excerpts twice—once with the lens of a reader and once with the lens of a writer. The “reader lens” focuses on plot, characters, setting—literary elements that revealed the reader’s understandings. The “writer lens” focuses on a writer’s craft—word choice, varying sentence lengths, sentence beginnings, repetitions, and other craft elements. Reading with two lenses leads students to more deeply analyze meaning (as a reader) and craft (as a writer). Further, reading like a writer helps develop advanced readers because they discover how form contributes to meaning (Brannon, 2012).

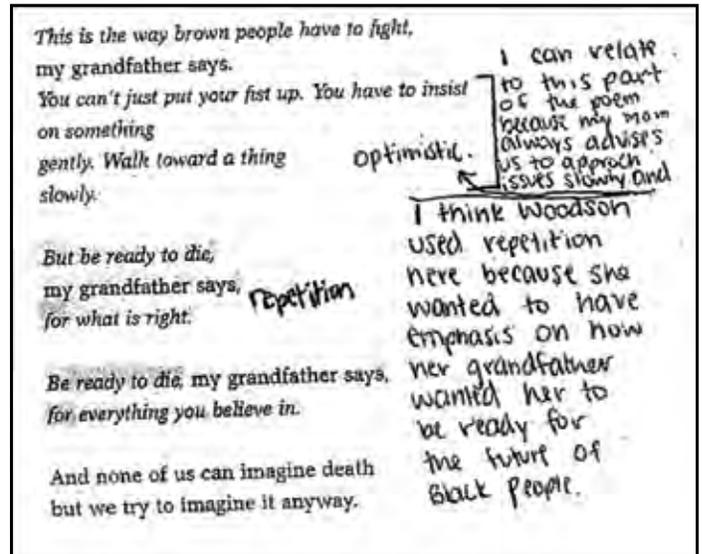


Figure 1. A student’s annotations on one page of *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

The sequence for selecting and imitating poetry was as follows:

1. Select a poem from *Brown Girl Dreaming* that “spoke to you.”
2. Read the poem once silently and once aloud.
3. Create a list of ideas the poem is conveying.
4. Create your own list of ideas that are similar to the ideas in the poem.
5. Create your own poem using Woodson’s basic structure.

See Table 1 for an excerpt from *Brown Girl Dreaming* (on the left) that a student used as inspiration to tell her own story (on the right).

The power of imitation lies in providing students with authentic examples of professional writing to serve as mentor texts from which they can model and shape their own (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2017). Jalynn saw a connection to Woodson’s story about her birthname: Jalynn’s family’s pattern of choosing names beginning with “J” sparked debate among her family just as Woodson’s father’s desire to name her a male name sparked debate. Jalynn borrowed from Woodson’s structure to share the opinions and thoughts of her family members, departing where needed to clarify perspectives and relate her facts. And because Jalynn followed Woodson’s structure from beginning to end, she created a concluding stanza that ties together her story with purpose, relating with pride that she is happy with the choice of name because it forever links her to her family.

Now that the students engaged in a thorough analysis of poem in order to create their own, they have a meaningful literacy experience

<p>“a girl named jack” by Jacqueline Woodson</p>	<p>“A Girl Named Jalynn” by Jalynn</p>
<p><i>Good enough name for me</i>, my father said the day I was born. <i>Don't see why she can't have it</i>, too.</p> <p>But the women said no. My mother first. Then each aunt, pulling my pink blanket back patting the crop of thick curls tugging at my new toes touching my cheeks</p> <p><i>We won't have a girl named Jack</i>, my mother said.</p> <p>And my father's sisters whispered, <i>A boy named Jack was bad enough.</i> But only so my mother could hear. <i>Name a girl Jack</i>, my father said, <i>and she can't help but grow up strong.</i></p> <p><i>Raise her right</i>, my father said, <i>and she'll make that name her own.</i> <i>Name a girl Jack</i> <i>and people will look at her twice</i>, my father said.</p> <p><i>For no good reason but to ask if her parents were crazy</i>, my mother said.</p> <p>And back and forth it went until I was Jackie and my father left the hospital mad.</p> <p>My mother said to my aunts, <i>Hand me that pen</i>, wrote <i>Jacqueline</i> where it asked for a name. Jacqueline, just in case someone thought to drop the <i>ie</i>.</p> <p>Jacqueline, just in case I grew up and wanted something a little bit longer and further away from Jack.</p>	<p>That's a good name, my sister said the day I was born. Don't see why that can't be her name.</p> <p>But my parents wanted something else My mother first Then my dad, pulling my pink blanket back patting the top of my tiny head tugging my new toes touching my cheeks</p> <p>Her name doesn't have to start with a “J” my mom said</p> <p>And my sister whispered. I don't want her to be left out But only so my parents could hear. Name us all J's, my sister said, and we will all be a strong family.</p> <p>Raise her right, my father said, and she'll make that name her own Name us all J's and people will look at us twice, my sister said.</p> <p>For no reason, but to think that we are matchy, matchy, my mother said.</p> <p>And back and forth it went until I was Jalynn and my sister left the hospital content.</p> <p>My mother said to my dad Hand me that pen wrote Jalynn where it asked for a name (Alexandra in the middle name) to make my sister happy</p> <p>Jalynn, so that I wouldn't ever feel left out and further away from my family.</p>

Table 1. A poem from *Brown Girl Dreaming* and a student's poem that Woodson's poem inspired.

in which they potentially understand the importance of structure, the relationship between structure and meaning, and the ability to tell stories precisely and concisely—many understandings of craft that they can apply as both readers and writers.

After students finished creating their poems, they shared them in a poetry reading and then posted them on the “Writing Corner” bulletin board in the classroom (see Figure 2).

Experience Three: Engaging in Read-Talk-Write

Once students had studied one poem independently in order to imitate it to create their own poetry, they engaged in the Read-Talk-Write framework (Motley, 2017). The framework includes students reading a text to learn, then engaging in structured opportunities to discuss the reading, and then writing about shared understandings and revelations. Opportunities to engage



Figure 2: Students' poems, inspired by *Brown Girl Dreaming*, are displayed in the classroom's Writer's Corner.

in learning through conversation, reading, and writing are social constructivist principles that are a cornerstone of literacy education (e.g., Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Swiers, 2006; Tovani, 2004).

It takes time to select the passage(s) students will engage with because there are many facets teachers should consider. One of the first considerations is the intended purpose and focus for reading the passage closely. Perhaps a study of characterization and plot is important to understanding the text at a deeper level, or perhaps teachers want students to examine figurative language and its contribution to meaning. Once teachers have a focus in place, then more logistical decisions are made. For example, teachers must set the amount of time that will be devoted to close reading (and this decision influences the length of the passage selected as well). Teachers might also want to consider if the entire class will read the same passage or if teacher-designated groups of students will read assigned or self-selected passages, thus providing opportunities for differentiation as well as for comparison of talk across peer groups.

With my seventh graders, the two selected passages focused on how particular characters addressed various implicit and explicit conflicts, which is at the core of an important literary elements TEKS (Texas Education Agency, 2017), and the goal was for students to connect the events to broader implications. In the first poem, “Journey,” Jacqueline’s father is insisting that his children will never live in the “segregated South” (Woodson, 2014, p. 29). In the second poem, “Greenville, South Carolina, 1963” (Woodson, 2014, pp. 30-31), Jacqueline’s mother and the children are traveling to the South on a bus and must follow many rules, such as sitting in the back, not looking a white person in the eye, and sitting up straight. What unifies the two selected poems is that both parents want their children to know that they are as good as anyone else.

Some students naturally related specific details from the poem—Jacqueline’s mother dressing the children neatly, telling them to be quiet, and reminding them to answer all people with “yes ma’am”—to the historical context in order to make meaning. For example, Hayes wrote:

I think the reason why the author included these three pages is to show the difference between the North and the South. In the South it is much different. Even though the Civil Rights Movement had already happened, there was still a lot of bias going on. The way her mother acted on the bus shows that the South can be a dangerous place for people of their skin color. If the author had not included these pages, the difference would be not established, and the problems between black and white would not seem as big of a problem as it truly is. It also shows why black people moved up North and the reason behind it being that they were just trying to escape racial discrimination.

Other benefits from the process of reading, talking, and then writing included the evolution of student thought. Early in the study of the book, students commented that people treated others “mean,” but later in the study, they came to understand the often-grim realities of the era. For instance, Pierce wrote, “Back then you could never stand your ground against a white person”; this is a more developed thought than that white people were “mean.” As another example, one discussion ended with Charlie stating, “I never knew about the problems of African Americans. I knew about Martin Luther King and his speeches, but I never thought about the ordinary people and how segregation and discrimination made their lives hard.” Charlie’s reflection shows a new understanding that beyond the

notable stories told by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., there must exist untold numbers of stories like Woodson’s; there is an implied appreciation in Charlie’s comment for Woodson and her personal story, one that represents many people’s stories.

Experience Four: Building Knowledge Through Allusion Research and Writing

After students worked with peers to analyze selected poems deeply, they were asked to self-select allusions to research and write about. An allusion, as defined in the students’ textbook, is a reference to a famous person, place, event, or work of literature (*McDougal Littell Literature: Student Edition*, 2008, p. R100). Students returned to their annotations in their first reading to find allusions that interested them and/or were unknown to them. Students completed a Quick Write (Green, Smith, & Brown, 2007) in which they explained their growing knowledge—through research, through context, and through class discussions—about the significance of the allusions they noticed during reading.

Maintaining a list of allusions as students read Woodson’s narrative meant that they were attuned to the sheer number of allusions that Woodson weaved through the narrative as well as that Woodson’s purpose was to show that her personal story was immersed and enmeshed in the historical context in which she was raised.

In Sammy’s Quick Write, she says: “Woodson references a time when Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘plan[ned] a march on Washington,’ Rosa Park ‘refused / to give up / her seat on a city bus,’ and Ruby Bridges ‘walked into an all-white school’ (Woodson, 2014, pp. 3-4). Rather than allowing what was happening around them, these three historical figures stood up for what they believed in.” Sammy goes on to acknowledge that what rises from the hardship Woodson describes is that “Woodson’s family... never stopped believing that things could be better for them.”

In Quinn’s Quick Write, he identifies multiple allusions, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panthers, and Ruby Bridges, with a focus on explaining how key events and figures chipped away at people’s perceptions of what was happening in the South. For example, Quinn writes, “Author James Baldwin was changing how people thought about how black people were treated by writing about injustice in his novels. ... ‘Soul Train’ was a TV show that included black people and changed the way they were seen. The TV show helped the world see black people, like Michael Jackson, as role models.” Thus, Quinn illustrates his understanding of how Woodson’s allusions to historical events show how she was raised during an era when the world around her was demanding and experiencing change.

Students usually chose to refer to and explain allusions that spoke to them on a personal level, that taught them about the era and the grim realities of cultural conflict during that time, and that helped them understand Woodson’s perspective more deeply. Maddy concludes from her study of allusions that Woodson’s narrative is “a collection of intimate and intricate poems about . . . loss, heartbreak, love, and searching for home,” and Owen expressed his satisfaction in being able to be one of Woodson’s students since he saw the book as one that “teaches readers.”

Once students had learned about many of the numerous allusions Woodson includes in her text, they were asked to select an allusion for further research, self-selecting multiple, reliable sources for this purpose. To synthesize and show their new learning about their allusion, students created an infographic—a visual representation

that combines words and images in meaningful ways. Creating an infographic was an engaging activity because the students were the decision-makers for all aspects of the task. They selected the allusion, the facts, the graphics, the technological template used for layout (such as the online graphic design tool Canva), and so forth.

The infographic that Morgan created (see Figure 3) shows that she put thought into how the background colors and purposeful images can create tone and add to the power and meaning of the words. Her title and thesis establish a position on the topic, one that she wants her readers to share. The information that follows is based on her research, but more than that, she exercises selectivity in deciding which information to present as well as considers the order and structure of that information to inform—and affect—her audience.



Figure 3: A student's infographic about Jim Crow laws, based on research.

Experience Five: Creating an Allusion-Inspired Poem

After students had completed research on a self-selected allusion and had created an infographic to display that information for an audience, students were asked to draw on and express that new learning in poetic form. Drawing on the learner-centered principle in which students engage in constructing knowledge through connecting what is being learned with prior knowledge and experience (Meece, 2003), the “Allusion-Inspired Poem” activity allowed students to personalize their learning journey through poetry.

Before students began composing their poems, they returned to the list of allusions they made earlier while reading the text and while

studying allusions. Students were asked to consider the messages of those allusions. For instance, students came to understand that Woodson's purpose for including references to John F. Kennedy were about service, that references to Rosa Parks were about protesting peacefully, and that references to James Baldwin were about the importance of honesty. By revisiting the allusions as a class and deciding and discussing some of the central messages and themes that Woodson included in her narrative, students were ready to consider the message they wanted to deliver in their poem about their allusion/topic.

The poems students wrote represented culminations of their learning because the content of the poems illustrated what the students had learned from reading and analyzing *Brown Girl Dreaming*, from sharing and responding in peer discussions, and from researching allusions. Certainly, their poems revealed their new understandings and their engagement and connections with their topics, but what is hard to quantify and express is the excitement the students exhibited when they had the opportunity to share their poems. What they wrote was important to them—this was not an assignment to be graded by the teacher, tucked in a notebook, and forgotten. They wanted time and attention to have their voices heard. In fact, many students used their poems as their performance entries at the Alley Theater Spring Slam Poetry contest. The poems were ideal because the students were passionate about the topics they addressed, topics that they related to their daily lives.

The poem that Morgan wrote (see Figure 4 of stanzas two and three) provides a more personal view regarding the information she researched and shared about Jim Crow laws in her infographic. She has learned to use questions as an effective structural move. She understands that a series of questions can create tone and can convey the speaker's perspective. And perhaps her message that “We need to speak the truth. / That's how we make a change” is not simply an echo of Woodson but a greater desire to live in a more equitable world.

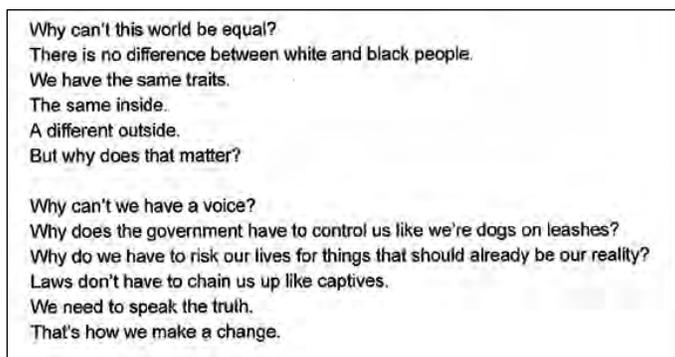


Figure 4: Stanzas from a student's poem about Jim Crow laws, based on research and the creation of an infographic.

Experience Six: Experiencing the *Brown Girl Dreaming* Gallery Walk

Throughout the study of *Brown Girl Dreaming* and the various learning opportunities to deeply understand the text and the issues it brings forward, the students took risks: writing and performing poems, sharing their ideas, working collaboratively, asking for help from peers, and exploring unfamiliar and often heavy issues that have shaped our history. Meece (2003) reminds that “learning occurs best in a positive environment, one that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions, comfort and order, and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged,

respected, and validated” (p. 112). To provide the level of validation and appreciation that Meece advocates, the first author planned a “*Brown Girl Dreaming* Gallery Walk.”

The creation of the Gallery Walk involved setting up a series of grids in the classroom. Each grid was labeled with an allusion and the corresponding infographics and allusion-inspired poems were hung on that specific grid (see Figure 5). The original poems inspired by the Woodson poems were already hanging on the Writers’ Corner bulletin board.



Figure 5: Photo from the classroom Gallery Walk of student products.

As students entered the classroom, they were awed by the array of work and were eager to begin the walk. Students were asked to engage with the learning artifacts by recording facts that surprised and/or interested them. They were also asked to reflect on their learning after the walk and to record inferences they could bring to a peer discussion.

The Gallery Walk, composed of entries from 86 seventh-grade students, essentially tore down the classroom walls and allowed students from other class periods to view the work of their peers. Students saw how their individual artifacts of their learning combined to form a powerful display that truly represented the 1960s. And in their discussions, students shared and grappled with ideas and issues—not just a means of communicating, but also as a means of co-constructing knowledge (Mercer, 1995). Max was stunned by the facts that compose the history of the 1960s and remarked, “I am glad the world is better today, not perfect, but better.” Miles focused on the role of protesting during that era and concluded, “I realized that people that protest must have strong beliefs because protesting comes with consequences, sometimes really bad consequences. You have to really want to make a difference.” And Catherine was pleased to have a broader knowledge of the “important people that made a difference like Langston Hughes and Shirley Chisholm.”

Experience Seven: Writing Reflections

Written reflections at the culmination of a learning journey can be an important way to solidify new understandings and awareness that will serve students well in future learning endeavors. Having the opportunity to think back and think across the experiences helps build students’ metacognitive abilities while also providing students with a sense of closure (Abshire, 2014). Sometimes, though, students misunderstand the purpose of reflection and simply create a list of facts they have gathered. To prevent students from rehashing facts and to help students gain distance and perspective on learning, I asked students to write “thesis-driven

reflections.” That is, students essentially decided on a controlling idea that best represented their learning and then set out to prove that thesis with specific experiential evidence. The result was that students’ reflections showed depth of thought, specific links and connections, and strong convictions.

Henry’s reflection reveals that his notion about the time period had previously been limited to Martin Luther King, but now he had expanded awareness: “MLK wanted more than just rights but [he wanted] the way people viewed him [to change]. Not as a black person, but as a great person.” Henry grew to understand that the struggle of the era was not about race but about decency.

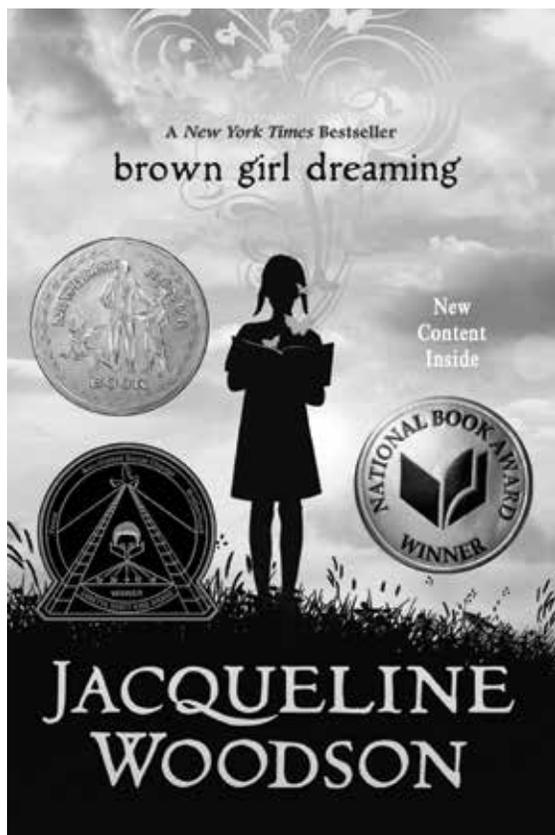
Several students had a similar thesis: “Segregation was much more complicated than I believed it to be.” Emily benefitted from the research and evolution of her peers’ thinking in that she wrote that the Gallery Walk helped her notice (from the images and the text that other students included in their infographics) that white people were members of the Freedom Riders too: “I thought it was [African Americans] only. The Gallery Walk opened my eyes to a whole new thought. So I went back to the novel, and suddenly I noticed there was ‘an old white woman’ that lived on Woodson’s street. It shocked me, but I realized that everyone is different and has different opinions.” Emily admired the courage of the white Freedom Riders who were willing to risk their lives fighting for justice for African Americans, and she wondered what it would take for everyone to get along.

Owen’s reflection touches on how the hardships affected relationships in the home. He wrote, “*Brown Girl Dreaming* showed me how segregation can cause problems you might never think about like divorce. Segregation caused Jacqueline’s parents to divorce because her dad didn’t want to move to the segregated South and her mom did.” Thus, Owen came to understand how the tensions of the time period had deeply personal impacts on many families.

Several students’ theses revolved around present-day evidence of segregation. Izzy wrote, “Segregation by wealth is still with us today. There is still segregation to homeless people and in some countries, women are not allowed to own property or have jobs.” Brandon wrote, “Now I realize that it [equal rights] represents all of the people who are treated unfairly because of their gender, race, or backgrounds. I believe we can put a stop to this by calling it out like the many brave people in the ‘60s.”

Other students’ reflection centered on their experiences with writing poetry. Annie Kate’s thesis was “for a poem to be good, it should be unique and meaningful to you.” She wrote, “What I hadn’t realized is that it doesn’t matter how many words are in it; it matters how many words have meaning. As I dove in, a thousand memories came to me. As I wrote I started to understand that poetry could be really fun when you write about something you care about.” Nicholas, too, shared his change in perspective about poetry: “Poetry isn’t only something that rhymes, it is something that tells a story. When I write poems, I dig deep into my thoughts and pull out the richest things I can find.” By not just reading poetry but by studying it deeply and using it as a mentor text for their own poetry writing, students’ thinking about what poetry is as well as how and why poetry is written evolved.

The thesis-driven reflections helped students synthesize their learning and to express how that learning has impacted them in lasting ways. It provided a structure for them to guide their thinking. It helped the students think broadly and then support their ideas with details and evidence that mattered.



Conclusion

For the seventh-grade students, *Brown Girl Dreaming* was the springboard not just for reading and enjoying a narrative told in verse but also for delving into the meaning that lives behind Woodson's words. So that students truly developed an understanding and appreciation for the text—to be truly influenced and impacted by the memoir—they participated in a number of literacy experiences that continually shaped, modified, expanded, and enriched those understandings. The acts of reading, writing, researching, discussing, sharing, and viewing (among many others) transformed not only students' literacy skills but also their understanding of the 1960s and in the larger sense, the richness of cultures. Students shaped their literacy learning by being fully present and engaged in the journey, truly understanding that narratives like Jacqueline Woodson's have the power to alter perspectives, foster new understandings, and even change lives.

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