



"I Want To Read"

How Culturally Relevant Texts Increase Student Engagement in Reading

By Mary-Virginia Feger

"I want to read," were the decisive words my student exclaimed instead of his usual greeting as he bounded into class one day. His demand was especially gratifying because it expressed the interest in reading that I had been hoping to hear. My hopes rested on a specifically designed instructional plan to incorporate comprehension strategies and culturally relevant literature with the goal of achieving greater student engagement in reading.

Responses like this student's confirmed my belief that my students were hungry for reading that supported their bilingual/bicultural identities. The more I had incorporated culturally relevant literature and non-fiction into the curriculum, the more my students' engagement in reading had increased, and my student's reaction was a resolute announcement of his preference. It was a piece of prized evidence that this approach to reading in my high school second language classroom was causing more than a little interest.

Before I added culturally relevant literature and non-fiction into my lessons, I had relied on textbooks for English language learners that focused on grammar. However, these books proved useful only for the most recent arrivals in my classes. Once my students acquired a sufficient command of English grammar to participate in class-

room lessons, the books did little to engage them, much less develop their literacy.

A Reflection on Reality

Spanish was the first language of the majority of my 9th and 10th grade students who came from the Caribbean and Central and South America. Parents often worked late hours, and many students were employed, or had family responsibilities after school. Based on the realities of their lives, my students' engagement in reading was haphazard. Because of family circumstances, reading literature did not appear to play an important role in their after school lives.

Whether it was due to issues of access or for other reasons, I knew that my students were not engaged in reading, and it was my responsibility to stimulate their interest. I reflectively and critically compared the curriculum in my classroom with that of mainstream classes and I realized that the students in mainstream classes had access to literature that offered characters and problems similar to their own lives and identities. I acknowledged that recognition of my students' cultural diversity determined their opportunities for success in literacy (Gay, 2002).

Language and identity are inseparable (Sleeter, 1996; Courts, 1997; De Leon, 2002), and it occurred to me that I could provide an opportunity for my students to explore their bilingual/bicultural identities and accept the challenges of reading culturally relevant literature and non-fiction.

Discovering Culturally Relevant Literature

Robbins (2002) described how he incorporated culturally relevant literature in a multiracial class to help his students understand the sociological aspects of language. Among the literature he selected was the award-winning autobiography of Francisco Jimenez who grew up as a migrant worker, excelled in school, and became a university professor.

The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child (1997) and its sequel, *Breaking Through* (2001), are poignant narratives about Jimenez's life as a child of migrant workers and his educational experiences in high school.

My Students' Reactions

The twelve beautifully written chapters in *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* can be read separately as individual stories from Jimenez's early life. Most of my students identified with one powerful narrative, "Learning the Game," in which Jimenez described the mistreatment of a migrant worker. They connected the mistreatment in the story with their own experiences and engaged in discussions of rules, conflict, punishment, and power.

During the class, I invited students to share their writing with me in dialogue journals that I had purchased for them. One student observed, "That episode made Francisco more mature." In addition to their personal responses to literature (Rosenblatt, 1978), students also demon-

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strated their ability to use their experience to make critical statements, "Life is serious and we have just one choice sometimes. Learning the game. Francisco wrote about that." The Jimenez narrative provided a context for students' critical reflections, such as:

This is a pretty good story. If somebody read it, this person can feel how the characters did. Francisco had a really bad childhood. I feel sorry for him. I'm happy for my life is not like his...if somebody have to start new life, isn't easy. I know because I had to do too. Many times I felt and I feel how Francisco did. Not easy to live somewhere, where they don't speak your language, they don't like you, and they want you go back where you came from.

The bilingual poems in *My Name is Jorge on Both Sides of the River* (Medina, 1999) express the voice of a child who bravely maintains his identity despite being constructed as "dumb." I incorporated one of Medina's poems, "Library Card," in which a Mexican student encountered prejudice while applying for a library card. In their writing, my students made inter-textual connections comparing the conflict in the poem with the conflict in the Jimenez text and with their own experiences.

A Celebration in Honor of Culturally Relevant Literature

Esperanza Rising (Munoz-Ryan, 2000) is the story of a twelve-year old girl who journeyed from her wealthy ranch in Mexico during the 1930s to poverty and a new identity. Like the character of the same name in *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1985), Esperanza's name means hope and, similarly, the characters embody a tension of opposites: the limitations under which they live versus their dreams of freedom.

Esperanza Rising (Munoz-Ryan, 2000) is filled with suspense and vivid imagery that enhances the lively depiction of the defiant Esperanza. During times that I read aloud, I modeled questioning strategies and making connections to my own experiences. During a read-aloud early in the book, one of the students complained. Other students disagreed and expressed eagerness to continue. A short while later, I noticed that the student who had complained was intently reading and turning the pages. The engagement that was demonstrated in reading the text communicated that culturally relevant literature had made an impact.

In one activity, the class was divided into two groups. One group created a triptych—a three-paneled wooden painting that the students painted with details

from the novel. Another group constructed three-dimensional objects that were important in Esperanza's story. One object was a washtub grotto constructed out of an aluminum tub. The aluminum grotto contained a student's painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The grotto was placed on its side, supported with Styrofoam "rocks" painted brown, and pierced with roses that represented the cuttings Esperanza brought from Mexico, her homeland.

The students created yarn dolls just like the ones Esperanza's mother had taught her how to make. All of the students incorporated their artwork into a final presentation that occurred in class. Several administrators and another class of English-language learners accepted our invitation to view the presentation and there was time for a celebration of pizza and soda following the presentation. I made "flan de almendras," or almond flan, Esperanza's favorite.

Culturally Relevant Non-Fiction

Accountability and high-stakes reading tests emphasize the importance of non-fiction, or informational text, and a large percentage of these tests are comprised of this kind of reading. In an effort to make reading non-fiction texts also culturally relevant, I had to develop selection criteria. Choosing culturally relevant information text for high school second-language learners meant first a wide reading of non-fiction sources and second selecting texts containing critical perspectives.

Traditional reading anthologies contained informational selections but these selections did not always engage my students' interests. The informational texts that were successful were both challenging in content and critical. One example was about how qualitative research was conducted to discover the source of "kuru," a mysterious fatal neurological disease among an indigenous culture whose traditions were found to be the cause.

The selection of quality non-fiction texts ranks as one of the most important features of effective reading instruction for second language learners. Topics that resonate with young adults are critical, global, and cognitively complex. In addition to selection of texts, building background knowledge, vocabulary instruction, and use of graphic organizers are also indispensable strategies. Culturally relevant literature and non-fiction, combined with a focus on collaboration and comprehension strategies, results in students' feelings of self-efficacy.

To account for the passing score received on the high-stakes test, one of my students observed, "I paid attention to the

articles, and I did my best!" This judgment of his own learning underscores the importance of culturally relevant literature and non-fiction in the acquisition of knowledge and consciousness of cognitive strategies in reading.

Culturally relevant literature and non-fiction texts transformed the level of engagement in reading for the English language learners in my class. I could never have dreamed of a better affirmation than the appeal "I want to read!"

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