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Integrating Diversity and Cultural Education into Literacy

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One winter day a couple of years ago in my writing class in a community college, my students were talking about racial data collection and the possible elimination of it through a ballot measure. The exchanges were heated.

“We should ban it because I hate to be categorized. I don’t want to be called a Latino. I’m a Mexican. And I really just want to be called Alexandro, instead of a Latino,” said the eighteen year old Alexandro.

“We should have racial data so we can tell if a company is cheating on us by not hiring people who are not white. That is why the system was put in place,” voiced Lisa, a middle-aged returning student who is also Latino.

“If we ban racial data collection, the cops would be able to get away with pulling over all blacks, ’cause nobody will know who they are,” said Devin, a black young man.

“I say we should not. We need to remind people that there are different cultures in this country. People are very ignorant. They do not know what Muslims are. Whatever they know is from the media. They look at us as if we are a bunch of crazy people. Like we are all terrorists. But they know nothing about us,” said Mohammed, an immigrant from Morocco.

“I agree with that. People here are very ignorant. I’m Chinese, and people often ask me if women still bind their feet and if men still wear those pigtailed. I was really offended. Those were long gone, almost a century now. But people think that’s still the way it is.” That was Ying, who was in her early thirties and who came to this country about five years ago.

“But don’t you hate to be called black, white, yellow, red? I don’t like those boxes when I fill out job applications. Can’t we just be called humans?” Noreen said. She was Vietnamese.

“Yeah, can’t we just all belong to one human race and not fall into all those boxes?” Linda, a Caucasian woman in her forties, echoed the same thought.

“No, we can’t. Because when I walk into a store, people will treat me differently than when your son goes in. The owner will watch me as if I’m going to steal something. The guards sometimes will even follow me around. The white women will hold on to their purses as if I were going to snatch them. And what have I done? Nothing. Just because I’m black, that’s all.” That was Tom, emotion clearly shown in his features. “Would that happen when your son, a white man, walks into a store? I don’t think so.”

Quite a few heads were nodding.

“What about the TV?” asked Rona, who was born and educated in this country but whose parents were Thai, “I don’t like watching much TV anymore because it’s all white faces looking at you. I never could find a Thai or even Asian face on TV when I was growing

up. If you look at the books, they are all about white people too. When can we find someone who looks like us on TV?"

Then there was a big explosion. Anne, a Caucasian girl, probably eighteen, who had hitherto been quiet, stood up, jaws quivering, hands shaking. She could barely control herself. Her voice was high pitched.

"Do you think you are the only one who suffered discrimination? I have suffered discrimination, big time. It is reverse discrimination! I cannot get into UC Davis because I am white! How do I know? Because another Mexican girl in my class got in. She has the same GPA as mine. She got in because she is Mexican. And I ended up being at Nelson College!"

"Nelson is a great. What's wrong with coming to Nelson?" someone asked.

But Anne was obviously very upset. Her chest heaved and her face was flushed. She wanted to argue further, but another white male student chimed in: "I think Anne has a point. My dad experienced reverse discrimination too. One time he applied for a job at a company. He did not get it. A black man got it. The company hired that man because they had to hire people from other races."

Tom immediately raised his hand: "Man, you call that discrimination! What about all the years when white people own black slaves, kill them and lynch them for no reason? Even today, look at the prisons. It's all blacks or Latinos. Your big daddy did not get a job he wanted, and you say that is discrimination? How do you know he deserves that job? How do you know the black man is not better than your dad?"

Immediately, several hands were raised, their owners eagerly wanting to respond.

That class episode, along with many others, propelled me onto this journey of search for ways to address these issues that students had raised. The episode illustrates how charged racial and cultural issues could be in classrooms. I view this kind of situation as a teachable moment. For many years, I have been teaching reading and writing courses at Nelson College, a community college situated in Northern California. The student population of the college is very diverse, with 6 % Asian, 8% African American, 22% Hispanic, 45% Caucasian and 8% other of mixed racial backgrounds.

Despite the presence of large percentage of minority students, the college curriculum for various courses continues to be Eurocentric as in most schools in this country. And it is not a new phenomenon. Eurocentrism has dominated American schools since the very beginning of American history (Applebee 1991; Boyd, 2002). Boyd (2002) stated that historically the American educational system has chosen to ignore diversity and contributions of minority groups. It prohibits or ignores literature written by and about people of color, women, and non-western countries and cultures. Applebee (1991) pointed out that the choice and intent of America's early educators were clear. They wanted to reduce diversity and promote a common set of values and common culture, espousing one heritage—white, male, Anglo-Saxon. The result is that school curricula privileged students from the dominant culture while excluding and disconfirming the experiences of minority groups (Glazer & Seo, 2005).

While there have been changes and progress in including more minorities into the curriculum in the recent decades, there is a long distance to go before true racial equality can be said to exist. Recent examination of textbooks in various subjects such as economics (Clawson, 2002), nursing (Byrne, 2001), American history (Litner, 2004), and literature (Suleiman, 2001) reveals that school curriculum is still mainly from European Americans'

point of view and portrayal of minorities is far from fair, non-stereotypical, and representative.

I strongly feel that the presence of diversity is a tremendous treasure, and I want to find a way to integrate diversity into my teaching. I want to use literacy as a tool to explore all the complex issues the students raised in that class. In this paper, I will analyze what I have found regarding the incorporation of diversity in reading and writing courses and the steps teachers could take towards helping students become not only better readers and writers, but also better thinkers. The issue of diversity and multiculturalism needs to be addressed head-on, not as a negative or problem, but as a positive to explore and appreciate.

Diversity: A Teacher's Role

Many educators have moved beyond questioning whether our society is culturally diverse to now addressing the diversity. Tactics of dealing with diversity vary greatly. Pewawardy (2003) collected 100 tactics people use to dodge the dialogue on cultural diversity. The "sensitive type" espouses sensitive racial and cultural issues, yet behaves differently. The "confused type" could not grasp cultural issues no matter how they are presented. The "cultural schizophrenic" is in a constant state of confusion regarding their cultural and ethnic identity. The "ethnic cheerleader" brings in ethnic or diversity speakers, celebrates ethnic holidays, and listens to ethnic music, but never really infiltrates culture into the core curriculum. The "segmenter" celebrates Black History Month, Hispanic Awareness Month, Native American Month, etc., but never mentions any culture other than the white the rest of the time in the classroom. The "exotificationer" subscribes to the idea that if cultures are presented as exotic, it is paying homage, when in reality, it is objectifying them. The "Why can't we all get along" type dismisses race as a factor and promotes a color blind perspective (Pewawardy, 2003). Another type of reaction that I often get from white students that is not included in these 100 tactics is "look at our classroom, we have all colors here, aren't we already equal?" Those who ask this question do not see that being able to attend college or come to school does not mean that everyone is already equal. Common among these tactics is an absence of meaningful intermingling of cultures.

Many educators adopt a hands-off approach because of lack of knowledge, genuine educational and societal support, and good teaching materials (Asumeng-Boahene & Klein, 2004). Since the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, professional organizations such as NCTE have called for greater inclusion of authors of diverse backgrounds, works that present people of color in more non-stereotypical, balanced, accurate, and realistic ways (Athanasos, 1999). Yet, despite such calls, scant attention is paid to minority authors or subjects in schools (Hinton & Berry, 2005).

Such a lack of attention begins early in schooling. Berry (Hinton & Berry, 2005) stated that she did not recall reading anything that featured African American authors or characters in elementary school. The only exception was her fifth grade teacher who allowed her to read a Langston Hughes poem in Black History Month. After fifth grade, her assigned reading did not include any minority authors.

A similar lack of attention to multicultural authors exists in later schooling was highlighted by Applebee's (1993) study of required book length texts in the secondary school where it was found that "recent attempts to broaden the curriculum seem to have had very little effect on the representation of women and minorities among authors" (p.60). In public schools, 85.9% of the authors of required books are written by males, 98.7% white, and the

higher the grade, the more white and male it becomes. The proportion of works by women and minority authors increases only marginally in comparison to 1963. There is only one female author in the top ten most frequently required books in high schools, Harper Lee, and all ten authors are white. There is no minority author in this top-ten list.

This invisibility and avoidance of diversity are in stark contrast with the extent of diversity in the student body in the nation's schools. Take California community colleges for example: in the basic skills courses, as many as 75% of students in a class can be students of color. These students thirst for materials and curriculum that reflect who they are and their heritage and contributions. Yet, most of the course materials have little or no mention of authors, history, or contributions of minority groups. The indifference to minority students' need and presence symbolizes what Bourdieu (1977) perceived as a traditional function of schools. According to Bourdieu, schools typically embody class and racial interests. They reward the cultural capital of the white middle and upper class students and systematically devalue the cultural capital of the minority students.

My view is that when students do not see their own culture reflected in the books they read, when they see that their teachers do not understand nor respect their culture and ways of being, school becomes a strange and alienating place. Lack of healthy discussion on diversity and social justice contributes to the problem. Minority students feel discriminated against, marginalized, and isolated. On the other hand, mainstream students feel "reversely discriminated" when they see minority students take "their" place in prestigious institutions. Stereotypes and resentment between groups deepens.

The good news is that some teachers are gradually doing more in integrating diversity in their curriculum, especially in the teaching of literacy. Articles discussing teachers using multicultural literature in classrooms occasionally appear in NCTE or IRA publications, which is an encouraging sign. More such efforts should continue and be encouraged. What we need to be aware of, however, is that this is a long term task, and not a fad that comes and fades. National changes in educational policy has pushed multicultural literature, along with topics such as critical literacy and literature based instruction, into one of the seven "coldest" topics in year 2006, giving way to other topics such as high stake assessment, adolescent literacy, scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2006). Regardless of the topic of multicultural literature being cold or hot, our student body remains diverse, therefore our commitment and efforts in incorporating all perspectives should remain constant.

One of the reasons this commitment is important is that students learn best and are most motivated when curriculum validates and reflects their cultural experiences and perspectives (Banks, 1997; De Leon, 2002). Students also benefit from learning about other cultures and ways of living, and most of them are interested in gaining more knowledge about others. Based on my own experiences teaching diverse student population and the research I did among community college students, I found that students' responses toward cultural learning are overwhelmingly positive. With very few exceptions, students are enthusiastic and appreciative about knowing more about other customs and traditions. Schools need to create an environment where such learning could occur.

How should teachers capitalize this thirst of knowledge on one hand and deal with factors such as their own lack of knowledge and infrequent student resistance to this mutual learning? How could teachers become culturally responsive and not marginalize and deprive students of the opportunities for validation as well as expansion? In the following, I will explain approaches that will help educators in their endeavors.

Becoming familiar with students' cultures

Despite the tremendous cultural and ethnic diversity that exists in this country, the teacher force remains "composed mainly of white middle class women" (Capella-Santana, 2003) in K-12 systems, community colleges, and universities. These teachers often have limited knowledge about and experience with people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Teachers from minority backgrounds remain a minority, and they often also lack knowledge about minority groups other than their own.

The discrepancy between teachers' knowledge of diverse cultures and the cultural/ethnic backgrounds of the students they must teach hinders teachers' abilities to effectively teach all students (Capella-Santana, 2003). Most teachers understand and teach better the group of students whose cultural capital resembles that of theirs, in this case, middle class white students. Teachers often have higher expectations of this group than others and they might misinterpret certain behaviors from other groups. Shade (1989) reported that teachers who did not know about Mexican American students' culture accused them of cheating when they shared their work, not knowing it was a culturally acceptable behavior and thus actively discouraged this learning style that could help them learn.

Capella-Santana (2003) reported that when teachers take into consideration students' cultural backgrounds and incorporate the cultural knowledge into their teaching, they have been able to improve student performance. Heath's (1983) study indicated that when teachers recognize students' cultural and community styles and utilize those styles in classroom discourse, the teaching was more effective and students' achievements were enhanced.

How can teachers become familiar with the different cultures? It takes frequent contact, immersion, taking courses on multicultural education or courses on different cultures, and going into the community. If a teacher is willing to be a student, her students can become great teachers and resources. I have personally been much changed by the process and learned tremendously through my conversations and contact with students and community members. The courses I have taken in multicultural literature and social and cultural aspects of literacy also helped.

Recognizing whiteness in cultural education and literacy

A special note has to be taken regarding white students' voices. The category of "white" includes many diverse groups of people with diverse cultures. For the discussion of this paper, I will limit the definition of "white" to being of European origin. My experience in diversity discussions leads me to caution all teachers to be sensitive to the views of white students while sensitizing them to the views of minority students. When discussions take place, the critiques of racism, discrimination, and white privilege might drive some white students into such a mode that they are not able to learn from the experiences of the underprivileged and disenfranchised.

As Pewawardy (2003) put it, some whites might become the "ostrich" and choose to bury their head in the sand and not participate. Some will say "I can't believe you played the race card," insinuating that race discussion is not welcome and healthy. Some will say "I wasn't born yet," attributing all discrimination to ancestries and refuse to recognize their own valid part in the discussion. Those who play a "victim" role will go into a discussion on the defensive and discourage disagreement and make anyone who disagrees look like accusatory shrews and promote sympathy for the victim" (Pewawardy, 2003).

“Playing a victim” is similar to “reverse discrimination” shown in the discussion at the beginning of this paper. The white female student feels that the only reason she has not been admitted by University of California, Davis is because she is white and she is suffering reverse discrimination. The white male student feels that the only reason his dad did not get the desired job is because he is white. Whether these rationales are true or not, students often use this kind of example to disqualify other students’ account of racism and make people feel that if there is discrimination, the kind that whites receive is the only kind that matters, effectively discouraging any further discussion.

Teachers need to be careful not to present cultural education from a simplistic didactic perspective in confrontational style that vilifies whiteness for that could have alienating effects (Horton & Scott, 2004). I have witnessed white students in my classes getting very defensive and irate when minority students talk about their past experiences of discrimination. Some of them also feel shame and guilt. Overwhelmingly, as Lawrence and Buche (1996) found in their study, most white students are unaware of institutionalized racism and do not recognize the advantages of being white in a white-dominant society. Almost all of them do not think of themselves as racist at all, claiming that they treat everybody equally. They do not see multicultural education as relevant and needed for them.

Therefore, it is extremely important for white students (sometimes white teachers as well) to see their own whiteness as race, to discover the white privilege they have enjoyed, and to reconceptualize whiteness in ways that embrace a “consciousness of equity, empowerment and equality for all” (Horton & Scott, 2004). One major obstacle is the invisibility of whiteness. It is difficult for white students to recognize, no less examine, their race privilege when being white has been so normalized (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996).

Therefore, a first step is to assist white students in seeing themselves as belonging to a race, to help them realize that cultural education is not just about the Blacks, the Asians, the Latinos. It is about them equally. They cannot overlook their place in race relations and maintain a false sense that race pertains to and only affects minorities (Lucal, 1996). Naming and locating whiteness as a race and culture and looking at the social construction of whiteness starts the process of dealing head on with dominance (Frankenberg, 1993).

A second step is to help white students see their racial privilege, something that most might resist in the beginning. As Lucal (1996) stated, teaching about race may be one of the most difficult tasks, teaching white students about their racial privilege even more so. Multiple channels need to be engaged. Personal contact with nonwhite students and understanding their daily lives and encounters are often starting points. Frankenberg (1993) described how spending a great deal of time with a network of working class women of color and older, poor white women has brought direct knowledge of meaning of racism and racist behavior. She learned through these women who are not white and who are poor what it means to navigate through a largely hostile terrain, to deal with institutions that do not operate by one’s own logic nor in one’s interests, and to need those institutions to function in one’s favor if one is to survive, let alone to achieve.

Part of white privilege is its invisibility. Not viewing whiteness as having a race is an illustration of dominance (hooks, 1981; Levine 1981). Minorities do not have that option. As hooks (1992) narrated, whites have the choice of being oblivious of the effects of race, but blacks, irrespective of their class status or politics, live daily with the possibility, dread, or fear of being terrorized by whites.

McIntosh's (1988) long list of white-skin privilege can be good reading and discussion material. Her list is about privileges that the white race has long enjoyed and taken for granted but which minorities have long been denied. "Being white confers privileges in numerous ways" (Lucas, 1996, p.248). Reading of this list generally spawns a lot of often heated discussion in my classroom. It makes whiteness visible. Many white students say that they have never considered things in those lights before. The list makes them realize what has hitherto been taken for granted and invisible.

Revising School Curriculum

Addressing racial and multicultural issues in classrooms requires revising curricula so that all backgrounds, not just the white, middle-class perspectives, are included and valued. The historic and long time exclusion of minority experiences has created damaging effects. De Leon (2002) stated that the omission of Latino experience in school, the inability to see herself and her Mexican-American heritage reflected in the books she read had led to her painful identity search in adolescence, her denial of her Mexican-American background. It causes what Kohl called "a major loss of self" and Locust called a "wounding of spirit" (quoted in Nieto, 2002). Failure of students to learn is often not caused by lack of intelligence, but by other things. In the words of one student,

It is time to start learning about things they told you didn't need to know—learning about me, instead of learning about them, starting to learn about her instead of learning about him. It's a connection that makes education education. (Tereault, 1997, p.150)

For all teachers, this is a voice we need to listen to. It is time to learn about "me," and "her," minorities and women who have long been ignored and marginalized by the school system, to learn what has been excluded and ignored, to make education meaningful for all students. We need to bring "me" and "her" into our curriculum and enable all students to see the connection between their lives and school (Tereault, 1997).

Students' hunger for diverse texts has been documented by a variety of educators and researchers. De Leon (2002) stated that after reading *House on Mango Street*, her ninth grade students were convinced that Sandra Cisneros was a much better writer than Charles Dickens simply because she spoke to them from a contemplative, cultural perspective. "They all found something about themselves, their families, or neighbors in the book, claiming they never felt so many emotions when reading" (p.49). Before *House on Mango Street*, her students seemed to always hate reading. "Nothing I suggested seemed interesting to them, and I wondered why." Now, she realized that "none of the books they had read before established a cultural connection until Cisneros did" (De Leon, 2002, p.49).

What De Leon (2002) witnessed is improved reading motivation and deeper engagement and connection when multicultural literature is used. I have seen similar experiences in my classes. When students are eager to read, they typically read more, and when it comes to reading improvement, quantity and motivation matter a great deal. Books like *House on Mango Street*, *Black Boy*, *Mama*, *Goodbye Vietnam*, *Joy Luck Club*, and *Bless Me Ultima*, were engaging and reflected some of readers' lived experiences, traditions, tears and hopes. Students feel their culture and perspectives validated when they read literature by authors from similar background who write about what they are familiar with. They make deep connections with the text which is extremely beneficial to reading improvement.

Another important benefit of multicultural literature is validation and cultural pride. Athanases (1998) reported that students who had engaged in diverse literature often emerge proud of their culture. The African American students “grew highly engaged in reading African American authors and felt a growing sense of pride” in their heritage. They enjoyed the getting over adversity stories of Maya Angelou in her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, and Martin Luther King’s writing such as *A Pilgrimage to Nonviolence* widened their understanding of King (Athanases, 1998).

Diverse texts also benefit students in their identity-making process. Literacy can be a powerful force in the construction, exploration, and expressions of identity (Vyas, 2004). The students Vyas studied in a literature club were able to, through dialogue and discussion about literary text by Asian American authors that connected to their culture and background, navigate their pathway to shape their bicultural identity (Vyas, 2004). Hinton (Hinton & Berry, 2005) described how as an African American girl her life was changed when her eighth-grade teacher introduced Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. The simple act of handing her a book written by and about blacks, transformed her life. The girl relates, it was a pivotal moment for me. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was not alone in the world. There were other black girls having experiences similar to mine, and some had grown up and written them down. I began to write down mine too with hopes of becoming a writer. No one in my family had ever gone to college, but after reading Maya Angelou’s autobiographical series, I began making plans. Pursuing an education suddenly became relevant to me.” (Hinton & Berry, 2005, p.285)

Multicultural texts also foster cross-cultural understanding and reduction of racism and stereotypes. When students read writing by people from other cultural backgrounds, it expands their knowledge and reduces stereotypical notion of other people and their culture. Athanases (1998) reported that after being engaged in literary works that address the “cultural norms and experiences of ethnic groups different from their own,” students in the two urban school English classes that he studied began thinking more about culture, diversity, and social equities in substantive ways. They started to see racism in a different light. Asian American students had more empathy for African Americans after reading books such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. Students who read Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* were outraged at the U.S. government’s role in the destruction of Native American cultures. “It showed me ...how stubborn and stupid people are because they stick to stereotypes instead of finding out the truth,” one of the student said (Athanases, 1998, p.289).

In addition, diverse reading materials that reflect students’ knowledge and experience taps into students’ prior knowledge making texts more comprehensible and easier to understand. Researchers in reading have confirmed, for some time now, the importance of students’ prior knowledge in understanding and responding to text (Ausabel, 1968; Pearson & Johnson, 1978; Stauffer, 1976, 1980).. Cultural context and membership in class and communities affect how students respond to texts. The texts students read need to be relevant to their lives so there is prior knowledge to be activated. Camborne (2000) stated that teachers need to make literacy, including texts, more accessible to students, especially the non-mainstream students. He maintained that critical literacy is a cultural resource that will enable the less privileged member of any cultural group to seek political and economic power for themselves. And that is another reason why we cannot simply always rely on the traditional canon.

The classic, traditional literature still has its value, but texts should represent a number of people, not just a particular group. Therefore, it behooves us to invite writers of all backgrounds, the multicultural authors, into our textbooks and our curriculum, so that literacy is more relevant and more engaging. In addition, as Kocis (2002) pointed out, rather than “acknowledging token writers, just one or two voices from any group, many voices must be infused” (p.33). These voices include variations with groups lumped together by terms such as Latino or Asian American. The rich variety is part of what makes multicultural literature infinitely enriching, intriguing, and exciting.

To help students make multicultural connections, both white and minority students can turn diversity and race topics into research projects. Students can engage in research about white privilege, race relations, civil rights movement, discrimination, and cultural traditions. They search and read literature in these fields, write interview questions and interview people, observe people from all races and see how race affects their lives, and write about their research findings. It could be an awakening experience for white students to interview minority people and hear their experiences of discrimination and prejudice. An equally effective research would be for them to talk to their own white friends and neighbors and see how whiteness is invisible and how white privilege is lived but not spoken of, or to check whether McIntosh’s list reflects their experiences as well. A very powerful writing experience could be students’ writing of their own autobiographical account of privilege or denial of rights. Experiences of privilege contrast with those of prejudice and denial. Everyone can learn from such reflection and discussion.

Reading and writing can be powerful tools in assisting students in their quest for cultural pride and self worth. They can help improve group relations, reduce, and ultimately rid our society of racism and stereotypes. The infusion of culture in reading and writing can also increase student motivation, engagement, and better reading improvement.

Facilitating inter- and intra-group dialogue

The inclusion of multicultural text in reading and writing curriculum makes the facilitation of inter-group and intra-group a natural yet crucial step. As my description of the episode in the beginning of this paper indicated, students have a burning need to talk about diversity and cultural issues. Literacy provides a critical window for them to explore along these lines. It is vital that both inter-group and intra-group interaction occur on a regular basis and students travel the road of transformation together.

Clark (2002) stated that the purpose of inter-group dialogue is to “enable participants to develop comfort with, and skill for, discourse on difficult topics towards the end of fostering positive, meaningful, and sustained cross-group relationships” (p.30). Aside from violent acts that are perpetrated against one group on the basis of its origin, more subtle and pervasive discrimination and stereotypes often exist. As Yep (1991) portrayed in his book *The Star Fisher*, the Lee family, children of Chinese origin born and raised in America, were greeted with suspicion, scorn, and derision when they went to school in West Virginia. The appliance store owner in the town proudly displayed a racist advertisement of “bucktoothed, pigtailed caricatures of Chinese in caps and pajamas” as he advertised his new washing machines (Lowery, 2003, p.21). The simple fact that the Lee children spoke English was incredible to their classmates. Because they did not look “white,” they were not regarded as Americans.

On the other hand, examples abound of how European Americans, African Americans, Latino and Asian Americans nourish negative stereotypes against each other. All these make it crucial that inter-group dialogue occur so that mutual knowledge and understanding are spread and fostered. Critical reading of diverse literature provides a window for students to see how stereotypes are often based on ignorance. Books have the power to either promote favorable attitudes and positive behavior or reinforce prejudices and stereotypes (Lowery, 2003). Thus it behooves all teachers to select books of high quality that do not seek to replicate stereotypes but seeks to expand knowledge and understanding.

A classroom provides a space to explore identities and social tensions, a place to build community and improve inter-group relations. Readings can provide students with a starting point where meaningful conversation about culture, race, discrimination, and stereotypes can and should occur. Facilitation of such dialogues might not follow a smooth path. A wide range of emotions are often present: anger, bewilderment, sadness, guilt. I have witnessed many of these emotions in discussions. Yet these discussions can provide not only catharsis, but empowerment. It is often through such discussions that students see that their particular social group is not the only group being discriminated against, that negativity causes pain and is often without foundation. It leads them to see how wrong it is to be a racist, consciously or unconsciously, and helps them to take actions against racism and discrimination.

Intra-group dialogue could also be facilitated in classrooms where diverse reading is utilized. Students from each group are often still very different. Hispanics can be from a variety of cultural origins; a Korean American is not the same as a Japanese American. Intra-group discussions have the advantage of allowing members to share common values and assist each other in grappling with similar issues while recognizing differences. The students in the literature club in Vyas's (2004) research were from a variety of Asian backgrounds. They shared commonality and explored differences through critique of literary works written by Asian or Asian American writers. They were able to draw strength and learn from each other through intra-group dialogue.

Clark (2002) stated that inter-group and intra-group dialogue programs on college and university campuses are enjoying wide spread recognition and attendance because they address the need of students for facilitated opportunities to come together in dialogue across various dimensions of difference to explore intra- and inter-group tensions and forge cross-group relationships and community. He also indicated that research on the impact of such dialogue in higher education has shown that students find them among the most important experience in their academic careers. Furthermore, the prowess and competency students develop in multicultural interaction through these dialogues lead them into higher-ranking and paying positions more quickly than peers who lack this competency.

A supportive classroom atmosphere, where everyone feels included and empowered by such exercise, is crucial. White students need to be encouraged and feel comfortable in this unlearning and relearning process. It benefits both themselves and society for them to recognize social inequality and take actions to correct it. Minority students also need to be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of possible discrimination—both as the oppressed and the oppressor. Both groups carry racist attitudes and prejudices. All these reflections can be turned into reading, writing, debating, and sharing events that can be extremely powerful for everyone present.

Conclusion

The integration of diversity and cultural education is a journey of discovery and empowerment. There will be many unexpected and emotion laden encounters such as the one I described in the beginning of this paper. But it is a journey important for everyone, minority as well as white students, to undertake. It takes every citizen of this country to take actions against racial prejudice and discrimination for such things to be eliminated and diversity to be truly regarded as a treasure. We as educators bear the responsibility and prerogative of helping to shape our students' understanding and perception of diversity.

Literacy is a tool through which these goals can be reached. Integration of diversity into literacy instruction makes literacy a path to empowerment. In the journey, students become not only better readers, writers, thinkers, but also more active and conscientious participants in democracy.

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