

# Deepening Teacher Knowledge of Multicultural Literature through a University-Schools Partnership

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Steven Z. Athanases

How can professional development help teachers tune up subject matter knowledge to better reach their culturally and linguistically diverse students? When teachers evaluate such work as effective, what do they learn, and what makes the work possible? These questions guide this examination of a group of educators involved in a summer institute and follow-up activity. The work was part of a university-schools partnership designed to better prepare underrepresented youth for college. The specific institute goal was to strengthen knowledge of multicultural literature for use with high school students in a highly diverse, high needs urban school district.

The teachers' goal was one among several common to multicultural education—that of content integration, infusion of cultural content in curricula (Banks, 1993). This work can occur in all subject areas but is particularly important and possible in social studies and English, where students encounter stories of challenges and conflicts in building cultures and civilizations and of how humans narrate and reflect on life journeys. Texts taught send strong messages about “official knowledge” and what schools are for (Apple, 1993), about power and social relationships and whose stories and perspectives warrant curricular space (Apple, 1992).

For literature study, multicultural resources include bibliographies and critiques of literature by and about people of color (Duff & Tongchinsub, 1990; Sasse, 1988) and specific groups such as African Americans (Sims, 1982; Trousdale, 1990), Latino/as and Chicano/as (Morales, 2001; Schon, 2005), and interracial children (Lee & Johnson, 2000). Other resources are literature selection guidelines (Sims Bishop, 1992; Yokota, 1993) and critical treatment of curriculum on culture and diversity in K-8 (Harris, 1992) and high school (Willis, 1997).

It is possible, maybe likely, that literature curricula in United States schools have diversified since the last national study found works selected for classrooms remained primarily those authored by White men (Applebee, 1993). However, given the stability of the literary canon between a prior study (Squire & Applebee, 1968) and the more recent one, and despite major U.S. social changes, such a claim is still speculation.

Impediments to diversifying curricula persist. Beyond the larger sociopolitical context that often has marginalized contributions of people of color are other factors. These include teachers' lack of familiarity with works by non-White authors and lack of time to read them (Applebee, 1993). Anthologies often limit works by women and authors of color to short sections at the backs of these books, or present women as weak and people of color as victims (Apple, 1992; Applebee, 1993; Pace, 1992).

Narrow guidelines of testing agencies and state and district organizations limit teachers' selections. A conservative political climate has engendered defense of the traditional literary canon and attacks on including multicultural literature as no more than politically correct advocacy (Taxel, 1997). Some teachers also resist confronting their own narrow knowledge base or issues of social privilege highlighted by perspectives such as critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999), issues raised in some literature by women, authors of color, and religious and sexual minorities.

Consider, however, a diverse group of teachers working with mostly students of color, in a district where cultural inclusion was on the agenda for several years. Consider, also, support from a university-schools partnership. Three impediments remained: lack of familiarity with works outside the canon, lack of time and structure to read and discuss works and to prepare units, and lack of books and support materials.

My colleagues and I removed the impediments with a partnership-sponsored summer institute to enable teaching of more multicultural texts. We examined institute products and processes and school-year follow-up activity, asking two research questions: (1) What themes emerged in teachers' engagements with diverse literary works? and (2) What features of context and institute process enabled teachers to stretch and explore in their work with diverse texts?

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## Framework

### The Promise of Explorations of Culturally Diverse Literature among Teachers

Some promising work of teachers exploring culturally diverse literature has occurred in preservice education. Book clubs have focused on deepening teachers' perspectives on issues of diversity and equity (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001), promoting personal responses and emotionally engaged readings (Addington, 2001), and fostering critically conscious dialogues (Jetton & Savage-Davis, 2005). In one group of six White women and a lead researcher (Florio-Ruane, 2001), socioeconomic background influenced text responses and in some cases fostered a social justice stance.

In another case, 10 pre-service teachers (mostly White women) felt any author has the right to write about any cultural group, but through instructional activities they increased understanding of cultural nuances, complexity of cultural representation, and a need to balance these concerns with a book's "aesthetic heat" in engaging readers (Wolf, Ballentine, & Hill, 1999).

### Problems and Pitfalls in Explorations of Culturally Diverse Literature among Teachers

For practicing teachers, book groups have supported multicultural literature study in majority White and culturally diverse communities. A concern in several projects, however, is the impact of a "pedagogy of personal experience" that privileges one's personal connections to a text over examination of culturally specific content (Smith, 1998).

For example, three middle school teachers and two researchers (all White and female) in a majority White rural Midwestern town used monthly discussion group meetings to explore multicultural young adult literature (Lewis, Ketter, & Fabos, 2001). As they responded to texts, the teachers frequently chose the comfort of universality, attempting to remain blind to color.

Participants often reinstated Whiteness as the norm, discussing how characters, despite varied sociocultural contexts, were "just like we are." Sociohistoric roots, local community events, and community members' cultures shaped how discussants often reproduced a White normalized gaze on difference and at times ignored thornier issues of structural inequities. The study revealed complexity of exploring diverse works and characters of color in a majority White community, and how context shapes discussions of diverse literature.

In another study, a diverse group of

teachers linked their lives to books though not always engaging in ethical respect for characters (Smith & Strickland, 2001). Response to culturally diverse literature in this and another study of all White teachers was diminished by preempting, distancing, and interference, stances involving failure to adequately empathize with another's position and life circumstances (Levin, Smith, & Strickland, 2001).

Teachers in these studies found ways to identify with characters and situations, to make the strange familiar and manageable. However, failure to engage culturally specific contexts proved problematic. In one study of a teacher institute on global literature, supplementary resources and cultural informants provided cultural context (Soter, 1997). Other interventions may be necessary as teachers engage diverse literature, including critical probing of responses (Levin, et al).

The present related study offers a key difference from others explored here. Beyond enrichment and building content knowledge, teachers in this study also used short-term multicultural book groups to design teachable units to strengthen curriculum.

## Method

### The Partnership Context and Participants

A core English group of 15-20 members of a university-schools partnership met in monthly department-based and periodic districtwide workshops and summer three-day institutes. This work supported instructional assistance, response to student writing, and development of teaching resources—all to strengthen preparation of African American and Latino youth in an urban low performing California high school district. Several teachers called for the summer institute

to read, study, and plan units for multicultural literary works.

Institute participants were 17 teachers (14 female) with teaching experience of 1 to over 25 years. Nine were of European ancestries, 4 African American, 2 Chinese American, 1 Mexican American, and 1 multiethnic identifying with her Cherokee roots. Five others, African American women, met in a separate workshop the next week due to late-announcement school-site meetings. Two staff development coordinators, both White (a colleague and I), facilitated activities, read and discussed with book groups, and documented events.

### Design of the Summer Institute

In spring the group voted on works to read and plan for by grade level. Table 1 shows the diversity in gender, ethnicity, and national origin of authors. All were authors of color, except Gordimer, whose novel examines race and class in South Africa. We used partnership funds to buy each teacher the chosen book(s), to pay teachers a stipend to participate, and to buy selected class sets of titles that would emerge as favorites.

As the summer institute began, most had read their group's one or two chosen book(s). Book groups met for most of the three-day institute. Community-building sessions explored teachers' hopes for the institute, writing and discussion with a common short story, and periodic check-ins to share excitement of new learning and promising unit ideas.

I introduced a framework for selecting multicultural literature, prompts for responding to literature, and tools to diversify assessment. At the end of the institute, groups shared literature responses and unit planning and discussed together the institute learning, processes, and next steps.

**Table 1**  
Literary Works by Grade Level Group, Author's Ethnicity, and Author's Gender

Grade level group	Author's Ethnicity	Author's Gender
12 <sup>th</sup> grade		
<i>The Rain God</i> , Arturo Islas	Mexican American	Male
<i>Woman Hollering Creek</i> , Sandra Cisneros	Mexican American	Female
11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
<i>The Bluest Eye</i> , Toni Morrison	African American	Female
11 <sup>th</sup> grade		
<i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , Amy Tan	Chinese American	Female
<i>China Boy</i> , Gus Lee	Chinese American	Male
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade		
<i>Things Fall Apart</i> , Chinua Achebe	Nigerian	Male
<i>The Bride Price</i> , Buchi Emecheta	Nigerian	Female
10 <sup>th</sup> grade		
<i>July's People</i> , Nadine Gordimer	South African (White)	Female
9 <sup>th</sup> grade		
<i>Jasmine</i> , Bharati Mukherjee	Indian	Female

We used a helpful definition of the complex concept of culture: “values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion” (Nieto, 2004, p. 139).

I illustrated the following principles to guide text selection (Athanases, 1999 details the principles and origins): (1) For works written by cultural outsiders, *strengthen authenticity* by adding works by members of the focal group; (2) *Explore variation and contrast within a cultural group* to preclude narrow perceptions; (3) *Deepen cultural background knowledge* to help students engage cultural elements and perspectives in a work; (4) *Provide social science perspectives* on sociohistorical issues raised by works; (5) *Move beyond victimization* by balancing grim stories with images of marginalized people in empowered states; and (6) *Move toward common ground* to engage students in compare-and-contrast about crosscultural themes of diversity and equity. We encouraged supporting book study with short works of other genres, print and audiovisual media, and guest speakers and interviews with community members.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data included institute observation field notes of activities and audiotapes of discussions later transcribed. Artifacts included handouts, materials teachers provided, and drafts of unit plans and lessons. Questionnaires asked about institute process, usefulness of resources, and suggestions for next steps in the partnership for diversifying literature curricula. Evaluations invited comments and concerns about the work.

We reviewed data repeatedly for emerging themes within categories (e.g., unit plans) and across categories (e.g., across summaries of both unit plans and discussion transcripts). A set of response stances in teachers’ engagements with literature emerged from this analysis. To analyze how institute, district, and community contexts shaped the work, we coded questionnaire responses and rank ordered themes by frequency of mention.

We used transcripts, field notes, and interviews to clarify and recluster themes and to check for conflicting and outlier perspectives. Analysis of the institute context was informed by documentation of several years of partnership work and by our collective knowledge of schools, district, and communities.

Response Stances in Teachers’ Engagements with Multicultural Literature

As in other studies, we found teachers used a stance of responding personally to culturally unfamiliar work, noting what in texts felt familiar and universal. However, unlike in most related work, we also found many instances of teachers adopting a stance of ethical respect for characters.

In fact, we found a *range* of stances (Table 2) seldom occurring in isolation. In work on a single novel, for example, teachers together adopted one stance then used others. In some cases, a teacher adopted a stance different from a group and shifted stances through group discussion. In what follows, I illustrate various versions of the permeable and recursive nature of the response stances.

From Personally Identifying with Universal Themes to Reflecting on Characters’ Cultures

The *Joy Luck Club* group, as one example, moved as a team of three from personally identifying (first stance in Table 2) to reflecting on characters’ cultures (second stance). In initial written and spoken responses, they focused on generational conflicts, mostly mother-child tensions in their own struggles as children to gain independence from their mothers’ tight grips.

Darlene, a White teacher, shared painful memories of how no matter how well she behaved or performed, she felt she never earned her mother’s nurturance and love. Tan explores this theme, as several Chinese American women struggle for acceptance by and independence from their overseas-born mothers. Darlene argued that ethnic culture was irrelevant, that

the book’s themes transcended cultures, and the other group members, one Chinese American, supported this stance.

However, the group soon talked of gender, of disturbing treatment of women in tales of the mothers’ lives in China. They argued that study of the book must examine limited roles women were expected to play, how some were abused by individual men and a patriarchal society, how women in other cultures have suffered at the hands of men. There was a crosscultural theme of subjugation of women but also historical and cultural specificity to the discussion now, as Darlene noted: “As we continued to talk about the work and think about teaching it, issues of culture emerged...As a work of literature it really has a strong footing in Chinese culture.”

Lessons the group outlined reflected their shifting response stances. They would guide students to respond personally to the theme of generational conflict; to examine how women of both generations were subjugated by societies/families in which they lived; to write an essay reporting on Chinese folk wisdom in the book; and to examine immigrant experience by collecting examples of conflict between the mothers’ traditional Chinese views of life and their daughters’ adaptations to “American ways.”

Reflecting on the Complexity of Characters’ Cultures and Identities

Table 2 shows that in reflecting on characters’ cultures, a second focus is identities as so complex that some readers need help to enter story worlds. In some cases, characters the groups studied faced multiple identity conflicts, prompted by ways they differed from or conflicted with others due to membership in communities identi-

**Table 2**  
Response Stances in Teachers’ Engagements with Multicultural Literature

Response Stance	Focus
Personally identifying	How I personally identify Personal associations I make in reading this text How anyone can relate to this What is (possibly) universal in this literary work
Reflecting on characters’ cultures	How I notice a character’s experience(s) shaped by membership in communities How a character’s cultural identity is so complex that I need help entering the story world(s)
Culturally connecting	How my cultural experiences make me <i>automatically</i> relate or identify How my cultural experiences <i>might help me</i> relate to those of others
Critiquing and shifting perspectives	Critiquing our own cultural locations How a different story might be told if we changed literary perspective or point of view
Historicizing and contextualizing	How history, sociology, anthropology can <i>deepen</i> my response How history, sociology, anthropology help me <i>critique</i> my response

fied by race, ethnicity, nation of origin, setting or region, class, age or generation, gender, and sexual orientation. In discussions, significance of such memberships and identity conflicts intensified and receded according to both events in the literature and the multiple and shifting lenses through which readers viewed the works.

The *Jasmine* group particularly engaged this complexity. The novel describes how, after her husband is killed by a bomb planted by Sikh terrorists in India, Jasmine immigrates illegally to the U.S.—first to Florida, then New York, then Iowa, where she settles briefly with a banker/farmer during the 1980s farm crisis and adopts a boy from Vietnam. Aligned with this journey, Jasmine navigates stages of a personal quest, confronting questions of cultural identity and the possibility of crosscultural connections.

As a rural Indian woman, she understands rural Iowa values; as an immigrant, she shares her adopted son Du's fierce will to survive; and as a woman who has been raped and treated as a second class citizen, she longs to be part of a matriarchal "tribe" of powerful women. As one group member asked: "Who is this character whose name changes from Jyoti and Jasmine in India, to Jazzy in Florida, Jase in New York, and Jane in Iowa?"

Exploring links between cultural context and personal development, teachers considered contrasting settings in the book, tensions between the protagonist's country of origin and her transplanted culture, and the tug of opposing cultural and spiritual forces. As a unit structuring device, they mapped Jasmine's physical journey and corresponding name changes to help students grasp the complexity of one Indian woman's evolving journey and identity. Jana worried about generalizing values of a culture from a single work. India, she noted, is such a complex society:

The central character happened to be a Hindu woman with a certain set of experiences, but there are many other strains in Indian culture as well. So we should be careful about what we're saying about a larger culture based on one piece that expresses something about it.

Others echoed this concern. Angela spoke of how she hated pressure as an African American in classes of primarily Whites when a teacher would turn to her to provide the "Black perspective." Julia added that she is constantly asked to be a Chinese authority in professional and social situations and how, as a third generation U.S. citizen, she feels unequipped to do so.

Angela noted the need to explore culture in discussing and planning for *Jas-*

*mine* in part because *no one* in the group had experience in Indian culture. Still the teachers felt a respect for what they didn't know and a need to better understand cultural referents and broader cultural notions that frame the text. Some book and internet searching helped the group. One group member noted the need to explore such culturally unfamiliar work:

whether we feel that because we have not experienced it we cannot do it, or whether we feel intimidated by it, or bringing up topics that are maybe a little scary because we haven't worked them out ourselves yet—these become excuses for not doing the literature.

The full group noted that students will have vastly varied responses to a single work anyway, and that teachers and students alike need to deepen literary and cultural knowledge. The group reached some consensus, though, on the value of positioning ourselves among students as fellow learners.

#### Culturally Connecting as a Way in for Diverse Readers

Table 2 notes that the culturally connecting stance gets adopted automatically when cultural alignment occurs between text and reader, and also can be used deliberately to create such connecting. Both versions of this stance arose in the group studying *The Rain God*. Islas' autobiographical fiction examines how the Angel family, mirroring Islas' own Chicano "familia," shaped his identity.

Set in the Texas desert, the novel circles around Miguel Chico who appears to be an outsider observing the repressive forces of sexuality, ethnicity, and social class which threaten to destroy his family. Distant and different, Miguel leaves his desert homeland, tenants of his culture, closeness of his family, and rules of his religion, to find belonging and self-fulfillment. His return home signals the importance of and need for familia to many Chicanos.

For Vivian, a Chicana, culturally connecting was automatic and powerful: "My first reading was very culturally based. It was the first time a story had reflected my own life so clearly and so honestly and so authentically." She later adopted another stance: "When we talked about it here we were concentrating on universal themes everyone in this room is affected by. I mean I think all of us strive for peace and we all have conflicts and ultimately want to reconcile." She noted the book could prompt cultural connecting especially for Chicano students and suggest crosscultural themes.

As readers they are going to read their own culture into it, which is what I did. That's how I made sense of it the first time.

And I think that reading is very valid still. But then there are the universal themes that cross boundaries. I was really thrilled by this experience. I learned a lot about the book that I didn't know, mainly through (other teachers' insights).

Issues that arose concerned how students would deal with themes of mixed race heritage and the protagonist's gay identity. Belinda, an African American teacher with all students of color, two-thirds African American, discussed ways to create cultural connecting to promote respect for characters experiencing tensions related to these issues. She argued that the book could speak across racial and ethnic lines and proposed including in the unit articles from *Essence* and *Ebony* on tensions in the African American community concerning mixed-race heritage and shades of skin color, and a piece by Linda Villarosa, former editor of *Essence*, entitled "Coming Out," in which she came out as a lesbian and included her mother's feelings and perspectives.

The group also created lessons to prompt the stance of reflecting on characters' cultures (Table 2). Lessons placed sociocultural details in a framework of broader themes to promote ethical respect and deeper understanding. Lessons asked questions about the theme of need for community or family, for *reconciliation* of differences. Students would examine family conflicts over skin color, gender, and Mexican vs. Mexican-American roots, but also reconciliation: How characters' feelings about family change, what they learn from each other, how feelings alter due to outside forces. They also would seek evidence of reconciliation between gay and straight characters.

The group pushed students to examine what divides and what enables reconciliation, empathy, common ground. Several teachers later taught the novel using this framework, reporting how well students responded to the group's lessons and how they developed respect for Miguel Chico and his family.

#### Critiquing and Shifting Perspectives

We discussed how different readings often are based in different cultural perspectives and that we need to critique our own cultural locations (Table 2) and be open to alternatives. Harriet, a White group member, spoke of Emecheta, author of *The Bride Price*, a Nigerian in England

writing this book that shows the kinds of really difficult circumstances and issues that women in Ibo culture are facing. I personally read it as a criticism and a call for change, for more sensitivity and flexibility for women's roles. And a lot of other Western

feminists have seen it that way. She's also been somewhat ostracized and marginalized by some African critics for not valorizing motherhood in the way they do.

One young man in a class taught by a teacher in this group read *The Bride Price* and wrote in an essay, in fact, that "We're imposing Western values by the way we read this book." And "What about African traditional culture and the values inherent in that?"

To address this concern, the group asked students: "Given your own position, experience or point of reference, comment on the role of women and men in Ibo society and the cultural traditions you have read about in *The Bride Price*." The group proposed that a teacher copy or display some of the most divergent opinions. Juxtaposing these, they explained: "should generate a provocative discussion regarding varied perspectives and interpretations."

The group paired *The Bride Price* with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and provided students with perspectives of Nigerian and other African cultures through folk tales. Students would use collage, presentation, and essays to compare roles of men and women in "Ibo culture and your own culture—and evaluate these roles. Discuss the positive and negative aspects of each role before concluding what you think is best." The group addressed the need to critique gender roles as depicted in the literature yet reminded students of their own cultural locations from which they offer these critiques.

Table 2 shows teachers also explored critiquing *characters'* locations and perspectives. This was illustrated well by the *July's People* group. Gordimer's novel is set in early 1980s South Africa. Portugal had let go of its colonies of Angola and Mozambique, freeing up bases there for the African National Congress to begin guerilla warfare against the South African government, which stubbornly resisted dismantling apartheid.

From this history, Gordimer described a fictional revolution from perspectives of a White liberal family of British descent, mostly through thoughts of the mother Maureen, as they flee the city for a village where their Black employee July (they're too "liberal" to call him a servant) resides when he is not with the family. We see the revolution through eyes of a White privileged South African, struggling to adapt to village life without basic amenities and to develop a new relationship with July once the unspoken protocol of city life has broken down. Race, class, and gender frame identities as the political structure overturns.

Teachers discussed how the book can be perceived as limited because it does not

provide perspective of a less privileged Black South African in the context of revolutionary struggle for racial equality. On the other hand, they noted, Gordimer offers an intimate account of a woman's awakening to realities of ways race and class in South Africa shaped daily living. Julia noted:

Maureen had thought she was sensitive to July and his family. She had held a fantasy of how someday she and her family would drive into the bush, she would drop July off, and the family would turn it into a camping trip, with her husband hunting. She thought they were a really liberal, progressive group.... She had never really considered what their lives truly were like, what it meant to live in a village—until she was forced into that situation.

To highlight Maureen's growing understanding and empathy, the group proposed that students: "Contrast Maureen's fantasy about a visit to July's home with the reality of the village and July's living situation." One teacher planned to use the book with South African works from Black perspectives. The group created activities to foster diverse points of view of story events so students might envision other perspectives of race and class and of a South African revolution.

#### Historicizing and Contextualizing One's Response

In many cases, groups sought ways to historicize and contextualize their own and their students' meaning-making (final response stance, Table 2). Those discussing the Nigerian novels collected resources on historical context for how colonialism frames both *Things Fall Apart* and *The Bride Price*. They proposed examination of results of colonialism in Africa, and how these shaped characters' experiences.

To help her colleagues gain such background, one teacher offered, "I'll tell you about some of the books my African friends are recommending." The *July's People* group planned background reading and a lecture on apartheid and the history of British and Afrikaners in South Africa. The *Jasmine* group assembled readings on Hindu culture and religion, roles of women in India, and the 1980s economic crisis of Midwestern farmers. The *Rain God* group collected the articles from *Essence* and others to help sensitize students to socio-cultural issues surrounding homosexuality. The *Joy Luck Club* group proposed use of newspaper reportage of aborted female fetuses in China and India, to frame the subjugation women faced in that work.

In these varied ways, the teachers demonstrated the value of historicizing and contextualizing texts and assisting readers in both engaging the works and critiquing their readings of them.

## Enabling Features of the Community Context, Partnership, & Institute Process

Unlike much research on teachers engaging multicultural literature, we did not find a predominance of using a White normalized gaze on difference, a rush to find familiar things and universal themes over culturally specific content and development of ethical respect. What enabled a broader set of stances to emerge in responses of teachers in the study reported here?

#### Impact of the Local Context—The Sociohistorical Frame

Like Lewis et al. (2001), we found local context shaped teachers' responses to diverse literature. The city had long been a site of sociopolitical activity related to change for African Americans, and teachers, parents, and students had called for more inclusive curricula, including 200 Latino and several Asian students who walked out of two schools and marched to protest narrow curricula.

Teachers committed to diversifying curricula still faced usual demands on public school teachers in a large urban district, and moving beyond these to reading unfamiliar literature and planning units for the works posed a challenge for many. It is within this context that teachers called for the summer institute, demonstrating ownership of and high motivation for the work.

#### Importance of a Longterm Partnership and Social Justice Agenda

Also important was the sociohistory of a partnership and its diverse membership, with a successful track record with teachers. Most participants had worked together in district and partnership activities across department, grade level, and racial/ethnic lines. Teachers identified needs in strengthening the teaching of English; partnership events addressed these, through active engagement with materials and ideas, and attendance at workshops ran high. Teachers sought out partnership coordinators and a diverse group of teachers viewed them as key supports, several identifying the partnership director as a lifeline to resources and ideas.

Of particular relevance to diversifying curricula, several teachers of color, who held district and state leadership positions, were center stage in the work. While coordinators during the year of the institute were both White, during prior years, several African American women held parallel positions. Also, while subject matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise of partnership teachers varied widely, overall they shared a commitment to better serving underserved youth.

Several White teachers in the group also participated in antiracist and diversity projects. Identity issues were not new to many of them, one of whom was married to an African American man, another who lived in a nearly all-Black community, and another who co-taught a unit on the Politics of Identity, using literature that addressed race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Finally, teaching assistants infused newer critical perspectives, drawing on feminism, multiculturalism, and queer theory. In all of these ways, social justice concerns had prominence in work of a partnership respected for its leadership, supportive resources, and teacher members committed to reforming education for urban youth.

#### Institute Processes

Prominent in institute evaluations was the importance of playing twin roles of reader and teacher—engaging the literature as learner first, then planning units for students to engage the works. This pair of roles enabled teachers to shuttle between personal and more critical and cultural stances to aid students' learning.

Working with a book closely in a group through multiple lenses enabled teachers to note the complexity of identity in their groups' responses. Several teachers taught English and history as linked subjects, using literature to illustrate historical themes and history to illuminate fiction. This dual disciplinary perspective also enriched literary explorations.

Also important was a safe space for critical conversations about diversity. We established this early when teachers wrote and shared personal, associative, and critical responses to a short story dealing with themes of cultural conflict and identity. As knowledge about cultural themes developed, experiences and expertise in the groups served the larger group as new perspectives were shared. This was important, since the presence of a broad range of intellectual resources is not enough to serve a professional group; members need to contribute their knowledge and access the resources of others (Palincsar, Magnusson, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998).

Resources came from within and outside the teacher group, a balance found in many successful networks (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Internal knowledge included sharing of experiences, ideas, cultural perspectives, and resources. External knowledge included research-based principles to guide selection of multicultural literature and resources on curriculum and assessment for unit planning.

Also, teachers valued balance of intensive group work and tightly facilitated

large group sessions to share ideas, engage new resources, and voice concerns. Other researchers have noted that as institute or book group leaders they did not use clear facilitation or critical probing and noted that they would do so in future efforts.

Our project, in contrast, had explicitly planned facilitation and professional development activities. We were not an acephalic book group, but a partnership with hired program coordinators whose job it was to lead. We had learned from partnership members' feedback that workshop time not tightly facilitated created disgruntled participants.

Finally, a closing discussion critiqued the work and outlined next steps that included a workshop on ways unit planning played out in teaching and learning and one on fostering empathy among diverse youth studying diverse literature. Also, five members of a district core literature selection committee used tools and themes from the summer institute to reshape district curricula.

This led to a Core Literature Study Group that developed a 5-day summer institute on rethinking the core and monthly after-school sessions to present results of piloting new works and units with students. Over 50 teachers participated over two years and helped shape a cross-disciplinary curriculum development initiative. Finally, teacher leaders emerged from the partnership who collaborated on regional workshops and national presentations on teaching multicultural literature.

#### Discussion

Research on teachers' engagement with multicultural literature has shown how, in efforts to link with texts, readers at times "over-identify," overlooking culturally and sociologically specific content that a cultural studies lens might enable (Lewis, 2000). We too found teachers made associations to engage literature personally and to connect across lines of difference.

However, we also found teachers stretching to engage new cultural experiences and perspectives. Tapping her Cherokee roots, Pauline voiced this stance with the Indian adage: "Literature allows us to walk in another's moccasins. My students will tell you I'm always harping about learning from vicarious experience."

Another teacher noted we don't have to "relate to it," that there is value in "entering a whole universe you know nothing about. That's what I tell my kids. Nabakov wrote an essay about that. Don't necessarily look for a novel you identify with. Look for something totally new."

There was a tension between wanting to identify personally and needing to

stretch to cultural specificity of characters' worlds. However, we found several other stances, including critiquing perspectives and historicizing response. We saw that personal links and universality were not ends in themselves but part of a complex set of often recursive stances in engaging multicultural literature.

We benefited from a local context that urgently called for and supported this work, and from a university-schools partnership that provided structure and resources for professional development and within which we established norms and a community of colleagues ready to embrace the work or critique its failings. Nonetheless, other groups may benefit from our analyses of institute features that enabled the work to succeed. These included teacher choice of literary works; the twin roles of reader and planner; direct and careful attention to culture in open discussion; and a focused planning task supported by a tool on multicultural issues. In addition, the diverse human and material resources from inside and outside the group supported teachers' explorations of cultural diversity.

Our goal was fostering teachers' knowledge and use of works by and about people of color. However, "Culture is not a corner that only colored people occupy" (Lee, 2000, p. 310). While one author teachers chose was White, Gordimer wrote of experiences far from the US, foreign and distant for White teachers and teachers of color alike.

In examining work by and about White *North American* women, we might contrast identities and experiences of, for example, Carol Shields' protagonist growing up on the Manitoba plains in *The Stone Diaries* and those of the poor southern girl Bone narrating Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The latter's despair and rage over poverty and class share much with Richard Wright's still harrowing account of hunger in *Black Boy*.

Recent book-length studies have enabled us to understand how and why pre-service teachers both take up and resist attention to diversity and equity in teaching (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sleeter, 1992). However, concerns of teachers in the post-induction period warrant particular attention and require particular learning opportunities (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

In addition, local communities, their cultures, and their histories place unique subject matter learning demands on teachers. We hope work we have done and studied can enable committed but busy teachers to benefit from similar opportunities to strengthen subject matter learning to serve diverse youth.

## Author Note

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