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First Things First

A Foreword to the Themed Issue on Multicultural Education in the Language Arts

David Dynak

During the past year, a colleague and I were asked to develop and mentor a series of workshops for administrators of a school district concerned with public perceptions of a lack of sensitivity to multicultural issues. One of the hypotheses that we returned to regularly was that cultural stereotypes derive from a lack of intimacy; when we open ourselves in the attempt to experience as *others* experience, stereotypes lose their objectifying power. Over the course of those workshops, all administrators (from superintendent to building-level assistant principals) demonstrated an incredible willingness to take some significant risks — to share personal insights and values with each other, to open themselves to peer-critique, to grapple with troubling aspects of the images and discourse that emerged at several points.

One of the more powerful sessions included a deceptively simple perception exercise. Twelve of the 40 administrators — mirroring the roughly 30% non-white and Hispanic population projected as currently attending K-12 public schools in the United States (The College Board, 1991) — were asked to go into the hallway and close the door behind them. Those of us that remained in the room discussed what we were to notice first when the 12 rejoined us. We decided that we would notice their noses. Our tasks were to look first at

their noses, to engage them in conversation, and to regularly return to their noses as focal points while conversations continued. When the 12 re-entered, we played *the encounter* with enthusiasm for awhile, until gradually, the tensions slowed the conversations into silence. We then stopped the game and debriefed, with individuals sharing their sense of what had happened.

"I felt like people were looking right through the back of my head," commented one administrator.

"I felt strange, almost invisible," stated another.

"I didn't know *what* was going on, but whatever it was, I didn't want it to continue."

From those of us who had been noticing noses came qualitatively different comments.

"At first, I thought it was funny, and so I kept looking at their noses. I'd sort of shift over to their sides so I could get a profile look. But the more I was with them, the less we had to say to each other. Until we were kind of paralyzed."

"I found that the longer we played this game, the more I looked at their noses."

As a group, we came to the consensus that what we see *first* (be it noses, or race, or ethnicity, or gender, or ascriptive characteristics often associated with socioeconomic status) has a tremendous impact on what we see second. Clearly, the game was only a metaphor, but it helped us feel, see, and talk about many key problems inherent in questioning, conceptualizing, and evaluating multicultural programs and practices in schools. To facilitate discussion, we used Banks's (1993)

typology. That is, did our thinking about programs and practices feature discrete curricular adjustments in order to highlight *contributions* of diverse peoples to mainstream culture (e.g., stories of heroes and heroines, culturally specific holidays, foods, etc.)? Were we envisioning programmatic initiatives that would *add* culturally diverse content, themes and perspectives to curriculum without changing its basic structure? Were we attempting to grapple with ways of *transforming* programs and practices in order to provide learners with a series of multicultural lenses through which concepts, issues, events, and themes could be contextualized and therefore understood more richly? Were we considering culturally sensitive programs and policies as tied inextricably to *social action* and social change? And, like Banks, did we perceive this four-tiered typology (contributions approach, additive approach, transformative approach, and action approach) as inherently hierarchical, with increasing value attached to higher levels?

Because they carried along so many personal beliefs and accepted district practices, these were difficult questions for us to raise, let alone attempt to answer with finality. But, district committees with wide-ranging membership *have* been formed. The dialogue *has* continued. And, we *are* still exploring.

It is our hope that this issue of *Reading Horizons* will help readers navigate some of the tricky currents that we continue to confront as educators of an increasingly diverse population of learners (The College Board, 1991), and as teacher educators concerned with how issues of multiculturalism are treated in teacher education programs. The articles included in this issue are meant to be understood not as examples of best practice, but rather, as examples of how these issues are being addressed by teacher educators and practitioners.

Collectively, these articles focus on the nature of content, tasks, and contexts for making multicultural issues a purposeful part of schooling.

In their bibliographic essay, Young, Campbell, and Oda begin by offering a rationale for making literature from diverse cultures an integral component of literacy instruction. They argue that, in reading the stories of characters from diverse cultures, learners develop a respect for cultural diversity as well as construct multidimensional understandings of human commonalities. Their essay is intended to help practitioners and teacher educators locate multicultural resources appropriate for classroom use, incorporate biographical information on non-mainstream authors and illustrators in classroom activities, and identify authors whose works could provide openings into the issues and canons of multicultural education.

Andersons' research explores the role played by cultural membership in shaping parents' attitudes toward teaching, learning, and literacy instruction. His study suggests that cultural membership is a crucial variable to examine — particularly how literacy practices at school are mediated by parents' attitudes and values toward those practices. Further, Anderson implies that communicating dimensions of literacy programs to parents may be very difficult given the ways in which cultural membership impacts parents' schemata.

In her essay, Stewart discusses how using African American literature about family units could enhance social studies content. She argues that such an approach would increase all learners' understanding of African American culture, while enabling African American learners to find themselves in the texts, thus helping them develop self-esteem,

and deepen their sense of history, social issues, and cultural customs.

Newell details how storytelling could function as a rich, multicultural pedagogy. She explores how storytelling can be grounded in the oral traditions of African and East Indian cultures. Further, she locates a series of skills that emerge from storytelling activities, wherein learners develop practical understandings of narrative structure, main ideas, sequencing of events, a holistic sense of storyline, poise and fluency, increased vocabulary, and the ability to use language to evoke time, place, and image.

Johnson uses his experiences as a "less able member" of a university concert choir as metaphor for how less able readers experience the demands of decoding and processing a complex symbol system. His narrative explores how his journaling during his year in the choir led him to posit literacy activities to help the less able reader grow in skills and confidence. He advocates that teachers begin by realizing how school contexts for literacy learning are often sites for anxiety and deflating evaluation. Johnson translates the positive activities he experienced as a member of the choir into language learning contexts. His list of beneficial activities includes choral reading, heterogeneous grouping (so modeling can occur), regular opportunities for practice, re-visiting familiar pieces to help readers find nuance and develop increased fluency, limiting stress-producing moments, establishing personal connections between readers, creating opportunities for readers to experience texts both part-to-whole and whole-to-part, and structuring literacy events as performances.

Ferguson and Young describe the content and pedagogy of a teacher's three-week unit using *Kwanzaa* to validate the Swahili roots of African American cultural heritage. In their

treatment of the unit, they emphasize that Kwanzaa is a holiday of principles that applies to all students by emphasizing community, purpose, and personal and collective action.

The authors of these articles express a need to expand our pedagogical and theoretical knowledge base by listening, integrating, and sharing -- listening to the voices of scholar educators explore ways of reaching all students; integrating these innovations to provide improved instruction for all students; and sharing these ideas as we develop them further through our own reflective practice.

Rudine Sims Bishop (1994) uses the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding doors in her conception of the multiple richnesses of multicultural literature. However, to experience the new vistas promised by scholars working within multicultural domains, we may need to sort through the things we have come to see first -- to look closely at ourselves and at others in order to open doors, and move through them.

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