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“Shut My Mouth Wide Open”: Realistic Fiction and Social Action

DURING AN INTERACTION WITH A fifth-grade male student, I asked him why he appeared not to be interested in the stories I read to the class. I will never forget his reply: “There ain’t no Little Red in my hood, and if I catch one of ’dem little piggies, I’m gon’ have a Bar-B-Que.” While his response made me chuckle, we continued to discuss why he did not like fairy tales. His comment suggested that he did not view fairy tales in the traditional ways.

This conversation concerned me, because fairy tales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Little Pigs*, are often used to teach across the curriculum, not just to develop literary behaviors. Therefore the student’s lack of engagement could lead to boredom at the very least, and academic failure at worst (Hale, 1994; Irvine, 1990).

This suggested to me a need for more contemporary themes in reading material for some readers. It moved me to explore the pedagogical implications of the selection of children’s literature, as well as how that literature and literary response (Rosenblatt, 1978) may be used as an instructional tool to increase literacy success and initiate social action. When I introduced a more contemporary version of the tale, he added to his response a discussion of the things that Little Red could have done to protect herself, what her grand-

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mother could have done differently, and what the neighborhood could do to get rid of the wolf.

As an elementary school teacher, I always found a small group of students in my classes who were not the least interested in the suggested children’s literature listed in the core curriculum. Like my young student, these students were most often African American males who scored very low on the standard measures of literate behaviors. As an African American educator and member of a society that has expanded the repertoire of literacy necessary for full participation, I know that a mind “turned off” to literature is a mind often ignored in traditional classrooms, and therefore a mind that will have fewer venues for expression.

In light of the ways that contemporary events are so shocking that they “shut our mouths wide open” in silent response, the use of contemporary realistic fiction, in which dilemmas in society are pivotal, have the potential to “open wide” the mouths of these African American male readers. As they increase their engagement with literature, these otherwise reluctant readers can increase their literary understanding and develop their literary voice into social agency to act on their own behalf and on the behalf of others.

To test this possibility, I met, over the course of an academic year, with seven African American, fifth grade males who attended an urban mid-western elementary school (Tyson, 1997). In this

article I share their responses to contemporary realistic fiction and the ways in which the tying of this literature to events in the boys' lives had the potential to move them toward social action.

Literature as a Catalyst

Literature has the potential to make a difference in the lives of African American males; that is, reading, writing, and discussing literature can help them to make sense of and negotiate their life experiences. In my work with these African American males, I explored the implications of the creation of a community of readers who share responses in socially constructed ways, and as readers whose culturally specific voices (Bishop, 1992; Smith, 1993, 1995) and lives are an integral part of the response to children's literature. As the boys developed as comrades, they named themselves "The Posse," and became a "brotherhood" of readers gathering information from their worlds and the world around them, constructing meanings that extended their understandings, responses, and participation (Hickman, 1995).

For the purposes of this project, contemporary realistic literature is defined as picture books that are fictionalized narratives based on socially significant events. The classification of realistic fiction is given to stories that are convincingly true to life and that help children see their own lives, empathize with other people, and see the complexity of human interaction.

For example, the picture book, *The Day GoGo Went to Vote* (Sisulu, 1996), is a fictionalized account of a South African grandmother who votes in the first democratic election in South Africa that permitted Black South Africans to participate. Another is the 1995 Caldecott Medal winner, *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), a fictional account of the Los Angeles riots, which occurred after three police officers were acquitted of criminal charges for the Rodney King beating.¹ Books such as these can provide a literary framework for the development of a sense of personal and civic competency, and the ability to make improvements in our own lives and the lives of others.

Responding to the Texts

I read aloud contemporary realistic fiction to the boys, gathering their responses in both written

and oral form. As they responded to the texts, the boys began to discover and supplement the fictional information with factual information. They began to scrutinize and interrupt the information through cause and effect, hypothesizing ideas and predictions, inferring or deciphering character traits or identifying the author's purpose, as well as bringing personal insight and their own experience to their literary interpretations.

When reading the book, *Daddy* (Caines, 1977), Colin² stated, "This kinda reminds me of my dad and my sister, he always teases her and likes to [play] these weird teasing games too, like this Daddy." The extra-textual application helped Colin to understand the characterization in the story. The father in the story played a teasing word game with his daughter. Colin first thought the story was strange, but after he made the connection to a life experience, he responded with a broader view of the text, stating, "I see, he is like my Dad, tryin' to be funny and the joke is on him 'cuz we ain't laughing!"

The boys often would say that a character reminded them of their moms, cousins, uncles, friends, sports figures, the man down the street, media images, and others who touched their lives. It was also apparent that sharing contemporary realistic fiction with these students extended their social interaction with each other as well as with me as researcher. Other researchers have explored the social aspects of reader response (e.g., Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1997), and have suggested that groups of readers who work together to understand what they are reading while exploring their own responses will have a richer experience than when reading alone (Purves, Rogers, & Soter, 1990).

As the boys responded to the literature as a community of readers, they began to think about serious problems in their communities, and to make suggestions to address those problems. This evolved into preliminary enactments of personal, communal, and civic social action.

Critical Literacy

While the contemporary realistic fiction introduced some issues familiar to the boys, not all the boys' lives were directly affected by these issues. When discussing housing for the homeless, Baby Jay responded that a shelter is "not so bad,

my Mom and I spent the night in one before.” Viking then asked, “How can you stay in a place we go for my Dad’s company picnic?” As we read and discussed the texts, it became evident that some of the boys simultaneously raised their awareness of societal issues and responded with personal, communal, and civic sensitivity, moving them to initiate and enact social action as extensions of the texts. Viking insisted that Baby Jay and his mother could come and stay with his family if they ever needed a place to live.

As the boys began to ask the “why” rather than just the “what, who, and where,” the door was open to also construct the “how.” For instance, they began to ask why there are drugs in their neighborhood, which moved them toward asking more complicated questions about how we can rid the neighborhood of drugs.

Thus, these boys participated in the act of critical literacy—reading the word in order to read the world (Freire, 1970/1993). The connections the boys made to contemporary realistic fiction about social issues and the ways they transgressed boundaries (hooks, 1994) of childhood as they initiated or enacted social action became synonymous with empowerment and liberation in their own lives.

Within the context of these literary events, using children’s literature that highlights the dilemmas in society, the boys’ “I would” stances exhibited evidence of social action. Frequently, they combined the social action to reflect the individual (I would), the community (our neighborhood should), and the civic (the government should) from one text to another. This was often the case when the community action was taken to solve a personal injustice.

After reading *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), a story about a homeless boy and his father living in an airport, one boy, Baby Jay, shared a plan that had been devised by his mother and his neighbors to save their aluminum cans in their garage—indicating a combination of the personal and communal social action. He reported that his family and his neighbors would all put the aluminum cans in the garage and a homeless man would come and collect them on a regular basis. He mentioned that at first people were afraid of him, “But just one day we just started treating him like he was just anybody else livin’ round us.”

At times, the boys’ responses revealed that the literature was either exactly like or similar to their lives as it prompted connections to their personal experiences as well as experiences that were closely connected to their communities. When discussing *The House That Crack Built* (Taylor, 1992), Viking suggested a hands-on approach: “Just go to people’s houses you know that got it [drugs], and then just get it and flush it down the toilet or something.” Other boys discussed community responsibility in the drug crisis and suggested more neighborhood rehabilitation centers, help from the medical profession, and community fundraising efforts.

The boys’ responses reflected a clear sense of the responsibility of the community to act when drugs in neighborhoods was the issue. However, the boys did not respond in this way about some of the other issues. They often intimated that the responsibility to change something rests with “they.” For example, “they” should use more money to keep the streets safer. When asked who constitutes “they,” the boys were sometimes able to name them as their neighbors, their police, their government, their parents, or any other group(s) that needed to take action. At other times, the “they” were unidentifiable.

For example, when discussing the matter of guns after reading *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* (Fitzhugh, 1986), the boys responded that “they” should go and try to ban guns. When asked who are the “they,” Paul responded, “I don’t know, but somebody around here got to be able to do something. So people will stop killing each other.” This sense of a need for social action, even given the ambivalence about who is responsible, was coupled with a sense of the gravity and urgency of the situation.

Social Action in a Broader Context

The boys’ responses were about more than just the relationship between the literary events and their own lives. They began to respond to the issues raised in the texts in ways that organized their understanding of how to initiate and effect change in a broader context. Freire (1983) used the term “conscientization” to describe the process by which adults must engage in critical analyses of the causes of their powerlessness. In their analysis of the social issues presented in the children’s literature, the boys deconstructed power relationships and

began to develop a framework to encompass individual, communal, and civic grievances and/or responsibilities necessary for social change.

Responses that exemplified situations that were beyond the realm of a reader as an individual or as part of a grassroots community included civic (municipal, governmental) referents. After relating the issues of drugs, homelessness, and guns to their own experiences and knowledge base, they decided to circulate petitions and write letters to congressional representatives, newspapers, and television stations.

The boys' responses were reflective of the need to move beyond individual action to looking at the civic or governmental levels of enforcing laws that already exist. They decided on a letter writing campaign to the highest level of the government, the president:

Dear Government,

I wish and hope that you can pass a law that says— all cities should have a raid for bad drugs. And if not that (create) a rehab program for states and cities across the nation. If drugs are being shipped from another country—have it stated (only) for medical reasons.

Colleness

Dear President,

I hope you can do something about people smoking crack and cocaine. They could die from it. Please write back my name is Zach Price. I live in mid-western town, U.S.A. And my address is 2468 Pecan Ledge Blvd.

Sincerely,
Zach

[Zach sketched a pencil drawing at the bottom of the page illustrating a person standing and smoking crack. Below, the same person is lying down with the caption, "Two minutes later he dies."]

Dear Bill Clinton,

I wish that you would put more efforts in trying to stop crack. I think you should have had drug growers to stop growing crack. It messes up people's lives, and gets people killed. There's hundreds of people dying every second because of crack. If you can please try to stop crack. If you can't please have more police patrolling allies, houses and hotels. If you can't do the job then maybe you should get out the white house and let somebody else do something!

Sincerely,
Viking

Sharing contemporary realistic fiction with these boys clearly had some significant influences in terms of facilitating responses that dealt with multiple social locations or positions shaped by race, ethnicity, age, economic resources, equality, and participatory democracy. This allowed for children's literature to be used not just for particular instructional outcomes but to help children develop and enhance the capacity to locate themselves in their socio-political places and spaces and to engage in social action.

At the same time, the boys began to know their own way around books and to find their voices in their own experiences. They learned to recognize their own ways of seeing as valid and communicable. This can, in turn, be a vital tool to build on existing knowledge and move the reluctant reader to higher levels of understanding.

Conclusion

Reaching for *One April Morning* (Lamb, 1996) about the Oklahoma City bombing of a federal building, Colin exclaimed, "You're like making some kinda pattern with all your stories you brought in here . . . like sad stories. But true." Baby Jay added, "Like stuff we see in our neighborhood." It is not my intention to essentialize the experience of young African American boys; however, the community we created in the study provided a place for these particular boys to make connections between school literature and their lives. In fact, these boys represented an array of diversity in experiences. For example, one child's father was a medical doctor and another child's father was unemployed, one child and his family had once lived in a family homeless shelter and another child's family time-shared beachfront property in Ocean City, and one child went hunting with his father (with guns) and another saw his uncle murdered (with a gun).

Discussion alone cannot effect social change. The boys, becoming aware of this, began to discuss social issues that on occasion included an enactment of social action. A factor often overlooked in all the discussion of literacy instruction for children has been using the social realities of children's lives as strategies to facilitate vision and develop a critical framework for personal, communal, and civic

social action. There was some indication that the boys' interactions with the books within the literary events in this project did increase their development of literary understandings. They made both textual and inter-textual connections, indications that they did look for connections to their lives including, but not limited to, school, family, and community experiences.

Working with these boys I found that their initial stages of engagement were influenced by the genre of contemporary realistic fiction offered to them, and that they sustained their engagement as they constructed meaning as a group. I also saw them develop literary understandings that led to important gains in reading and literary behaviors that enhanced success with school literacies. But, most importantly, the boys' initiation and enactment of personal, communal, and civic social action, in response to the critical reading of contemporary realistic fiction, included actions that can make a difference in people's lives.

It has been my desire to do the "righteous" thing in the presentation of what transformed the participants into the "Posse" and the data I gathered into what the boys labeled my "homework." Colin put it best at the end of the study when he said, "Well, maybe all the teachers in the world could like read your homework—when you get done and then reading groups will be 'bout things that are about . . . life." And the "Posse" said "Amen."

Notes

1. The other texts used in the study were, *Chilly Stomach* (Caines, 1986); *Somebody's New Pajamas* (Jackson, 1996); *Heroes* (Mochizuki, 1995); and *Tiger Flowers* (Quinlan, 1994).
2. All the student names are pseudonyms.

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