

Talking Books

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Curriculum as Identity: Writing the Word, Writing the World

understanding how we make sense of any text in terms of our own unique social practices and experiences. Every new experience provides an opportunity to see ourselves and our world through a different lens.

One way to support all children in owning literacy is to put together text sets that speak to their lives and cultural identities. These text sets include not only books, but also diverse semiotic forms such as poems, videotapes, and photographs. We often follow the “reading” of these texts by inviting children to name the world in which they live. The result is writing that fosters empathy for others, prompts exploration of personal and familial experiences, and invites children (and, by proxy, us and other teachers) to become more critical and discerning readers of our social worlds.

In response to a poem by Ruben Antonio Villalobos entitled “Tio Juancho” in *June Jordan’s Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (Muller, 1995), one of Gerald Campano’s fifth graders wrote a poem that named her world and spoke directly to her cultural background and identity:

Send me words like music grandma
Take me back to our land
The land I was born in
Show me the works of the Philippines
Show me how to stay in business
Tell me how it feels selling fish while they’re still
Fresh and Watery
Show me the house you built with:
Cardboard, metals, sticks and your
Bare hands
Tell me the memories you remember
So I can remember

Naming the world often begins with an intuitive sense of fairness. Herbert (grade 3) had a lot to say about the book *Major Taylor: Champion Cyclist* (Cline-Ransom, 2004), the

Paulo Freire’s insight that “reading the world” always “precedes reading the word” (1993, p. 35) provides a foundation for

story of an African American who battled racism to become a world champion cyclist. Herbert came away with the thought that “people should play fair, use the Golden Rule.” He named “prejudice” as the underlying problem and asserted that the white racers “discriminated [against] him by saying this is going to be your last race. They was mean and some sore losers.” We can sense him identifying with Marshall Taylor as someone to emulate since he “rode clean and fair” and stayed focused on his dream of winning the race.

The concept of identity can also be used as a starting point for children to look at the world from the perspective of others. *Stars in the Darkness* (Joose, 2002) tells the story of Richard, who joined a gang, and what his younger brother, mother, and neighbors did to unite in peaceful social action. When asked to respond from the perspective of the little brother, Cierra (grade 4) wrote, “Last night he came in late with blood everywhere. He said it was nothing, but it is to me.” Invited to think about the story from the mother’s perspective, Cierra wrote: “I feel worried because my son is in a gang. . . . My sons are all I have. . . . Richard is his little brother’s role model. . . . I have to get Richard out of this gang before he dies.” Finally, writing from the perspective of Richard, Cierra showed an implicit understanding of how identity creates tension in this story. “This gang is so cool and I have the power now. . . . But I still worry about my little brother. I don’t want to worry him or my mom.”

Fairness and identity both figure prominently in Debra Chasnoff’s videotape, *Let’s Get Real!* (2004). Given the almost epidemic occurrences of bullying both in and outside of schools, it’s easy to identify with Jason as he rides his bike across the playground and is cruelly knocked down by one of his classmates. On the pretense that it was all good-natured fun, the bully helps him up as his friends snicker maliciously. Show this video to your class and we guarantee that students will have stories to tell: “There was this kid in PE that they were picking on. . . . and they said, ‘What are you going to do about it? You’re just a girl!’” (Paola, grade 8).

Murals: Walls That Sing (Ancona, 2003) invites

students to explore the historical as well as the everyday art of the anonymous graffiti artist. Like street artists, students can be invited to collect graffiti in their neighborhood as well as use art to tell their stories and the histories of their families. And speaking of the combination of wonderful art and exploring family histories, no book is more inviting than Lester Laminack's *Saturdays and Teacakes* (2004), the story of a young boy and his Saturdays with Mamaw.

Two additional books that further expand as well as invite the exploration of identity are *Just Like Josh Gibson* (Johnson, 2004)—a family story of a grandmother who “could hit a ball a mile” and whose story demonstrates that the small steps made by individuals can inspire us all—and *Ellington Was Not a Street* (Shange, 2004), a reflective tribute to the African American community of old. What is important about these stories is that they demonstrate how our own personal experience affects the overall good of the community.

In a recent presentation (2004), Etienne Wenger argued that education in this century ought to be first and foremost about identity. For Wenger, identity is always social: Learning is defined in terms of community competency as a composite of individual experience. Wenger sees the interplay between the community and the individual as a contested site, but nonetheless, the site at which both the community and the individual outgrow their very selves. It is this tension that drives the learning process.

We see the text set featured here as supporting teachers in building from the diversity and differences in their own classrooms, no matter whether that diversity lies in basic interests, playground experiences, or cultural heritage. This text set not only features different cultural groups, but murals, family stories, poetry, and personal narratives for purposes of expanding notions of literacy and

opening up space in our classrooms for all children to give voice to their own experiences. ●

Identity Text Set

- Ancona, G. (2003). *Murals: Walls that sing*. New York: Marshall Cavendis.
- Cline-Ransome, L. (2004). *Major Taylor: Champion cyclist* (Illustrated by J. E. Ransome). New York: Atheneum Books.
- Chasnoff, D. (2004). *Let's get real* (videotape). San Francisco: Women's Educational Media.
- Johnson, A. (2004). *Just like Josh Gibson* (Illustrated by B. Peck). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Joosse, B. (2002). *Stars in the darkness* (Illustrated by G. Christie). San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Laminack, L. (2004). *Saturdays and teacakes* (Illustrated by C. Soentpiet). Atlanta: Peachtree.
- Muller, L. (Ed.). (1995). *June Jordan's poetry for the people: A revolutionary blueprint*. New York: Routledge.
- Shange, N. (2004). *Ellington was not a street* (Illustrated by K. Nelson). New York: Simon & Schuster.

References

- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Wenger, E. (2004). *The community structure of large-scale learning systems: Learning as a journey of self* (Lecture & PowerPoint Presentation). Bloomington, IN: School of Education.