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Connecting Literature To Life And Life To Literature: How Urban Girls Constructed Meaning In A Book Group

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This paper describes how a book group setting fostered the construction of meaning by 12 urban adolescent Latina girls as they responded to literature. Differing from the interactions seen in more traditional educational settings, this study examines the ways that this book group context encouraged the participants to discuss and write about issues related to their lives in order to contemplate social and personal complexities, celebrate triumphs, and cope with tragedies. Furthermore, this paper explores the development of the literate meaning-making behaviors that helped the girls interpret textual messages and connect with each other as members of a literate community.

Framework and Background

Purpose of this Study

Rather than celebrating the aesthetic beauty of literature and fostering the social and personal benefits that readers gain from a literary experience, in many school-based literary settings learning about and from literature is reduced to listening to teachers talk about it and then taking quizzes and exams to test for “understanding.” In fact, many classroom studies of discourse in traditional schools indicate that teachers are responsible for the majority of talk that occurs (i.e. Cazden; Mehan; Nystrand; Pappas and Zecker). In such settings, students rarely get the opportunity to respond authentically



and aesthetically to texts, and even less of a chance to expand these meanings through collaborative discussion. As Smith notes, “the patterns of discourse in classroom discussions of literature are not natural or inevitable” (181) and do not encourage readers to construct meaning. Moreover, numerous studies show that the talk about texts that occurs in typical high school contexts actually discourage students from responding personally and thinking reflectively about how the literature relates to them and their life experiences (i.e. Applebee; Hynds; Nystrand and Gamoran).

Yet with this knowledge, some schools have begun to shift away from viewing talk as a vehicle for one-way transmission (teacher to student) of knowledge towards viewing talk as a way to “share systems of meaning *among* teachers and students” (Lemke 1, my emphasis). These schools have adopted classroom practices, such as book groups, that provide “spaces” for students’ voices and acknowledge that the construction and transformation of knowledge occurs best through the interaction of these voices (Pappas and Zecker). In making this shift, schools that adopt these more “alternative” literary practices have become places where teachers and texts are no longer the sole sources or authorities on knowledge. Accordingly, the interpretations and personal experiences that students share through dialogue are also considered valid sources of knowing and are greatly encouraged.

However, even in classrooms that do promote collaborative talk, the discussions tend to shy away from the complicated social, cultural, political, and personal issues that are addressed in literature and that affect the daily lives of students. But, the reality is that the responsibility for raising students’ awareness to these issues and supporting students’ personal struggles and triumphs falls squarely on schools’ shoulders as they need to make space for the necessary yet often personal conversations that could lead students to a new critical consciousness. By using literature as a starting place to initiate these vital discussions, students may have opportunities to reflect



on important personal, social, and political constructs, which in turn could enable them to transform their own beliefs, understandings, and possibly their world.

Robbins Alternative High School was one such school making this vital paradigm shift regarding the positive outcomes of collaborative meaning-making through literature discussions. Located in one of the most violent and economically challenged neighborhoods in the south side of Chicago, Robbins served a total of 29 students (12 girls and 17 boys) ages 16-21 who had been expelled from public school or who had previously dropped out of the public school setting. The population was 97% Mexican American with the other 3% consisting of students from Arab American, Puerto Rican, and Polish American backgrounds. All of the female participants in this study defined themselves as being of Mexican descent.

I was interested in examining this particular book group setting for two reasons: First, it offered me an opportunity to see how adolescents who were considered “at-risk” for early academic drop-out, due to their social environment and economic status, developed a set of literate behaviors and a literate self-concept that helped them navigate various life issues. Second, through a feminist lens, I was able to explore how responding to literature in a book group allowed these young women, as they have done so for many women in the past, to share certain feminine “ways of knowing” (Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan) that ultimately led to a validation of the “life experiences (epiphanies) that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects” (Denzin 510).

Through their interactions, the readers in this study were able to “live-through” texts (Rosenblatt, 1978) and evoke responses that the girls and their book group leader, Kathy, shared, discussed, and examined collaboratively during the book group sessions. As such, the readers came together to read and collaboratively construct meaning from



literature. It is the focus of this paper to explore the nature of this setting as it promoted the literate behaviors that became the major tool that the participants used to construct vital meanings in response to adverse situations.

Methods of Data Collection

In keeping with the philosophy that interactive dialogic communication between teachers and students was important for the students' well-being and development, all of the students at Robbins Alternative High School participated in a weekly same-gender reflective support group where they could discuss issues related to identity, social grouping (such as gangs), self-esteem, and self-empowerment. Although actual participation in the boys and girls groups' activities was voluntary, attendance was mandatory. As part of this requirement, the boys met with a local pastor from one of the churches in the neighborhood while the girls met with Kathy Tillman from Literature Sisters Book Group Organization. The twelve girls that met in this book group voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Seven book group members participated for the entire year (Ana, Gloria, Lisa, Lupe, Maria, Sandra, and Sonia), two members left the school after one semester (Estee and Lea), and three members joined the group during the second semester (Eva, Lola, and Stacia). Four of the participants in the group were mothers (Ana, Lea, Lupe, and Sandra), and the school identified all of the other girls as at-risk for early motherhood. Since I had more time to get to know the seven girls who participated in book group for the entire year, they became the major informants for this study.

The data for this one-year ethnographic study included transcripts of 26 audiotaped book group sessions, responses from two surveys, fieldnotes from book group sessions and field trips, transcriptions of formal interviews with the three teachers, the book group leader, and the 12 participants, and participant-produced poetry. My role was that of a participant-observer. At the time of the research, Literature Sisters Organization facilitated eight book groups in various locations and



contexts. I spent the first year attending at least one book group session at each of the sites to find a setting on which to focus my research. While I was inspired by many of the groups, the members were rather transient and many sites had ongoing enrollment policies such that members could join the group at any time. I felt that in order to do justice to this study, I needed to choose a site that had the following criteria:

- The book group should follow a complete cycle (i.e. school calendar).
- The majority of the book group's participants should remain the same for the complete cycle.
- The participants should maintain regular attendance (attend three out of every four sessions).

After careful consideration and eliminating sites that did not fit the above criteria, I decided to focus this study on the Elise J. Robins Alternative High School book group and attended every book group session for an entire school year (August through June). Although there was a great deal of information collected over the course of the year, the purpose of this paper is to offer a snapshot of one day in book group in order illustrate how this context fostered the girls' ability to develop literate behaviors that helped them construct meaning around various life-issues.

Theoretical Framework

Contexts for Reader Response

In their study of how students in interactive literature-based classroom settings constructed meaning through “grand conversations,” Eeds and Wells found that “talk helps to confirm, extend, or modify individual interpretations and creates a better understanding of the text” (27). Langer also explained that through literature discussions, students are



“encouraged to ponder their own understandings and move beyond to form richer interpretations” (26). In these settings, readers offered their own interpretations and compared them with the thoughts and beliefs of other participants. When readers are encouraged to talk about and talk through their personal responses to literature in this way, “multiple meanings, multiple perspectives, multiple frames” emerge and lead to a greater sense of what is possible (Bruner 96). In this way, discussing literary texts and listening to others’ responses both encourages readers to negotiate or rethink their initial spontaneous reactions in favor of a fuller response and supports narrative thinking. This kind of narrative collaboration is a major step in initiating social, ethical, and psychological growth for readers by offering them alternative examples that lead to a broader insight and a greater awareness about life issues. As such, the role that literature can play in the lives of readers is vast. According to Rosenblatt (37):

Literature may offer us an emotional outlet. It may enable us to exercise our senses more intensely and more fully than we otherwise have time or opportunity to. Through literature we may enjoy the beauty or the grandeur of nature and the exotic splendor of scenes in far distant lands. Furthermore, it may provide experiences that would not otherwise be either possible or wise to introduce into our own lives...Literature contributes to the enlargement of experience. Through the medium of literature...we explore ourselves and the world about us.

Reading literature may provide many positive advantages for readers, but in order for a reader to reap these benefits, they must engage and connect with it. What renders this engagement possible are the funds of knowledge and relevant memories that the reader has to draw on. As Steinbeck has said, “And, of course, people are interested only in themselves. If a story is not about the hearer, he [sic] will not listen. And here I make a rule—a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting—only



the deeply personal and familiar” (276). While utilizing personal experiences to engage with literature is not necessarily fostered within more traditional classroom settings, this “way of knowing” (Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan) and connecting with texts in order to understand and “read” the world is the foundation for meaning-making in women’s book groups.

Historically, women have actively promoted book groups as a way to help them create and maintain a literate culture (i.e. Blair; Heath; Sicherman). They used these groups to “improve their own lives through exposure to new ideas by reading and discussing classical as well as popular literature, current political writings, and religious texts” (Gonzalez 223). In these book groups, women stimulated their interest in different genres of literature, learned and shared new ideas, and discussed the social and political events of the day. Through reflective discussion and often debate, women in these early book groups generated ideas, interpretations, and hypotheses from written words and discussed the implicit meanings therein. As Heath (6) explains,

Their habits of reading and talking were intertwined with specific ways of verifying and thinking about knowledge, because they were at leisure to become a community of talkers who could go beyond what texts said to what they meant for action, ideas, and ideology.

Instead of just learning the skills necessary to be able to read and write, these groups encouraged readers to exhibit “literate behaviors” by which “individuals can compare, sequence, argue with, interpret, and create extended chunks of spoken and written language in response to a written text in which communication, reflection, and interpretation are grounded” (Heath 3). As was the case for the literate communities before them, these groups or “textual communities” (Stock), not only empowered their members, but also helped them sustain a collective memory and challenge the established literary tradition.



Participation in such book groups transformed the perception of reading as a private act into seeing reading as a social activity. Book groups offered women a social literate identity by providing occasions for them to collaboratively interpret literature, by encouraging new forms of association, and by nurturing new ideas that were developed further through collaborative conversations (Long). In these groups, reading became a communal activity that replaced the image of reading for women as a leisurely solitary activity.

Even though women's book groups met primarily to discuss the prominent writings of the day, they also legitimized and valorized certain books, certain ways of reading, and certain topics of discussion that were not commonly regarded by the larger scholastic community as "serious." The women who joined a particular book group also tended to share similar backgrounds and values with the other members in the group and therefore, often liked to read similar texts. As Long discovered, "reading groups often form because of a subtext of shared values, and the text itself is often the pretext (though an invaluable one) for the conversation through which members engage not only with the authorial "other" but with each other as well" (194).

Women's reading groups also tended to focus on literature and generate discussions about issues related specifically to women. In sharing their stories, women had the power to raise the level of consciousness about the social realities of their collective experience in order to change and improve it. Heilbrun added that in order to ensure that their experiences remained valid such that they no longer needed to suffer alone in silence "women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies" (44). These meetings also proved to have other unexpected outcomes as they also provided occasions for action through community service. The literature introduced in the book groups prompted these readers to contemplate a variety of different issues including pure food and drug laws, protective legislation for women



and children, and the establishment of public schools, libraries, parks, and healthy water supplies (Long). In responding to these issues and relating them to their own lives, many of the women discovered their public voices. They used these new found voices to become organized and lead the charge for change. In this way, many women who were members of a book group found it emancipating. These groups offered “a way of escaping the confines of gender and class by defining oneself through the many possibilities and other sources of fulfillment presented in literature” (Gonzalez 223).

Research on modern women’s book groups show that many women join them for the same reasons that women have been joining them for centuries; they provide a space, a forum, and an atmosphere of trust for women to freely explore new ideas, to learn about themselves and others, and to gain a better understanding about the larger contextual world (Flood and Lapp; Gonzalez; Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith). Because book groups have been shown to promote reflective thinking and meaningful conversations for adult women, more recently many elementary and secondary schools have adopted them as a method to help students become more engaged in their reading. Sometimes referred to as literature circles (Daniels; Hill, Johnson, and Noe), book clubs (McMahon & Raphael), literature discussion groups (Hart, Escobar & Jacobson), and literature study circles (Samway & Whang), this method for examining literature offers occasions for students to use exploratory talk to construct meaning and support their learning (Barnes; Barnes and Todd).

Unfortunately, a great deal of formal reading instruction has stressed that students be able to understand the literal implications of texts (Barr and Dreeben), or be able to respond “correctly” to teacher initiated questions (Mehan), instead of being encouraged to produce their own responses to literature and use talk to enhance their thinking. As a result, many students are not able to critically examine texts, consider other points of view, or construct thoughtful responses to literature



(Alamasi; Hart, Escobar, and Jacobson). Alternatively, book groups rely on reader-response theory and a transactional approach to reading (Rosenblatt). Such a setting promotes reading engagement, encourages authentic responses to literature, and provides opportunities for readers to explore these responses together.

Reader Response: A Transactional Theory of Reading

Reader response theory argues that personal involvement with a text is essential for a reader to fully experience it. Rosenblatt explains that as readers “transact” with texts, they bring to and take away meaning from them. In this way, “readers are not passive spectators *of* the text but are active performers *with* the text” (Karolides 8, emphasis in original). As readers “live through” this literary experience, certain interpretations, images, and memories are evoked by the text and as such, new texts or “poems” are constructed. The type and the import of the aesthetic emotions that are evoked will vary from reader to reader depending on “the life experiences, the attitudes, and the personal literary history of the reader” (Eeds and Wells 5). The text, however, will constrain the set of possible meanings that can be constructed as a result of this interaction. Through these experiences with literature, readers do more than just vicariously live through the text— they actually come to a fuller understanding of their own experiences as they compare the subjective view of reality found in the literature to their own lives (Rosenblatt). This comparison allows readers to reflect on and better understand what they value and what they believe.

This idea is also reflected in the work of Iser who argues that the “apprehension of a literary work comes about through the interaction between the reader’s presence in the text and his [sic] habitual experiences, which are now a past orientation. As such it is not a passive process of acceptance, but a productive response” (113). In this way, readers must actively apply prior experiences to the reading event to truly comprehend and interpret a text. Iser also elaborates on reader response theory through his concept of “narrative gaps.” He contends



that most stories cannot be understood or enjoyed solely through the explicit words in the text because all texts are filled with “gaps” left by the author. As readers read, they fill these gaps with their own predictions, hypotheses, or life experiences and “supply what is meant from what is not said” (168). In this way, as readers transact with the texts, they construct meaning through interpretations and reflections about the characters motives, and are thus able to more fully experience the reading event while also considering critically their own viewpoints and experiences.

In applying these theories into practice, the book group setting in this study promoted the development and use of literate behaviors such as negotiating, comparing, evaluating, predicting, reflecting and using their own personal stories in order to fill the literary gaps, transact with, and interpret texts, to encourage the girls to use the collaborative response to literature approach as an important way to interpret and understand the texts as well as critically consider their own stories. As such, they began to view their experiences and feelings as valid sources of meaning-making and knowledge. The following examples illustrate how the girls displayed the aforementioned literate behaviors and how they used personal stories to construct meaning in order to cope with a traumatic incident.

Findings

A Typical Book Group Session: Encouraging Engagement, Connection, and Community

In order to maintain the feeling of safety necessary to openly and honestly discuss some of the sensitive issues evoked by the literature, it was important to establish procedures and an environment that fostered stability and intimacy. This book group met every Tuesday afternoon for an entire school year in a small narrow room in the basement of the school. Metal bars lined the four windows that faced the street. Two



old wooden folding tables were placed together to form a square and twelve folding chairs, many with ripped cushions, were placed around the table. However, when the table was set with a bright yellow and red tapestry and the snacks and juice boxes were placed in the center, the room was transformed from a dingy basement into the welcoming book group space.

A typical book group meeting started with casual talk among the participants and Kathy for the first five minutes. This time was important because it allowed everyone to get a snack, relax, get comfortable, and share the events of the day or week. After the group mingled, Kathy would ask for everyone to stand up, and a volunteer would light the book group's ceremonial candle. Once lit, the group would recite the opening ritual aloud in unison; a poem by Joy Harjo (12) that reminded them that they had an important role in shaping the world because they were cherished members of it. They would chant the poem together: "Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you. Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you." This opening ritual helped the group come together to form a bonding sense of sisterhood. It also helped everyone to focus on being "present" for the book group activities.

After the opening ritual, Kathy would distribute copies of a poem that would initiate a discussion about a particular topic that would later be addressed in the novel they were reading. The group would read the poem aloud in round-robin style skipping any person who did not want to read. After the reading, they would discuss the poem focusing on confusing details and offering their personal responses. After this discussion, Kathy would ask the girls to take out their copies of the book they were reading. The girls would all be at different stages of completing the book, so Kathy would have pre-chosen an interesting section to read and discuss and would connect it thematically to the poem. A volunteer would summarize the plot up to that point, and the group would again read the section aloud in a round-robin fashion and share their responses through a discussion.



For the last fifteen minutes of the session, Kathy would offer a poetry-writing prompt that related to the topic that the group discussed in order to promote further meaning-making. Everyone who wanted to write would create a poem in response to the prompt. For the last five minutes, the majority of participants would share what they had written with the group. Before leaving, everyone would turn in their poems to be proofread for spelling errors and typed by the book group organization staff for inclusion in a published group poetry book.

The Book Group Context: Using Literate Behaviors to Cope with Tragedy

On a Tuesday morning in early March, I received a phone call from Kathy telling me that Robbins Alternative School was closed for the day and that book group was canceled because of the funeral. “What funeral?” I asked. “Didn’t you see it in the paper?” Kathy replied. “Luis Rodriguez (a pseudonym) was killed by three guys in the rival gang late on Saturday night and his funeral is being held today. The school is closed so that all of the kids and teachers can attend.” Luis was one of the most beloved students at Robbins. He was smart, funny, and very outgoing. Luis was also a member of the local neighborhood gang, and on that Saturday night, he and two of his friends were hanging out in their car one block out of their gang’s “safe zone.” Recognizing their car, two other boys from the rival gang pulled up next to Luis and his friends and started shooting. Luis was killed instantly and the other two boys escaped unharmed.

The next Tuesday, we had book group. As the girls arrived, many of them walked over to Kathy without words, but with open arms needing to be hugged. When Gloria walked in she handed Kathy a piece of yellow legal paper with writing on it. Kathy asked, “Do you want me to read it to the group?” “No. It’s a poem for Luis. I just wanted to tell him how I feel. Will you just type it for me?” Kathy held the piece of paper to her chest and replied, “Of course. That was a beautiful thing for you to do.” When Eva went to Kathy for her hug, she began to



cry. Kathy held her and whispered words of comfort in her ear. When everyone had finally arrived and settled into the chairs arranged around the table, Kathy took out a new candle and placed it in the middle of the table explaining, “This is for Luis.” Sandra took out her lighter and lit the candle. We all lowered our heads in a moment of silence for him.

Kathy then started book group with the opening ritual. After we read the poem aloud in unison, Kathy explained to the girls that feeling sad meant that they had a lot of love for Luis and that in her experience, each day that they live, there will be less and less pain. She also told them to remember the beautiful times that they shared with Luis and suggested that they try to be there to comfort each other through this tough and mournful time. Several girls then offered some ways that they were trying to deal with Luis’s death. Lupe and Maria explained that they tried to pretend that Luis was on a long trip to Mexico and didn’t have a phone. Ana coped with the tragedy by talking to her aunt who had also lost a son to gang violence. Sandra made a collage of pictures of her and Luis. Gloria wrote poetry.

After the girls shared their coping strategies, Kathy explained that she had brought a short story by Ruth Behar called “La Cortada” about a woman who felt “cut off” from her childhood in Cuba because she had lost the memories of her time there. As a book group leader, Kathy believed that it was her responsibility to “expose the young women to powerful feminist thought through literature so that they learn the language of power in order to use it for their own benefit” (interview, March). As such, Kathy chose texts in a genre that she referred to as “women’s literature.” These were works that were generally written by women and addressed the communal triumphs, hardships, histories, and experiences of women. For this particular book group meeting, she chose this story because it “evoked the kinds of thinking and responses that are useful to understanding and coping with a loss and will help the girls know how important memories are about a situation or a person” (interview, March). It turned out that the woman in the story was



traumatized when her family's driver "pinched her legs" on one trip to her aunt's house when she was three years old. She refused to ride with him again. She told her caregiver about the incident, but never told her mother. Looking back, she understood that she forgot her memories from that time, both the good and the bad ones, to protect herself from reliving the trauma.

Each participant of book group took a turn reading a portion of the story aloud. My feeling was that when they began reading, the sadness in the room seemed to dissipate as the girls began to consider their own memories evoked by the story. When they finished reading the story, Kathy asked, "Do you know anyone who is cut off or cortada? Do you ever feel that way?" Gloria answered that many of the memories that she had lost from when she was a young child often came back to her when she smelled something, saw something, or tasted something that triggered them. She offered the example that when she was a baby, she lived with her mother and her mother's boyfriend in an apartment, but after they got arrested for drugs when she turned six, she moved in with her grandmother. When she was twelve, she went to a party where she had her first "adult" exposure to marijuana. The smell triggered memories of her mother and the boyfriend smoking it when she had lived with them.

After Gloria finished telling her story, Sandra chimed in to share her story of returning to Mexico the previous year. She explained that her family moved from Mexico when she was five years old and she had very few memories of living there. When her family arrived at her grandmother's farm during the trip, the smell of the mud triggered a vivid memory of having to feed the chickens. She clearly remembered how much that chore had frightened her. She then said laughing, "it's no wonder that now I won't eat chicken!" When we all stopped laughing, Kathy shared that she kept a basket of pinecones on her desk to remind her of a favorite camping trip she took with her family, and Lupe told us that she often looked at old photographs to



remember past events. These examples led the group to share other memorable experiences such as first days of school, the day they began menstruating, and memories of family members and friends, including Luis, who had passed away.

Kathy then asked the question, “So why do you think she never told her mother?” This question sparked a new conversation about how mothers are not always good listeners. Below is the discussion about this aspect of the story:

Gloria: Maybe she didn’t trust that her mom would listen to her.

Lisa: She was just a little kid. The mom might not listen because she thinks the kid was lying or didn’t understand what happened.

K: What does it take for someone to listen?

Gloria: They actually have to care what you are saying.

Sandra: They need to try and pay attention to you.

K: Does anyone know a time when people go through something that you learn not to make the same mistake?

Gloria: Yeah, my parents. I won’t be like them. They never tried to understand us or what we wanted.

Sandra: My mom tried to listen and do good by us, but she had a lot to do. It was hard. I still think she was a good mother though. She and I talk a lot more now.

Ana: I think that it is important not to make the same mistakes your parents made. If you pay attention, you will be stronger for it. I won’t do that with my kids. Well, I’ll try not to (laugh).



Leah: It's hard though. My mom couldn't be there like I wanted her to. She had to work and take care of everyone. We just fought all of the time. She never had time to listen to me.

Lisa: I think most people fight with their mothers. We just don't see things the same as they do.

Kathy: But, it is never too late to forge the kind of relationships that you want to have with other people. If you know what you want, you can figure out how to get it. Remember that a relationship takes two people and it takes work to have the kind of relationships that are supportive and wonderful.

As this segment of discourse shows, through the use of literate behaviors that were learned and developed in this book group setting, such as extrapolating, comparing and reflecting, the girls transacted with the text by utilizing their own viewpoints and experiences regarding their relationships with their mothers to collaboratively consider the reasons why the main character did not tell her mother about the trauma that she endured as a child. In order to interpret the significance and fill in the story's textual gap, the girls attempted to use their own experiences to construct meaning. However, in performing this literary behavior, they also benefited by affording themselves the opportunity to critically consider the nature of their own mother-daughter relationships and possible future relationships with their own children, reflect on what good listening entails, and as Kathy prompted, think about how they can shape their relationships with others so that they can possibly improve the relationship in order to meet their emotional needs.

With only fifteen minutes left of book group, Kathy wrapped up the conversation and asked the girls to respond to "La Cortada" by writing about their first memory, another significant memory or relationship, or about someone special who had passed away. Some of the girls



continued to share their stories about past events that they remembered. Lisa and Gloria laughed about a story that they remembered from when they played together as young girls. However, after another couple of minutes, the room became quiet, as everyone had begun to write.

The topics of the responses sparked by “La Cortada” varied significantly. Some of the girls wrote about Luis or someone else close to them who had died. Other girls wrote about something traumatic or painful that they remembered from their childhood, or an event that occurred more recently, and some of the girls expanded on stories that they shared in discussion. Here are five examples of their responses to this story.

Listen to me

By Maria

Mom, can you hear me?
Don't just nod your head.
Something has happened to me today.
And I really need a friend.

Mom, I need you to start listening to me today.
Help me grow and feel safe.
Listen to my thoughts, my dreams, my sorrows. Make
time to help me through my mistakes.

Mom, please don't make excuses.
I know how busy you are.
But I am worth the trouble.
Before I get too far.



Sad Day

By Sonia

It was a rainy sad day
When I heard you passed away.
Now every day that passes by,
I stop and think of you and cry.
As I stop and think about graduation
It just brings me more pain,
Knowing you won't be here with us
On such a special day.
I know we can't see you but
I'm sure you are here,
Because now you're an angel
And you will always be near.

Untitled

By Ana

Sometimes I wish I could no longer remember
Remember the pain my father brought my mother
Remember the endless rivers of tears flowing through my life
Remember my mother's cries
While remembering my father's fist beating her senseless
Remember the way I felt helpless
I could have helped my mother and I don't know why
I could have done something other than just sit there and cry
How could I stand there watching my mother's dreams just die?



Memory

By Sandra

The pain. I remember it like it was yesterday.
The crying and the moaning I let out trying to give you freedom.
The pushing and the breathing trying to give you life
You don't know how much I cried.
I yelled in pain but when I saw your small red face—
How could something so painful and tiring turn out to be so beautiful?

When You Made Me Choose

By Gloria

Mommy, I'll always remember when you made me choose
Who will it be mommy or daddy?
I looked up at my daddy and saw the love in his eyes
I looked at mommy and saw love in her heart
Then I asked who my little baby sister was going with?
Mommy said, "Me" and I said then I'll go, too
To this day if I would have gone with daddy
Things would have been different
I still wonder.

As these poems illustrate, responses to the same piece of literature can vary greatly depending on the specific needs and experiences that individual readers bring to the reading event. "La Cortada" became meaningful because these readers were encouraged to fully engage with the story by relating it to their own personal experiences. This



story became even more meaningful when the participants of the group shared these connections through oral and written responses that in turn triggered similar memories for other girls. The literature and the supportive setting also provided a starting place for these readers to get in touch with and share their emotions during this sad time and gave them an opportunity to try to consider ways to cope with their loss and pain about Luis's death.

Discussion

Whether we read to escape our world or to explore it, ultimately, reading and responding to literature can provide a vehicle to construct meaning in our lives, or as in the examples used in this paper, can help us cope with and learn from our personal tragedies. In this way, literature offers readers ways to independently and creatively think through ideas as they try to make sense of textual situations and nuances. Further, book groups offer opportunities for readers to communicate their initial understandings while also encouraging them to examine their own viewpoints and consider those of other participants. Although it is important for all people to learn and practice thinking in this critical way, adolescents are at a stage in life when reflective and empathetic thinking would be highly beneficial to their psychological health.

During adolescence, people start to form their own personal ideologies or philosophies of life from their personal experiences and use these philosophies as a frame for evaluating events, making life choices, and guiding behavior (Muuss). As mentioned earlier, discussion encourages readers to grapple with and reflect on the worldviews or stances they take when interpreting the world and their experiences. Such stances greatly contribute and often determine how people define their "selves." Because people often talk about themselves and their beliefs when interacting with others in discussion, Wortham has argued that, "the self gets constructed through relationships with others, especially



in discourse” (145). In this book group, the girls were encouraged to develop literate behaviors, such as discussing and writing about different facets of their lives, to interpret the texts and ultimately construct meaning from them. Yet, more importantly perhaps, this process enabled them to develop a literate self that they could take with them beyond the book group borders and into their adult lives.

Additionally, adolescents need to be exposed to books that are accessible and interesting to them so that they are motivated and encouraged to make the connections needed for engagement. In classrooms that support collaborative learning through literature discussion groups, high interest multicultural texts have been shown to evoke the kinds of personal connections that are needed for genuine reflections, authentic responses, and grand conversations among students (i.e. Applebee; Au; Eeds and Wells; hooks; Hynds; Smith; Willis). Adolescents also need to encounter texts that help them develop the ability and confidence needed to delve into more intellectually and emotionally challenging material and perhaps outgrow their current points of view. As an example, Hynds found that when adolescent readers were encouraged to “bring personal constructs to literature,” they were also more likely to read for pleasure and relate more to issues in the world. In this way, when texts are meaningful and are connected to the experiences and needs of readers, readers are able “bring life to literature and literature to life” (31)—a truly necessary element of an engaged and personally meaningful reading experience.

When readers are engaged in a text, they are said to have entered the “secondary world” of the story (Benton, 69; a term borrowed from Tolkien). When entering this world, a reader may relate to characters’ problems and experiences, feel characters’ emotions, envision the characters in the story’s setting, and project, apply, or map his or her real-world knowledge onto the virtual story world. Through relating and connecting to the story in this personal way, the reader can elaborate on the story world from within it by linking his or her real



experiences to the storied experiences. In Beach and Phinney's words, adolescent readers are "constructing text worlds based on their real-world social experiences" (159).

Through narrative reflection, readers are able to engage personally with texts and are then able to react to the facets of the human condition with which literature is concerned. When readers recall and utilize their own personal stories or beliefs as a way to construct meaning regarding these textual themes, they are given the opportunity to critically evaluate their own understandings by means of analogy. Through this analogy, a reader is engaging in a transaction between the self and the text—the foundation of an aesthetic response to literature (Rosenblatt). This meaning-making strategy is not only necessary for making inferences about characters actions and motives and ultimately understanding literature, but it is also a key way for people to understand their own and others' life experiences.

When readers are in an arena where collaborative discussions are encouraged, they are in what Nystrand and Gamoran call a "discourse community." These communities provide a means for self-expression, a place where learners can sort out their ideas through talk, and provide opportunities for learners to relate readings to their own experiences. However, in every community, there are certain conventions or "ground rules" (Durst) that the members must adhere to in order to participate appropriately. As Wertsch explains, in every setting or community, "certain patterns of speaking and thinking are easier or come to be viewed as more appropriate...than others" (38). As discussed earlier, some of the topics that were explored during the book group session highlighted here were first menstrual periods, smoking marijuana, and giving birth. These topics may or may not be appropriate for discussion in other contexts such as traditional school settings, but it does not preclude schools from creating spaces and opportunities for students to share these important experiences.



As the book group examples illustrate, the ways that readers respond to texts depends strongly on the norms of the “interpretive communities” (Fish) that they belong to, on the contexts that they are reading in, and on their purposes for reading. However, what remains quite clear is the fact that, no matter what the context or the purpose for reading, young readers must be encouraged to make the personal connections needed to engage with texts. As shown in this paper, it is only by practicing literate behaviors, such as connecting the literature to their life experiences, that readers fully engage with texts and truly make sense of the ideas presented in a story.

Implications

Although the circumstances of this book group setting were unique and quite special, there are some aspects that can and should be replicated in more traditional classroom settings including: 1) Introducing adolescents to engaging texts with which they can connect personally; 2) Creating space and time for students to share their personal responses to literature, both orally and in writing; 3) Adopting a general philosophy that, as an art form, there is no one correct way to interpret literature—this will encourage more aesthetic readings of texts; and 4) Training classroom teachers to help students learn, develop, and practice literacy behaviors—that is, to use reading and writing as a means to gain a better understanding of who they are and what they believe as they become aware of choices and possibilities that exist in the world.

Since the ultimate goal of all secondary reading programs is to create classroom environments that help readers and learners utilize and apply literacy strategies to various situations in order to stay informed and make appropriate choices (International Reading Association Position Statement, 2005), schools need to promote and create “safe spaces” for these types of literate endeavors to occur. The most important aspect that made this book group environment possible was the philosophical



underpinnings that guided the Robbins' school administrators' decisions and set the stage for the school's supportive culture. Although the teachers were trained by the book group organization to employ some of the book group techniques and methods in their classes, such as choosing more engaging multicultural texts, facilitating more dynamic literature discussions, and encouraging students to use their own experiences as valid ways to interpret texts, the administration believed that their students would thrive even more if given an opportunity to read and write in a more authentic environment. As such, they made room in their curriculum to include a mandatory "course" on reflective decision-making that was fulfilled by the girls' attendance in book group. Carving out this time in the school day for students to work with a gifted facilitator who did not grade them on their interpretations, did not judge them for their experiences or choices, and did not force them to participate made all the difference in creating the safe environment that was the Robbins school book group. As this paper has shown, the value of providing an opportunity for students to participate in this type of authentic literary activity is not only possible for all schools to do, but is vital for students' growth and development. With this in mind, schools need to make room for authentic meaning-making activities for students to achieve success academically, but also, more importantly, personally, psychologically, emotionally, and socially as they learn to value their experiences and begin to see themselves as capable, creative, and worthy people.



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