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USING OUR PRESENT REALITIES TO SHAPE OUR FUTURES:

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF LATINO STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Education

by
Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens

June 2001

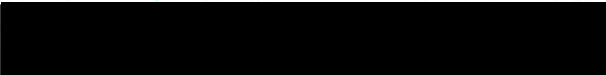
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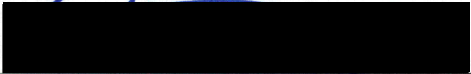
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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates how Latino high school students engaged in authentic literary analysis through the use of Latino Literature that made their lives visible, relevant, and valued in everyday life. It also shows how a successful literacy program was organized to promote reading success. Students self selected their literature, reflected in writing on a daily basis in their literature response journals, and discussed their interpretations through literature studies. Included in the analysis are literary responses by the students that capture the impact of the literature on their lives. The theory and research governing the teaching/learning of this reading program are based on a variety of paradigms, e.g. sociocultural theory, sociopolitical theory of education, reading comprehension, and literary analysis. It is clearly demonstrated how Latino high school students' literary potential is orchestrated and how they successfully become literary critics and avid readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Drs. Barbara Flores and Esteban Díaz who changed my life and led me to become a better teacher.

DEDICATION

This is for my students, who not only tolerate, but meet the challenge of my experimental teaching, and most especially, this is for Matthew and Forrest, with all my love. Without your patience and encouragement, I would never have believed that I could do it.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I knew them the minute they swaggered into my room, Joe, Ruby, Michael, Mayra, Ruben, and the others. Their stance and flat affect challenged other students, the system, and most of all, me, to try to teach them. These were the survivors, the ones the system had not yet devalued nor destroyed. They had someone at home who would kick their ass if they didn't come to school, or attendance was a term of their probation, or school was the safest place to go. They had outsmarted the system and were still here, these clever ones. They could all read, but were not readers. School had done a good job of teaching them to decode and bark words, but school had not shown them literature that reflected their lives, that touched their hearts. School had no relevance for them. They wanted to know if I was going to force them to read more of that "boring stuff." Some had not even had enough time with that "boring stuff" to find the magic of literature that could transport them away from their lives and their troubles to a place of hope and peace. Joe was one of those extraordinary students. He showed up about once a week to my alternative English class, held after

the regular school day for kids who couldn't quite make it in the "normal" school population. I can still see him hunched over a Low Rider Magazine at the back table, shaved head, carefully starched and pressed J.C. Penney T-shirt revealing "Lola" tattooed on his arm. Unacknowledged, I sat next to him, touched one arm and asked "Who's Lola?" "My mom," he replied in his usual monotone, firmly focusing on the magazine in front of him, making it clear I was not welcome at his table.

This class was small, but the girls in all three classes were in dispute over who got to read the new book I had just bought, Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruíz. I resolved the conflict by allowing one girl in each class to claim the book for herself by placing a bookmark in the place where she had left off. At the end of class, she would leave the book on my desk, forbidden territory for all students except the girls with bookmarks. No one could take Mona home. This system worked until I was absent for three days and came back to find the book was gone. Needless to say, the privileged readers were angry, and so was I. Then Joe, late as usual, sauntered in. "Hey, Mrs. H., I like that book." "What book, Joe?" "You know." And he pointed to the empty corner of my desk. "You lifted my book!" I nearly grabbed him. "Ah, don't be like that. I

like it. Ya know, her life's like mine." Something at school had finally connected with Joe. I had to negotiate with him to bring back the book. We agreed he could take Mona home daily after the dismissal bell, and return it before classes the following day to the corner of my desk if he wanted to keep reading it. He couldn't read it during class because the girls had it reserved. He agreed, and, for a change, Joe started coming to school every day. I felt as if I'd won a small victory. He was, after all, a man of his word. And then, no more book; Joe stopped coming. I made repeated trips to his house in a menacing neighborhood with threatening young men glaring at me as I got out of the car, until they found out I was Joe's teacher. I discovered he was staying home to protect his mother from an abusive old boyfriend, but promised to send the book daily when he couldn't come to school. That worked for a month or two and then he stopped coming altogether. I returned to the house and found he had been picked up for carrying a gun. Four months later, a letter arrived from Joe:

How are you doing Mrs. Houtchens? I'm just writing to let you know how I'm doing because I was thinking about when I was in your class. I know your class especially helped me. You helped me start to change alot but I kept myself down. I still got that book "Two Badges." When I got locked

up in the hall, I started to think alot. I thought about the book and how Mona Ruiz didn't give up. So I didn't give up. I'm in School right now and I got to stay here for 14 months...I'm doing good, I keep my mind focus. I should take my GED test in 3 months than after that I'll be working on my high school credits. I'm going to get my diploma so I could keep the book. I have not forgot our deal.

I know he will graduate. Joe is, after all, a man of his word.

Background

Jail is certainly not the destination for all of my students, but life for most is a constant struggle. My urban high school is in a progressively deteriorating neighborhood in the center of San Bernardino, California. It is large, over 2800 students. More than 70% of the students qualify for free lunch, meaning that their families live at or below the federal poverty level. Many come from single parent families or are being raised by someone other than their parents. Some parents are high school graduates, but few have attended college. Many students work to support themselves or to help with family expenses. The student population is fairly diverse: 57% Latino, 18% Black, 17% White, and 8% Asian, American Indian, South Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern. The Latino population consists of students whose families have

lived here for generations, many arriving to work on the Santa Fe Railroad in the 1930's, as well as those who have arrived since, including 600 very recent immigrants who speak little or no English. Regardless of the problems they encounter in their lives, graduation is important to the students and their families, but they often have difficulty seeing the relevance of schoolwork to their lives. As a result, the pressures of life and their frustrations with school often lead to their dropping out.

The Problem

Education, if not in a crisis, is certainly at a crossroads. Standards-based instruction and the California High School Exit Exam have raised the stakes for all students and teachers. Many students still appear resistant to learning and feel that school has little relevance or interest to them. In the high school English classroom and in the English language development classroom, there is a compelling need to improve student reading and writing skills. This need is substantiated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1999) studies, which show that California students rank last in the nation in reading.

Drop out statistics clearly reflect the lack of relevancy that schools have had for most Latinos. Nationally, 30% of Latinos fail to obtain a high school diploma by the age of 24 - the highest drop out rate of any group in the U.S. In their report *Transforming Education for Hispanic Youth*, Professors Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood and Walter G. Secada state that "dropping out of school is the logical outcome of the social forces that limit Hispanics' role in society." Schools do a good job of teaching Latino students to decode written text, but fail in the areas of developing comprehensive literacy and developing in these students an academic consciousness.

At San Bernardino High School, the freshman class consistently averages between 900 to 1200 students, yet in the past 15 years, we have averaged graduating classes of only 330 students. Most of the freshmen entering my ninth grade college prep English classes hate reading, have never owned a book of their own, and have no books other than the Bible at home. Using the STAR Reading Assessment every September, I find that they read at around the fourth or fifth grade levels, while most juniors only read at the sixth grade level. These students believe that a good reader is someone who knows how to pronounce correctly all of the words on a page. They are still stuck

at the word level, seldom seeing "mental movies," when they forget the words on the page and visualize the stories in their heads, losing track of time. I know that if they are going to make it to graduation, their reading levels and attitudes toward literacy must change. In addition to helping every student discover the relevance of school to their life, each teacher's task is to help students boost their reading levels so that they are reading at the appropriate grade levels.

Diverse languages and cultural backgrounds are frequently seen by staff and students as a problem, rather than a resource, which often contributes to the student belief that they have little reason to continue in school, and little to contribute to their own educations. Strategies must be found to build upon the cultural and linguistic strengths of all students, including English learners. Opportunities are needed to allow students to see the cultural and linguistic relevance of education to their lives. Cultural and linguistic relevance leads to empowerment because if students cannot relate new knowledge to their own realities, it has no meaning for them. Traditional "banking" models of education view students as empty vessels who come to school to be filled and teachers as those who deposit knowledge into students

(Freire, 1970). This model of education is destructive, creating students who are passive, oppressed, and accepting of oppressive policies. If learning were more relevant to students' lives, if students had authentic purposes for reading and writing, rather than engaging in artificial, teacher created assignments, they might find reasons to concentrate on improvement. Students must be allowed to critically examine their identities, to take risks, to redefine their identities, and to validate themselves. Classrooms must be organized to provide students with opportunities to read and think critically, to discover and share the knowledge they bring with them to the classroom, to relate new knowledge to previously acquired knowledge, and to allow students to critically examine their pseudo concepts in order to rethink and reform their knowledge and their senses of self. Reading and reflecting on that reading are ways to shape the critical consciousness of adolescents, but only if the reading grabs the students' interests by reflecting their realities (Freire, 1970). When a culture becomes too large and too decentralized for oral tradition to transmit cultural values, the culture breaks down and its children become lost. This is happening in the neighborhoods where my students live. Through literacy, cultures become more

cohesive as reading disseminates values and connectedness to its members, providing youth with direction and hope. By developing literacy in my students and helping them to find connections to literature which might inspire them and give them direction, I hope to prevent losing them to the streets.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Wertsch (1991), Bakhtin (1991), and Vygotsky (1989) provide the theoretical framework upon which to examine student interactions with literature, as well as cognitive and linguistic development. Giroux (1992), discusses the value of providing opportunities for students to cross cultural borders in order to become democratic participants in society. Freire (1970), reinforces this when he says that as teachers, "our job was to get them to act. Then we reacted to that action and used whatever we could bring to bear on it" (p. 44). Teachers must use what the students learn through their interactions with literature in order to structure additional opportunities for learning and to provide access to the cultural capital of the larger society.

Wertsch (1991) notes the inability of the discipline of psychology to coherently explain the overall functioning of the human mind. He states that this inability is due to the fact that modern psychologists focus on the individual, tending to ignore the influence of society, culture, history and institutions upon the individual. He believes that, although individual

diversity exists, no one exists in isolation to his or her environment. There are no totally independent, free thinking, self-made people. Wertsch (1991) believes that we create ourselves through action, and this action is determined by our sociocultural historical environment. The limits imposed by our environment are contained within our language. Since school is the environment in which our children spend the majority of their thinking day, we must examine the limits we impose upon cognition and language.

Habermas expands upon Wertsch and speaks of "communicative action", which involves more than one individual negotiating meaning through speech and action in order to establish interpersonal relations (as cited in Wertsch, 1991). Communicative action is determined by cultural norms, is based on truth and efficacy, and is selected to present a culturally acceptable image of the individual to the world. Communicative action is learned in a social setting, through interpersonal transactions. Communicative action is most effectively accomplished through language, and this language becomes a system for organizing our thoughts. This organization influences our actions and defines who we are.

Wertsch explains that the primary function of speech is communication. Communication shapes our egocentric

speech, and consequently, our inner speech. Because language is a symbolic means by which we represent our world and ourselves, we must engage in constant dialogue and negotiation in order to reach meaning. Sometimes the dialogue is with others in conversation, sometimes with text, and sometimes it is with ourselves. Luria states "One must seek the origins of conscious activity and 'categorical' behavior not in the depths of the spirit, but in the external conditions of life...in the social and historical forms of human existence" (as cited in Wertsch, 1991, p. 34). Wertsch affirms that when we try to determine who is acting, we must look at not just the individual, the action, or the means, but at the "individual-acting" with mediational-means, "tying the social to the individual, the external to the internal, hence mediated action. Mediated action is the irreducible agent of analysis" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 119). Bakhtin felt that, in regard to social languages and speech genres, dialogicality is always present and, within our own voice, we can hear the voices of others. When we hear the exact words of those we know, spoken as our own, we are "ventriloquating" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 122). Ventriloquation is a hybrid construction, where we either appropriate the voice of another, or our voice populates someone else's

voice. We can hear our own voices and values populating those of others, and students must be given opportunities to hear the voices of others, both those who are like them and those who are different.

Wertsch (1991) defines three types of language, all of which structure our minds and actions. The first is national language, which we recognize as English or French, etc., traditionally having a common linguistic, syntactical and grammatical system. Within each national language are social languages, linked to social strata. Within each social language are various speech genres, each of which are linked to a particular situation, and prescribe what is appropriate to say in that particular situation. This point is of particular importance to adolescent students learning read and learning to speak English in a school setting. In most school settings, standard conversational English and academic English is taught, but for English learning adolescents to be able to communicate effectively and become participating members of mainstream adolescent groups, they must also learn mainstream adolescent social language.

In his book Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education, Giroux (1992) discusses the roles of schools, teachers and education in the

development of citizens who learn by crossing cultural and class borders. He believes that "language constructs as well as reflects social reality; language develops out of a sense of difference...language always embodies participatory kinds of values" (Giroux, 1992, p. 14). In other words, students must participate in the observation of differences in order to develop their language. Their language is an outward demonstration of their identities. He believes that "teaching is a form of mediation between different persons and different groups of persons" and that "schools should function to provide students with the knowledge, character and moral vision that build civic courage" (Giroux, 1992, p. 17-18). He states that there is a "need for educators to take up culture as a vital source for developing a politics of identity, community, and pedagogy" (Giroux, 1992, p. 32). It is important that "culture is not viewed as monolithic or unchanging, but as a shifting sphere of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences, and voices intermingle amid diverse relations of power and privilege" (Giroux, 1992, p. 32). Therefore, teachers should provide opportunities for students to engage in a critical analysis of their beliefs and values in contrast with those who are different from themselves. It is

through these types of analyses and interactions that students come to understand and value others and begin to restructure their own belief systems and identities. Before they can begin their analyses, students "must be given opportunities to put into effect what they learn outside of the school...they must be given the opportunity to engage in anti-racist struggles in an effort to link schooling with real life, ethical discourse to political action, and classroom relations to a broader notion of cultural politics" (Giroux, 1992, p. 141). Students must be provided opportunities to remap their own cultural boundaries. They must be "encouraged to cross ideological and political borders as a way of furthering the limits of their own understanding in a setting that is pedagogically safe and socially nurturing" (Giroux, 1992, p. 143). Reading literature from diverse cultures and keeping response journals can work to achieve these objectives. Giroux does not recommend that students only be given opportunities to interact in order to learn, or that teachers are unnecessary. He does not state that all we need is to provide students with opportunities to read a variety of cultural texts, or to interact with those who are from different cultures, and they will learn. Teachers must provide these opportunities, but must also draw upon

the students' experiences and the teacher's knowledge to guide them through self-analysis and reformation. Giroux believes that teachers "should always be mindful of our obligation not to run away from authority but to exercise it in the name of self and social formation...that power must be exercised within a framework that allows students to inform us and to be more critical about their own voices, as well as to become aware of the codes and cultural representations of others outside the immediacy of their experience" (Giroux, 1992, p. 157).

Students must be provided opportunities to hear, interact with, and appropriate, the speech genres of many different groups. Hence, reading a variety of texts representing a variety of ethnic and racial groups is important, but even more important is providing students with opportunities to interact with groups and literature that reflect their own realities, thus validating themselves and their realities. Appropriation of voice and opportunities for using that voice until it is internalized and made a part of the student allow the student to self-regulate, shape their actions and recreate their identity. Throughout the process, the student's previously acquired speech genres are not replaced; new ones are differentiated, validated, and added as the

school socializes and acculturates the student. This mediated action gives the students a system for organizing their thoughts and minds, allowing students to negotiate meaning in a variety of social situations, and a variety of cultural contexts.

Adolescence is one of life's major transitional stages, between that of child and adult. The development of personal identity includes distancing themselves, but not disconnecting entirely, from their families. Part of this distancing involves replacing their parents with their peers who serve as consultants who come to influence them significantly. For this reason, they talk on the phone incessantly, socialize throughout a major portion of their day, and write notes to friends when they should be taking notes in class. Certainly, adolescents do not exist in isolation to others, to culture, to history, or to institutions. They use many voices to arrive at a negotiated meaning with themselves, with text, and with others. The voices of their culture, history, and others determine what they understand. Their voice does not exist in isolation. Their voice can mean, but only in negotiation of that meaning in dialogue with others. Every utterance is linked, either explicitly or implicitly, with the voices of others or with their own inner voice.

Because words are symbols of what they mean, they always negotiate meaning. Every transmission of meaning is multi-directional, being influenced by what preceded it and simultaneously, by the interpretation of whomever may receive it. Wertsch refers to this as the interanimation of voices. It illustrates the dynamic meaning of our utterances. Every word belongs partially to someone else.

For adolescents, the voices of their peers are "thinking devices" and carry the system for reorganization of their thinking (Wertsch, 1991). The reorganization of thinking occurs because the peer's voice is privileged. Peer utterances are arranged hierarchically in regard to influence, and as adolescents practice their peers' utterances and internalizes them, the adolescents' inner dialogue increases. This hidden dialogicality occurs between the adolescent's previous voice and the appropriated voice of the peer. Therefore, dialogicality becomes more hidden, but occurs more frequently as the utterance moves from the social context, to egocentric speech, and finally to inner speech.

The concepts of dialogicality and privilege provide a link between multivoicedness of meaning and heterogeneity of voice. Because we constantly use and appropriate different speech genres according to their privilege or

appropriateness to a particular situation, it would appear that our mind might represent a mass of ever-changing, disorganized thoughts. However, in Wertsch's tool kit analogy, the tools within that kit, or the many voices in our mind, help us organize our thoughts and express ourselves in different situations to achieve different purposes. In accordance with current needs, we use different types of verbal thinking, or voices, to suit different situations. All these voices coexist within us and we learn to use them when appropriate. The voices do not necessarily correspond to culture, but rather to their function. Vygotsky differentiates speech functions between individual and social functions; i.e., communicative activities vs. individual activities. Communicative/social activities serve to develop concepts while intellectual/individual functions help inner speech to emerge (or submerge). Bakhtin's social languages and speech genres coexist within every individual and emerge when appropriate (as cited in Wertsch, 1991). We do not create social languages and speech genres; we acquire them from those around us who we see as privileged. If teachers do not provide students with relevant access to the larger society, they will never be able to cross into the sphere of influence.

We determine privilege by examining the relationship of power and persuasiveness that the speaker's utterance has with the utterances of others. Privilege is the psychological (individual) judgment regarding which social languages and speech genres are most appropriate in particular social contexts. We are taught to master the concept of privileging with our first social contacts, those of our parents. As we internalize them, our parents' voices become the inner voices that regulate our behavior. These voices carry not only sounds and words, but also values. They lead us to positive, healthy growth, or cause us to become dysfunctional individuals. The voices we appropriate receive additional testing for appropriateness when we enter the socialization machinery of school, when the privileged voice of the teacher or our peers takes the place of those of our parents.

When children reach adolescence, their intelligence does not change, but they have developed to the point of being able to function at a significative or symbolic level. Competition for privilege occurs between the parents' or teachers' voices and those of their peers. Oftentimes, especially in oppositional minority groups, such as Black or Latino groups in the United States the privileged voices of peers and the neighborhood are

diametrically opposed to the voices of teachers (Ogbu, 1978). This occurs because one of the goals of school is employment, and for oppositional groups, schooling does not always appear to lead to employment. The employment reality for White America is often perceived by Blacks and Latinos to be systematically denied to them, so the goal of employment reached by acceptance of the school's voice is, for them, a myth. The teacher's privileged voice has been further undermined by the increasing amount of public debate by political and cultural leaders about the sad state of education today, and the lack of relevance of education to the goals of modern society. Schooling does not appear relevant to the sociocultural realities of today's linguistically or culturally diverse students, who by the year 2000 constituted the majority of students in California.

Because the privileged voice determines what our mind is to become, educators must endeavor to acquire the competitive edge regarding privilege. Educators must provide adolescent students with bridges to the forms of thinking that will lead them to success in mainstream society. Educators have not been very successful in this arena, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of Latino students dropping out of school, many finding gang

membership attractive. How can educators slow the loss of our students? How can educators build bridges between the privileged voices of adolescent peers, the unprivileged voice of school, and the underprivileged voices of English learners?

We must reject the traditional pedagogy that views teachers as the bearers of all knowledge. We must change the teacher's role to that of facilitator. We must create a community of learners where the voices and knowledge that students bring to the classroom are valued, analyzed for appropriateness, and explored. We must abandon methods that underprivilege the cultures that accompany our students to school and that view our students as having deficit backgrounds. We must adopt a teaching philosophy and teaching methodologies that value and celebrate the diversity of voices with which students enter the classroom, the voices necessary for success in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Organizing for Success

Based on current sociopsycholinguistic reading theory (Goodman, 1982) and the sociocultural theory of teaching/learning (Vygotsky, 1978), I started the Cardinal Reading Program. The entire English department at San Bernardino High School currently implements some form of it. At the beginning of the year, I administer a reading survey to all my ninth graders. The survey confirms what I already know about them: they have never read enough to fall in love with literature. After brainstorming why reading is important in our lives, I break the news: they must all read for 30 minutes a night, every night of the school year. They may read novels, biographies, autobiographies, or other extended stories. I want them to become involved over time with stories and characters. There is no time off for holidays, birthdays, funerals, or illnesses. If they miss reading one night, they must make it up the next night. If they miss 1/2 hour of reading in the semester, they will fail English. If they read 30 minutes every night during the semester, the worst grade they will receive in my class is a D. I tell them I'm so

serious, that if, God forbid, they should get into a horrible motorcycle accident and end up in a coma in the hospital, they can still pass my English class if their parents will read to them daily and let me know about it. I tell them that even the doctors will recommend reading to stimulate their brain, that reading is so powerful it can save their lives. None of my students are initially as excited about this program as I am. To reach the levels I expect from them, I know I must organize their learning so that they all meet success.

Because most of my students are inexperienced readers, they must learn and practice the skills of accomplished readers. A critical first skill is where to locate good books, so we brainstorm possibilities. The students always mention neighborhood stores, the mall, libraries, friends, family, and my classroom. S. Krashen told me that if adolescents have books within arm's reach, they will read, so I found a discarded paperback book carousel for my room and filled it with at least 300 donated paperback books. Students can take and return these paperbacks as they like. In addition, I spend \$1,000 each year buying books by and about Latinos, immigrants, sports, and other topics that might be of interest to my students. Some are popular adult books, some are young

adult books, and some are wonderful children's books. These books are on separate shelves in my room and students are free to check them out in an honor library system. I try to make finding books as easy as possible for them. In addition, students bring in books that they find and think other students might enjoy.

After we have exhausted our list of places to find books, we discuss how to discover if a book is worth reading. They all know to look at the cover and to read the title. Most don't know to read the back cover, the inside book flaps, and to read the first two or three pages before deciding to choose a book or not. After discussing these simple previewing techniques, I put a stack of books on each table, pulling heavily from my special books, at a variety of reading levels, and ask my students to preview them. This takes half of a class period. At the end of the period, they share their discoveries with the class. Not so incredibly, many find a book they might like to read. Then I let them in on an amazing secret - good readers don't always finish every book they start. I give them permission to abandon a book if they find one that is inappropriate, too hard, uninteresting, offensive, or if their parents would find

it objectionable. From now on, the books they choose to read for this program are up to them.

For those who don't know how to judge if a book is too difficult for them, I have devised a worksheet based on Sheffelbine's premise that a book is at a student's independent reading level if they read 90 words a minute with 90% accuracy (See Appendix A) (Sheffelbine, 1999). To use the form, a student must read aloud from their chosen book for 30 seconds. A fellow student, a peer tutor, a teacher's aide, or I will listen to them and count the errors they make. After 60 seconds, the student will count the number of words they read by counting backwards from where they stopped. If the total is more than 90, they continue with the worksheet. They then subtract the number of errors they made from the words they read and divide this answer by the total words read. If the answer is greater than 90%, they can feel confident that this book will not be too difficult for them to read independently. My students include a copy of this worksheet for each book they read in their literature journals.

One of the students' first questions is "How many pages do we have to read every night?" This, of course varies with each book and each student's reading ability. That's why I prefer to have them read for 30 minutes

rather than giving them a set number of pages to read. To give them an idea of the intensity with which I expect them to read, however, I have them read for five minutes in a book of their choice. This number is noted on the worksheet explained above. The student then counts the pages read and multiplies the number by six. This gives us both an idea of their capabilities and my expectations for their nightly homework.

To keep track of their reading, the students keep a reflective journal while they read. They keep a log in the back of their journals noting the books they have read and abandoned (See Appendix C). At the top of each page in the journal, students note the date, the times they started and stopped reading, as well as the page numbers where they started and stopped. In about five or six lines, I ask them to summarize what they have read. Before they can do this, we practice summarizing in class because many of them think that summarizing means copying directly from their books. After the summary, I ask that they reflect on their reading. Of course, we must also practice this, and I use the five strategies for active reading defined in our literature text: predicting, connecting, questioning, clarifying, and evaluating. To provide a scaffold or a mediational structure for their reflections, I provide

sentence starters for the type of reflections I would like to see in their journals. Some of these include "I think that _____ is going to happen because..."; This character reminds me of myself because..."; "I wonder what _____ meant when he said _____. Maybe he thought _____." Students are expected to journal every day while they read, or immediately after reading (See Appendix B). Journal writing should take them no more than 10 or 15 minutes.

Every Friday, the students bring their novels and completed journals to class. They read silently all period. Of course, few students in class are able to sustain their reading more than 10 minutes when we first start the program, so we discuss avoidance behaviors, such as falling asleep, needing to go to the bathroom, needing a drink of water, making noises, writing notes, daydreaming, etc. We also compare reading to athletics, that when training to run a mile for the first time, we often want to stop; we get pains in our sides, or are too out of breath to continue. If we give up, we never get into shape. We know that to get into shape, we should not stop, but should slow down, walk for a while, and then continue running. If we do this every day, we will get a little better. We discuss how developing physically is

just like developing habits of the mind. They both take practice and self-discipline. I tell them that if they find themselves engaging in avoidance behaviors, to recognize them for what they are, look away from the book for a few minutes, and then continue reading. It's the best way to get their flabby brains in shape and to improve their reading.

To motivate them even more, I share their previous year's standardized test scores in reading and language, as well as their STAR Reading Assessment Results, and discuss with them what the scores mean. Most are discouraged, but I promise them a marked improvement if they will follow the program for just this school year. Those who follow the program for the entire year have always shown great improvement.

While students read silently on Fridays, I read and grade their journals. I usually have time to conference with them about their books and journal entries. In addition, I can spend time with the most reluctant readers, discussing their interests, their past histories with reading, and recommending books they might enjoy.

At the beginning of the year, I ask the students to estimate how many books they think they can read in one school year if they read 30 minutes every night. Their

estimates range between one and ten. By the end of the first semester, they have all surpassed their estimates, reading between 15 and 36 books by June.

This reading program is merely a supplement to the regular curriculum. We still read stories from our anthology and novels on the recommended core, as well as Romeo and Juliet. The students are still responsible for other homework in my class, mostly writing, comprehension, vocabulary building, and research assignments.

The types of literature from which my students can select are important to their success. I make a concerted effort to buy as many novels and biographies by and about Latinos, immigrants, sports, and other adolescent interests as I can find. These, for my students, are not more "boring stuff." If I can hook reluctant readers with these books and they can read enough to become fluent readers, then they usually expand their selections beyond books that reflect their own lives. Most of my students have seldom encountered Latinos with lives similar to theirs in the literature that they read at school. Latino students are not invisible at school; they should not be invisible in the literature to which we expose them. When students find themselves and their lives reflected in the books they are reading, their own lives become validated.

What follow are excerpts from my students' journals as they discuss their reading choices. I have chosen not to edit their writing, in order to demonstrate the difference between their level of writing and their choices in reading, and to retain the original flavor. These students' families are all of Mexican origin.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Student Voices

Mayra's grandparents immigrated to San Bernardino when they were young. Mayra began her academic career in San Bernardino in kindergarten, was the youngest of five children, and the only girl. I had taught several of her older brothers and knew they were in a gang. Mayra's responses to Luis Rodriguez' Always Running included

This guys life is too hard. My mom threw my brother out to live in the garage just like him cuz she didn't want his friends in her house. He was real stubborn too just like this guy in the book. My brother didn't learn nothing from that and now he's in prison.

In another reflection she added

I cant believe how good this guy writes about his barrio. You can really tell how life is there and it sounds like where I live. I even know guys just like the guys he hangs with. They sound just like my brother's friends. I wish somebody would write about my barrio like this cuz I think there are interesting kinds of people there too.

Mayra did start to write poetry and short stories about her barrio, but I don't know how her year turned out. A dangerous set of drive by shootings on her house forced her father to move them out of the community in the

middle of the night. I am sure, however, that Mayra's life will not go on as it did before Always Running. Rodriguez showed her that Latinos have powerful voices and helped her to find her own.

Jose had only been in the U.S. for a couple of years, and I didn't believe that his English was advanced enough to read Always Running easily, but he insisted. His life and responses were very different from Mayra's. He wrote:

I have to finish reading the book, I just read five chapters. and I was thinking that night about my life and Ramiro's life and I saw a very big difference for example: I like the school, sports. I like to work and I like my safe life, and Ramiro's life is a 100% different, because he likes the gangs, drugs, etc. I would like to study at the college or the University, and this book has helped me to give value to my life, my school, and my family.

Books about real life can reaffirm even the lives of students who are not attracted to gangs. Jose graduated last year and is heading to college to become a teacher.

Not all my students read about gangs. Juana, who recently immigrated alone to live with her father, was reading Lupita Mañana. This young adult novel is about a young Mexican girl forced to look for work in the U.S. to help support her widowed mother. Since many of my students cross the border without documentation, they easily sympathize with Lupita. Juana wrote:

Lupe is very upset in a problem she had to face. It was men being treated more highly than woman, and not them being treated equally. But life goes on and stuff happens! Lupe is very strong and stands up for what she believes in. She is very determined to achieve what men can, to let people see that women and men are equal. Sometimes this book makes me fill like crying. I get jealous when I read about Lupe and her mother when they talk because it looks so special. I would want to have that relationship with my mother that Lupe has with hers.

Juana connected with the dichotomies my immigrant students are forced to live; the cultural boundaries they must negotiate, as well as their longing for distant relatives and a desire for an education.

Aida was left here by her mother to live with a family friend. While reading In Nueva York, Aida found ways to connect with the characters, even though she is Mexican, and they are Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican. She quoted "Chiquitín asked Federico 'You probably miss Puerto Rico, too, eh?' 'All my family is here, so I don't miss it in the way Lali does. But...Yes, I miss Puerto Rico very much!'" Aida reflected "That's what happens to me also but in another way. What I miss is my family, not my country. Most of my family is in Mexico." Reading this book made her feel less alone.

Luis, who had been in the U.S. for seven years, is the type of student who is easily overlooked in most classrooms. He never called attention to himself, and his work first semester of his freshman year was, at best, mediocre. I felt he could do much better. After a long conversation with his mother, she agreed to have him complete his reading at the kitchen table while she prepared dinner. She spoke no English, so could not read over his work, but agreed to sign his journal every day after he had read his 30 minutes and written his reflections. Luis' grade and classroom participation improved throughout the second semester. Between March and June, he completed fifteen novels, including Dogs From Illusion, The Secret of Two Brothers, The Old Man Who Read Love Stories, The Journey of the Sparrows, Shadow of the Bull, The Great Mom Swap, The Sword and the Circle: Knights of the Round Table, Dragon of the Lost Sea, Soccer Sam, Lost Armies, The Outsiders, Snake, Hunting Dinosaurs, Sacred Hoops, and The Night the White Deer Died. He abandoned The Wedding, finding it too difficult. Luis filled a spiral-bound notebook with his reflections, certainly more work than he had ever completed in one semester in his academic career. Dogs From Illusion was the first book he read. He was so enthralled by this book

that he could not keep it to himself. He and another equally reluctant reader spent their Friday silent reading periods outside my room in the hallway, reading the book aloud to each other. As a result, they both started reading more. Dogs from Illusion is a graphic novel about two young Chicanos serving in Viet Nam. This book was difficult for Luis, but he persevered because he found it engaging. When he finished this book, he selected other books about Latinos. While reading The Secret of Two Brothers, Luis wrote "I think that it is good to learn something about places like Mexico City like me I like to learn about the revolution and independence and I want to learn about Hidalgo, Villa and Zapata." Of The Old Man Who Read Love Stories, Luis wrote "I think that it is good to have a dentist on the town because it helps like in the town of my that there's no dentist." From Journey of the Sparrows, Luis reflects "I think that it is dangerous to be immigrating in a little truck you can die. Sometimes my dad pass in a car and in Tijuana they put persons in "La Cajuela." He also writes:

I think that Alicia must be sad of being in the migration. I know that because I have been their two times. The first one was with my mother and brother for five hrs. and the second one they caught me and my brother for 12 hrs. I was sad but happy too because my mom scape.

Luis often discusses what he finds different in the U.S. from his experiences in Mexico. About Soccer Sam, he writes:

I think that when you are in a new contry you see games that you don't know and then you play and if you do something wrong they started to laft. I didn't know how to play handball but I wanted to play and sometimes I made some mistaiks and Olivar started to laft.

Luis chose young adult books before tackling a more challenging book, Sacred Hoops. From this metaphorical book comparing basketball to life, he writes "I think that this book use good words that are like a poem and this is great so you can learn both." Luis continued to read a variety of books and even his attitude in class changed as his grade improved. His pride in becoming one of the most prolific readers in class carried over to his other academic subjects as well, and his mother noticed a less sullen attitude at home.

Not all the reading the students completed had positive effects. Sometimes feelings brought forth through the literature were uncomfortable reminders of the students' own pasts. Salvador, a junior, was very quiet, a loner. He had low academic skills and poor self-esteem. When forced to read, he chose a young adult book about two Asian sibilings trying to survive alone during a war. In

his journal, he quotes a passages from the book and then responds. The burden of sorrows life had given him became apparent in his responses, and in this book, he found powerful reminders of his past. From the book: "I went back to work the following day. We had to methodically clear out the dense weeds that sprang up between the newly sown rice seedlings." His response: "When I had my last vacation I went to work with my brother-in-law. It was a hard job but I have to work hard so that my body can get used to it." The next day, he quoted: "My sister Navreoun picked that moment to have an attack of malaria. Her teeth chattered and her whole body was shaking." He responded:

I don't like to remember this things but I got to do it. I only want you to know this... When I lived in Mexico I got sick of something that is similar to the malaria. I lost weight and I almost died. I remember that my mom took me to the doctor with just one vaccination I got cured. Since then I feel that my life changed. I hate to remember things from the past. Only bad and sad things happen to me.

From the book: "The day passed and then the next. Navreoun was still feverish and exhausted." Salvador's response:

I just feel that life hasn't been fair with me. Sometimes when I listen to music in Spanish, I remember the past and think of the present and the future. And the tears start coming from my eyes slowly. Especially when I think of my past.

The next day, he quoted: "He walked twenty-five kilometers on that road, a nightmare. One foot in front of the other." His response:

This reminds me of the things my mom tells me and my brothers. That when she was little she suffered a lot. She didn't go to school cause her mom died when she was little. There wasn't enough food. And they didn't have clothes. I'm sorry just to write sad things but that's my life.

In his final entry, he quoted "The harvest was almost over. What would they do with us?" His response: "Today I don't feel like writing. This book makes me remember things I don't want to remember." Tellingly, on the front cover of his journal, Salvador had expertly drawn the smiling face of a court jester, superimposed over his first name, with a sparkling smile and a large tear coursing down his cheek.

Chava, a freshman class clown who connected with Bless Me Última, wrote:

This story is like my life there parents worked hard in the field and try to make a better life for me to have a better education to have a better job. But where they live there is not that many people so there is not that many schools for the children but they still work in the ranchos with the animals. I like this story. I like to work in the rancho and in the field. I really don't know why but I do. I like to work hard.

In discussing his reflection with him, I was able to help him see the connection between hard physical work and working hard in school.

Mayra's appearance is deceiving. She wears the pencil-thin eyebrows, black outlined lips of a chola, and her father is said to demand respect by his tough appearance alone. She is a student who has a hardened exterior but excellent academic capabilities. Mayra devoured books about Chicanos and pestered me incessantly whenever she had exhausted my supply. While reading Locas, she commented:

I would never gang bang like Cecilia, I'm not into that. I like the dress code that now the little cholos and little cholas wear but more than that I don't think so I don't do the drugs and throw barrios that's not me. I'm not a chola.

She discusses Manny, one of the protagonists, and how he dropped out of school to gang bang. She reflects:

I think that Manny is not getting anywhere he has ruined his life for good, If he keeps on going the way he is probably he is going to regret everything and you can't change the past. Even if you wanted to badly you just can't.

Other teachers argue that letting students read novels about gangsters only lends credibility to the gang life and encourages students to join, but Mayra's comments from this book include:

I think that as for me I would like to be a gangster but now I understood that it doesn't bring you any good at all. A gang doesn't bring you an education, a good job. All it brings you is illegal things like selling drugs and all that and I understand that this ain't good.

Maya's reading choices continue to affirm that the gang life is not for her.

Homesick: My Own Story, is about a 10 year old girl in China who is going to visit her grandmother in the U.S. The ethnic hatred this young girl feels from her peers in China resonates in Sandra's journal:

And about that Bund. I think its mean, Not letting people come to that place. Well actually chinese and dogs. I guess what do they hear against Chinese. People call me chinese because I look like. And thats mean I think... Jean is scare like me. I guess she is not that kind of girl who likes to fight. And this part its like me. But I don't skip school I just avoid them. I hope her problems go away.

Without this reflection, I would not have realized that Sandra felt threatened by a group of girls at school; together we worked on solutions.

When he entered my class in February, Manuel had never read an entire book on his own. He lacked both skill and confidence. His first choice was an author's biography. He wrote:

I started reading the book. I don't understand nothing of the first 8 pages

that I read. The story seemed to lack an autobiography about this guy named Robert Ervin Howard. It has big words that I can't understand like cordiality, vitality, and sterile. I'm going to start to read another book that I can understand.

The next day he continued:

I can't find another book yet so I read another 5 pages. I'm not sure, but it's turning into a scary story. I still can't understand some words. I doubt that it was going to be a story about a werewolf. I'm going to start reading a easier book.

Two months later, while reading a young adult book he never named, he wrote:

I've seen Death I've been more closer to death than a doctor and trust me you want to kill death when he takes one of your own lack of death took David's little brother just seeing his mom cry he found out right after he came from dance lessons he knew something was up but he didn't pay much attention.

Manuel tried several additional "boring" books, until he found one that connected. He powered through this book, sometimes reading for two hours at a time. He identified with Linc, the protagonist, who was "Mexican so he is tough." By June, Manuel had discovered that he enjoyed reading.

Not all of my Latino students chose books by or about Latinos, but the power of choice still influenced their reading. For example, Jorge, a shy but studious freshman,

surprised me when I started reading his journal about a vaguely familiar, but unexpected novel.

Hindley is a jacked up man because he left his son, Hareton, a begger with no money or house. If I were Hareton I wouldn't slave for Heathcliff. Heathcliff is nothing but a user and abuser because he don't even like Linton, he is just using Linton to get his revenge on Edgar and Isabela... I don't think its right for Cathy and Linton to marry because they are cousins. I wouldn't marry or date any of my cousins... Cathy should listen to Edgar about the Wuthering Heights because she's just going to get herself in trouble.

I would never have chosen Wuthering Heights for Jorge. I thought it too complex and above his reading level, but when he had the power to choose his own literature, he, like many others, went far beyond my expectations. Jorge was not alone.

Anita, another freshman, chose a non-Latino book and wrote about it in dialectical journal format. Her reflections include:

I think she is compare herself to someone and she envy Amy. She thinks she's got the bad part other people get good part... I think her mother thinking what Jo is thinking, that is why she could understand Jo and rob her heart with her tenderest heart... I think Meg is fun life with her husband and children.

Anita used Alcott's Little Women to inform her own knowledge about writing when she noted:

Also I found out something in this sentences is that HE doesn't have to be capitalized but it is. I think the author wanted to make that word stand out strong. I've noticed she did couple more words in same way. . . I think the author didn't like to say Beth is dead because I've noticed that says 'Beth left the old home for the new' couple times in this chapter.

Although Anita had only been in the U.S. for two and a half years, reading Little Women was more than I would have recommended. Not only her reading improved, but she also used the author's style to inform her own writing. Once more, a student surpassed my expectations for them.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

These few student samples demonstrate that students who previously may have been regarded as unproductive, unmotivated, and resistant to succeeding in school are capable of becoming active, engaged readers. The road to success is not easy, and I am very insistent that they participate, often forming alliances with parents to encourage the most reluctant. The rewards are apparent, however, as they analyze their changing reading habits, view the unpredicted list of novels they read, and review the amount of writing they have completed in their journals, often filling two spiral-bound notebooks.

Through their reading and response journals, the students' cultural, racial, national, personal, and language borders are been crossed. Students are unable to retain their old stereotypes or pseudoconcepts because they learned. They were privileged by their choices and challenged by the literature to examine and interrogate their own identities, as well as their previously acquired concepts about the world. No student was quite the same person when the year ended as when it began.

Upon reflection of the changes evidenced in the students through their journals, I was reminded of a portion of a poem by Antonio Machado:

Women/men who walk
There is no path,
You make the path when you walk. (sic)
(Machado, 1977, p. 146)

When teachers empower their students by giving them opportunities to examine their own voices in dialogue with the voices of others, the students learn to walk, to think, and to make their own paths. And, as they find the opportunity to make their own paths, they create their own identities. Giroux (1992) reinforces this idea when he encourages teachers to educate students to make choices, to empower students to believe they can make a difference, to show students how to think critically, and to enable students to learn to govern. Schooling systematizes the individual and, as educators, we must ensure that the systems already existing within our students when they arrive in our classrooms are not devalued and obliterated, but are affirmed and interrogated, allowing students to redefine themselves as they learn. Teachers must promote compassion and tolerance, constantly examine whose history, story, and experience prevail in school, and allow students to examine where they belong in the larger

society. Teachers have the opportunity to give meaning to the dreams and desires of students and must take seriously what students say (Giroux, 1992).

One way to accomplish this is to provide students with the means to find themselves in literature, to explore others' identities, and to reexamine their own. Self-selected reading and response journals are one way to accomplish this.

Although becoming a good reader is not a life goal many of my students cite in their first essay for my class, their excitement shouts from the pages of their journals when they finally see "mental movies." They know this is a sign that they have crossed the threshold to becoming literate. I, as their teacher, have refused to organize their academic studies at a low level. On the contrary, I believe my role is to expect more, to organize for their potential, and to deliberately mediate their learning by providing them with structures to guide them (Díaz & Flores, 2001). In doing so, I believe that they learn to respect and value themselves and their educations. When given the power of choice over their reading selections, along with rich literature reflecting their own experiences and support in achieving success, these students surpass everyone's expectations of them.

Joe, Michael, Mayra, Ruby, Ruben and the others will continue to swagger into classrooms, but beneath their swagger will lie the realization that literature is about them. I know I cannot prevent all of them from becoming lost to the streets, but their awakening literacy will not go away. The magic of literature will continue to illustrate their lives, will help them escape their troubles and perhaps reveal solutions to their problems or the problems of their children.

APPENDIX A
NOVEL ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

NOVEL ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

NAME _____ DATE _____

NOVEL TITLE _____

AUTHOR _____

Ask someone to follow along as you read. They should time you, and count the errors you make as you read. They should not count errors you self-correct.

1. Read aloud from your book for 30 seconds.
2. Counting backwards from where you stopped reading, how many words did you read? Write your answer here: _____
3. Multiply the total by 2. Write the total here: _____
4. If your total is more than 90, this might be a good book for you to read independently. Continue with #5.
5. If your total is less than 90, this book might be too difficult. Try another book and start over with #1.
6. Multiply the total words you read incorrectly and write it here: _____
7. Subtract your answer in #5 from #2. Write it here: _____
8. Divide your answer in #6 by your answer in #2. Write it here: _____

This last number is your accuracy rate. If it is lower than 90%, this book might be too hard for you. You might want to look for an easier book and start over with #1. If it is higher than 90%, this might be a good book for you. Continue with #9.

9. Read your book silently for 5 minutes.
10. Write the number of pages you read in 5 minutes: _____
11. Multiply this number by 6. Write the total here: _____

Circle this last number. This is how many pages you can expect to read in this book in 30 minutes of focused reading.

APPENDIX B
REFLECTION STARTERS

REFLECTION STARTERS

PREDICTING:

1. I think (character's name) is going to _____ next because _____.
2. I know exactly is going to happen next! I think _____ because _____.
3. I know who did it! It was _____ because _____.

CONNECTING:

1. This character reminds me of _____ because _____.
2. This situation reminds me of a similar one in my own life when _____.
3. If I were at this point, I would _____.

QUESTIONING:

1. I wonder what this means _____.
2. I really don't understand this part because _____.
3. I don't get it! Why did (character's name) _____?

CLARIFYING:

1. I'm not sure, but I think this part is about _____ because _____.
2. I'm not sure why (character's name) did this, but I think it's because _____.
3. This word, _____, is new to me. I think it means _____ because _____.

EVALUATING:

1. I really like (hate) this book because _____.
2. The setting (character, occurrence) is important because _____.
3. This writer is good because _____.

APPENDIX C

LITERATURE JOURNAL LOG FORMAT

LITERATURE JOURNAL LOG FORMAT

When you start a book, enter bibliographic information and the date on this chart. When you finish, enter the date and whether you finished or abandoned the book. Be sure to include your literature assessment worksheet for each book in your journal.

DATE STARTED	AUTHOR AND TITLE	DATE COMPLETE OR ABANDONED

APPENDIX D
JOURNAL PAGE FORMAT

JOURNAL PAGE FORMAT

Keep your journal open while you read. Before starting to read, write the date, the page number where you are going to start, and the time you are starting. When you stop reading, for any reason, enter the page on which you stopped and the time you stopped. Your page should look like this:

9/31

pages 7-15

4:30-5:07

SUMMARY

In this part of the book, Gary and his brother were home alone. Their mom was at work and they were supposed to be cleaning the kitchen. Instead, they tried to do some science experiments and caught the kitchen on fire. Then, to put out the fire, they dragged the garden hose in and sprayed the whole kitchen with water. It was a giant mess, but it was funny.

REFLECTION – CONNECTING & QUESTIONING

I remember one time when my brothers and I were playing with matches behind the garage and caught some dried grass on fire. We put out the fire with the hose, too, but not before some of the garage caught on fire. My dad almost killed us when he saw what we did. I don't know if he was scared about what happened, was mad about having to replace part of the garage wall, or wanted to make sure we never did it again. I wonder what Gary's mom is going to do when she gets home. There's no way they will be able to clean up their mess.

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