"Making literacy teaching a priority in a culturally diverse classroom"

by Adrienne Rische

Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom has become an increasingly important priority for English teachers. In this piece, I will explore the difficulties that come with selecting culturally relevant texts and many of the misconceptions that teachers have about teaching literacy in culturally diverse classrooms.

It has not been long since I sat at my desk in my 8th grade English classroom, before the bleeping of the bell, complaining about the reading we'd been assigned for the previous night. Responses from my peers suggested I was not the only one who felt so. "This book is so stupid." "I don't get why we have to read this." Of course, I hadn't actually read most of the assigned reading. Looking back, I would assume that most of my sour 8th grade cohorts hadn't actually read it, either.

The text we were reading was a memoir written by the young Ethiopian native and former refugee, Mawi Asgedom. "Of Beetles and Angels" followed his painful and inspiring journey from Ethiopia to a refugee camp in Sudan, from which he came to America with his family at the age of seven. He shared how, coming from a family with a tragic history and no assets upon the arrival in the United States, Mawi worked hard in school, became a top-of-the-class student, and went to study at Harvard University.

When I was in 8th grade, I was probably failing math, maybe getting a C in history, and had no dreams of going to Harvard. Living in an affluent midwestern suburb, I certainly couldn't make connections to an Ethiopian family that suffered the deaths of friends in the midst of relentless fatigue, thirst, and starvation. I knew nothing about the war in Ethiopia that separated Mawi from his father for two years of his childhood. My 8th grade English teacher most likely assigned the text thinking that it would inspire us while expanding our cultural views and raising our global awareness. Asgedom's story is, needless to say, a brilliant one. Had I read it under different circumstances, I may have found it inspiring.

As a preservice teacher, I hear this all to often in almost every classroom I have set foot in: "I hate this stupid book" seems like a universal mantra amongst students in every grade. Teachers may listen to the disgruntled complaints of teenagers as a regular part of their job. Contrary to common belief, enabling and tolerating this attitude is not a job requirement.

However discouraging students' responses may be, ELA teachers maintain the important role of converting disinterested students into lifelong readers and learners. They are tasked with the seemingly impossible mission of "developing students literacy skills," as dictated by the 2010 Minnesota Academic Standards for English Language Arts. Literacy is undoubtedly an issue for teachers in every content area to express their concern over. Still, literacy instruction primarily lies in the realm of English and Language Arts. With classrooms ranging in diversity, it is becoming increasingly apparent that choosing culturally relevant texts is an essential step.

In diverse classrooms, it is important to choose texts that reach out to every student. Choosing books with characters and themes that students can easily identify with is key to motivating many students to read. In addition, choosing culturally relevant texts can aid in the development of each student's personal cultural identity. Still, choosing culturally relevant texts does not only advantage the students who share the experiences in the texts being read. My 8th grade teacher had this in mind when she had our class read "Of Beetles and Angels." Reading has the potential to go beyond what students have already seen, bringing them completely new experiences that broaden their understanding of different cultures. In short, literature has the potential to make students into culturally competent human beings.

Before addressing some of the misconceptions about assigning culturally relevant texts, it is important to first define what makes a text "culturally relevant." It is easy for many to reduce the meaning of culturally relevant to dealing with race and ethnicity. Classroom diversity, however, is not limited only to race and ethnicity. When selecting culturally relevant texts, a teacher needs to consider the "religious, ethnic, social, racial, physical, sexual, and other diversities found in contemporary society and examine the way all groups are represented" (Bucher & Hinton, 23). Teachers can also consider honoring youth culture, and learning more about the groups, music, clubs, etc. that students affiliate themselves with. Student diversity is complex, with multiple components and considerations to be fully understood before choosing a text.

In addition to these varying characteristics, teachers must not forget to take individual student interests and reading preferences into consideration. Teachers who fail to do so may actually end up being "patronizing in their assumptions about what students would be interested in" (Dressman, Wilder, & Connor, 2005). They will also most likely discover that student connections with the text will not instantly occur. Even when a relevant text is selected, it should never be assumed that the student would read the synopsis and immediately want to start reading. Literacy exchanges require time, and sometimes they may simply not happen at all.

Another issue to consider when selecting culturally relevant texts is simply gauging the quality of the text. This may seem obvious, but teachers who go through great lengths to find texts that relate to their students may forget to consider how *good* those texts actually are. Choosing a boring text will unquestionably result in a bored student, so teachers should utilize resources such as book reviews and book awards when selecting any texts to assign to the class or to include in the classroom library.

When getting students to engage in literacy activities, it is also easy to mistake the refusal to participate as an act of misbehavior. Teachers also need to understand that, for many students, reading is a source of frustration. As a result, students who struggle to read challenging texts may be discouraged, leading to the repeated decision of not wanting to try to read at all. This applies to any activity involving reading and writing. Creating a classroom climate that supports all readers can go along way in encouraging struggling readers to challenge themselves with new texts. A healthy classroom climate supports what Wood and Locius call a "collaborative environment." A collaborative environment is one in which "the

students know and understand that as a group, all are working to become more proficient and critical readers" (666). In a collaborative environment, every student has the goal of becoming a better reader, and understands that each of their classmates share the same goal, regardless of their reading abilities. They also acknowledge that every student may experience reading difficulties. Most importantly, they work together and support each other in the development of their reading skills.

Another benefit of a collaborative environment is that it prevents the disillusionment that many students experience when they are told that they will become better readers if they try harder and read more, but do not experience instant success. "A collaborative environment sets students and teachers up to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses so that students can begin to see not only their growth, but the growth of their peers" (Wood & Locius, 666). Making reading a collaborative effort, rather than an isolated one, can also encourage an inclusive classroom and support the growth of understanding between culturally diverse students.

Making literacy teaching a priority in a culturally diverse classroom is no simple task. It can not be reduced, stripped, and simplified if it is to be effective. Teachers who know their students, know the texts they bring into the classroom, and are able to create a supportive classroom environment that encourages learning can help create the foundation that students need to transform into lifelong learners.