

From *The Odyssey* to *The Kite Runner*: Creating and Implementing a Literature Curriculum in a Somali Charter School

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I was about a week into studying *The Odyssey* with a class of ninth graders in an all-Muslim (mainly Somali and Oromo) charter school in Minneapolis when I finally got the question. Poseidon was thwarting Odysseus' travel plans when Abdishakur¹ looked up from the book and asked, "Hey, should we be reading this? They believe in all these gods, but there is no God but God."

The particular community that started our school was a little more traditional and conservative than most of the Somali communities in the Twin Cities. For example, all of the girls wore traditional Muslim head scarves (or *hijabs*), and boys and girls had separate physical education classes, sat at separate tables in the lunchroom and separate sections of the gym in all-school assemblies. So a student casually quoting the *Shahada* ("There is no God but God"), the first tenet of Islam, was not a surprise. Because the school had just opened and my students and I were just getting to know each other, Abdishakur's concern about the book selection was not a complete surprise, either.

Not willing to take an authoritarian position on what was, essentially, a cultural and religious question, I dodged. "What do you think?" I asked the class.

Another boy in class, Mohamed, was regarded amongst the students as a junior religious scholar. He often had his pocket-sized Qu'ran secretly open under his desk because, in the tradition of *hafiz*, he was working toward complete memorization of the Muslim holy book. When Abdishakur and the students turned to him to "rule" on the appropriateness of reading *The Odyssey*, he calmly said, "Nah, it's o.k. The Greeks came before Mohamed, Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him."

"Any other thoughts?" I asked the class. Everyone seemed satisfied, so I moved on to the rest of the lesson.

Reading literature with students is one of the best aspects of my job, and choosing which books to study can be a complicated, albeit enjoyable, decision. In *The English Teacher's Companion*, Jim Burke writes, "We read these stories [in class] for the conversations they let us have" (57). The brief exchange I had six years ago about Greek polytheism with two young Muslim men stayed with me. In it, I learned a little more about how my class would respond to questions of faith in the classroom, and it added to my understanding of the community in which I was teaching. I also imagine that, in the conversation, my students learned I wouldn't be offended if they questioned my decisions or the value of a piece of literature, and that I would take their ideas seriously. As literature so often does in classrooms, the story opened up space for us to talk to each other.

I have been a high school English teacher in Minnesota for eighteen years, four of which I spent at a charter school opened by an East African community in the Twin Cities. I look back on those years fondly, in part because of the conversations about literature I was able to have with my colleagues and students whose lives were often very different from my own. In condensing countless hours of conversation into a few specific examples here, I hope to speak for the value of using literature to increase cross-cultural understanding.

However, I hesitate to write about my charter school experience because the stakes seem so high: I don't want to misrepresent my students or the East African community that welcomed me and treated me with esteem. Even with good intentions, writing about someone else's culture is filled with potential for simplification, stereotype or offense. Furthermore, I was a guest of the community; I cannot provide a true "insider" perspective. I can only write about my perceptions of my East African colleagues and students and my shared experiences.

On the other hand, I am driven to write about my experience for much the same reason why I try to include literature with Muslim characters in my curriculum: as counterbalance to the sensationalistic and negative images of Muslim people in the media. I believe that perceptions change when we have more images of people living their ordinary lives – learning, going to school, teaching – and reading books and articles can help provide those images.

Literature Selection Parameters from the Community

Our school's charter charged us to prepare students for college and meaningful careers in the community. My challenge in selecting texts for the English classes was to balance several goals. The texts had to maintain high school-level rigor, meet community leader-and parent-approval in this traditional and conservative community, and be accessible to Levels 3-5 ELL students. I also wanted the curriculum to include a variety and diversity of texts that challenged students to think deeply about themes that resonated in their own lives. I tried to select texts very purposefully rather than merely replicating the curriculum that I was familiar with from my twelve previous years of teaching.

The process of "learning" what texts were acceptable to the community was continual – as I believe it always should be. The second day of teacher workshop before the school opened, I was told to "start ordering books," but I was cautious enough to start by asking questions first. Integral to this process was the openness and thoughtfulness of the Somali and Oromo men on the faculty who patiently answered my questions and illustrated their answers with stories of their own educational experiences in Somalia, Ethiopia, Italy, England, Norway, Kenya and the United States. These men were also very articulate about the perceptions of American schools that were commonly held in their communities.

Americans – myself included -- like lists and clear guidelines. I kept asking, "What should I teach? What should I avoid?" hoping, I suppose, that I could create a checklist or rubric that would help me make future decisions more consistently and efficiently. What I repeatedly learned and grew to appreciate was that this is not always the African approach to communication, which tends to be peppered with anecdote, metaphor and nuance. So in anticipation of my readers' desires for a list, here's a greatly simplified version of what came to me as guidance and opinion from many, many conversations over the years:

Of High Value (in this specific Somali/Oromo community):

Family

Respect for Elders and tradition

Education for both boys and girls

College preparation as the path to success

Giving back to the community

Topics to Avoid:

Teen dating

Anti-Islamic rhetoric

Teaching Islam specifically

I discovered I was allowed – encouraged even – to teach a lot of the American high school canon. People might be surprised that most parents who enroll their teenagers in a Somali charter school still want their kids to get not just an equal education but also the same *kind* of education that “regular” American teenagers get. Ironically, for many it was that desire that actually sent them to the (culturally-specific) charter school in the first place. A common belief in the community was that their children were not treated like regular American kids when they were enrolled-- in some cases for years -- in ELL classes in regular public schools. As is probably common in many immigrant communities, there is great cachet in being perceived as being able to compete on an even playing field with native-born students. Titles like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Odyssey* and *The Great Gatsby* are staples in high schools across the country and including them gave our curriculum “legitimacy,” particularly to those students with older brothers and sisters who had attended regular public schools in the U. S. (As a start-up charter school, perceived legitimacy was important to earning community “buy-in” that would keep the school alive).

Because our students and families have lived in many countries before coming to the United States, books and authors with international reputations were also very well received. A student who had recently arrived in the U. S. with an excellent education from Kenya had been free with his disdain for American education (which included our school): students here were undisciplined, teachers were too casual, and there was not enough homework. The school must be a poor one if no white students attended it, he argued. Luckily, a few weeks into his experience at our school, I began teaching Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to his 10th grade class. The next day he came in, formally and respectfully as always, and told me that I had selected an excellent book: “My uncle tells me that this book is read in all the schools in Africa and that it is a genius book. I think you have chosen well.”

I also think teaching two of the most sexually explicit texts in the curriculum, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* by Naguib Mahfouz and *Sula* by Toni Morrison, met with less controversy in the community because both authors are Nobel Prize winners in Literature, a prize that is only granted to authors with well-established international reputations (a fact that I was sure to point out explicitly to students before we began reading).

Sexuality in literature was a delicate issue. Many parents in traditional cultures are very fearful of the highly sexualized teen culture in America. The traditional cultures place a high value on girls’ purity and virtue to establish their worthiness for a desirable marriage. The parents, many of whom grew up in places where the entire culture perpetuated this value, worry a great deal about the mixed messages their teenage girls and boys are getting in America. Most parents of teenagers in America feel some of the same anxiety, but it is amplified in conservative first-generation immigrant communities.

Why such intense concern about female virtue? There is likely both an economic and a moral concern at play. For a woman, getting married assures economic stability for herself and her children. Having a reputation for getting too close to boys challenges a girl’s marriage prospects in the culture. As the daughters become women, the community’s impulse to monitor their contact with young men often increases.

This vigilance can feel oppressive to those of us (students as well as teachers) who were raised in the United States in the last half of the 20th century. I remember the first day I taught a class of “newcomers,” students who had recently arrived in the U. S., and the boys sat themselves at the tables in the first two rows and the girls sat at the ones in the back two rows. When there weren’t enough chairs for the girls at the back tables, some of them stood, even though there were extra chairs in the front rows. I encouraged them to sit in front and they refused. I was startled and, I admit, dismissive of their desire for physical separation. Why wouldn’t they just sit in the front where they would have more room and where they had every right to sit?

The stand-off was resolved when one of the boys got up and brought the chairs over to the girls, who then sat down, crowded around the back tables.

At the time I thought the issue was about equality and I was irked that the boys got (and were granted) the “prime seats” while the girls, who outnumbered the boys, were over-crowded in the back. However, when I look at the situation knowing the cultural pressure to maintain physical separation between men and women, I understand that some of the girls – a few of whom were women in their twenties and married already – would be so uncomfortable breaking the cultural standard they had been taught (if they were to sit next to an unfamiliar boy in class) that they would have had trouble completing their school work. They perceived that their reputations were at stake.

So sexuality in literature was, indeed, a delicate issue, but the rules were not always what I expected. As you can see, the book list is hardly Puritanical (although I did have some fascinating discussions about Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”). It was the idea of *dating*, which seems innocent in American culture, but was generally forbidden in our school’s Somali community, that was most worrisome to the community leaders. There was greater latitude for books that contained references to sexual relations, particularly in the context of a marriage, than there was for casual references to dating.

This startled me when I presented *A Raisin in the Sun* to a group of elders for approval. I had anticipated that Ruth’s desire to abort her baby would raise flags, so I launched into an explanation of the context of her decision (and the fact that she does not have the abortion in the end). The elders nodded and didn’t express concern. Then I went on to explain how Asagai, one of Beneatha’s boyfriends, is from Africa and is studying in the United States in order to return to Africa to help his village. I thought this would really please the elders because many of them hoped our students would also return to Africa to help their people as nurses, doctors, or other medical professionals. I was surprised when their faces turned grim at this point in my presentation. Finally, one of them stopped me, “How is this man related in the play? He is a girl’s boyfriend? That is not acceptable. I think you can find a better book to read.”

Romeo and Juliet was rejected on similar grounds. Young lovers defying their parents’ traditions and meeting each other secretly – even when these behaviors lead to tragedy – were not the images our parents wanted presented to their children in school. The community did not want students glorifying the Western practice of dating, and they worked very hard to counteract the notion in America that dating was a normal aspect of teenage life.

A few words regarding “book banning”

I was fine with taking *Romeo and Juliet* off the list, but I understand why other teachers might be more upset by the elders’ rejection. They might argue the “cultural trump card,” thinking, “These books are classics. This is what we teach in the United States, so people who

come here from other countries should get on board.” Or they might be more upset on the basis of perceived authority, thinking, “Who do the elders think they are to tell me, an experienced, licensed English teacher what books to choose?” Or, seeing no continuum between “no restrictions” and censorship, might ask, “Are they banning books now?” I have colleagues who think I’m a coward for allowing parents and their representatives to dictate what I teach, but I believe local control is an important part of American education. Especially as a new teacher in a new setting, I wanted to know what books would be accepted by the community in which I was teaching. I believe parents have a right to participate in decisions about what is taught in schools. I believe that what texts work with some students in some parts of the country or eras in history aren’t as meaningful to students in other parts of the country or at other times. Effective teaching is greatly enhanced by skillful text selection, matching text to students’ needs.

Am I a coward for not fighting the conservative ban on *Romeo and Juliet*? No. I wanted to get along and build trust with the community and, frankly, I didn’t feel passionately about *Romeo and Juliet*. I did, however, want the kids to read Shakespeare and to puzzle through the difficult language and to feel wonder at how something written hundreds of years ago in iambic pentameter can still be relevant to our lives today. Shakespeare wrote a lot of plays; I didn’t have to squander cachet over the Montagues and the Capulets. I decided to teach *The Merchant of Venice* instead.

But *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about a proud African-American family that values education and following dreams and which includes an articulate, respectable African immigrant, was worth fighting for, especially if it pushed my East African students to re-think their own prejudices about African-American people. So I backed off initially when it was rejected by the elders, but knew I’d return and ask about that text again once I’d gained people’s trust.

The Reading List

Of course, creating the reading list is only one part of creating a high school English curriculum and what follows is only the list of major texts (novels, memoirs, plays, a complete short story collection, and an epic poem), organized by full-year course. Although every English class focused on reading, writing, speaking, critical viewing and critical thinking, I tried to develop a unique identity for each course through literature selection and organization.

Major texts in the curriculum

English I (9th grade equivalent), organized by genre and theme

The Odyssey by Homer

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

English II (10th grade equivalent), mostly international authors, examined thematically

The Journey of Ibn Fattouma by Naguib Mahfouz

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

The Director and Other Stories by Leila Abouzaid

American Literature (11th grade equivalent), organized chronologically

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

College in the Schools: Basic Writing (now Writing Studio) (1 semester 12th grade)

A Choice of Weapons by Gordon Parks

Lucky Child: A daughter of Cambodia reunites with the sister she left behind by Loung Ung

College in the Schools: Introduction to Literature (1 semester 12th grade), Modern and Contemporary Literature, introduction of multiple literary critical theories

The Awakening by Kate Chopin

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

The Kite Runner by Khalid Hosseini

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

Sula by Toni Morrison

A Place Where the Sea Remembers by Sandra Benitez

We also offered 12th grade World Literature, which I did not teach, and a one semester English elective called "Writing for Publication" that did not have a literature component.

Student Reactions to Specific Texts

Some of the texts I brought to my students were already familiar to me from having taught them in other settings, and some of them were new. In either case, the conversations they let us have helped us to share our cultures and viewpoints with one another.

***The Odyssey* by Homer:** The adventure always works, no matter where I teach. Who doesn't cringe with horror and surprise when the Cyclops' eye sizzles and melts at the end of Odysseus' hot spike? What child raised by a single mom doesn't feel his throat tighten a bit when long-lost Odysseus reveals himself to his son, Telemachus, and wraps it in an apology, saying, "I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he"? I have grown to love teaching *The Odyssey* during the first term of ninth grade and likening Odysseus's travels to the long adventurous journey of high school.

At the charter school, *The Odyssey* was my first text. We talked about gods and religion, about loyalty and things that frighten us, about the difference between confidence and hubris, about hospitality and gods-in-disguise. I also learned that showing a movie clip, particularly one that depicted "pagan gods," to devout Muslim students during the first week of Ramadan isn't very sensitive. I learned that female students in the charter school, much like their regular public school counterparts, are exasperated at Odysseus' unrepentant affairs with various nymphs while he expects Penelope to virtuously wait twenty years for his possible return.

I followed the study of the text with a writing project where the students had to interview an elder about his/her own "life odyssey" and write a biographical essay about it. This also encouraged many interesting conversations in class, as well as between students and elders. Most memorably, one team of boys interviewed one of the boys' moms. All three speak Somali, English and Arabic, and when I listened to the interview they recorded, I discovered that they switched back and forth in all three languages. Luckily for me, the following exchange was in English. The boys asked, "If you could tell people back home in Somalia one thing that you have learned since coming to America, what would you tell them?" The mother replied, "I would tell them that in America people of all different kinds can live side by side in peace and not bother each other. This is what is great about America."

The Merchant of Venice: Perhaps as a reaction to the prohibition of *Romeo and Juliet*, I chose to teach Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which is often prohibited in schools because of its derogatory and stereotypical depiction of Shylock, the Jew. I guessed – and was right – that the depiction of religious persecution of a minority would resonate with Muslim American students in a Post-9/11 world. I used PBS's excellent website about the play to front-load historical context before we began reading (Rogers). Students learned about the persecution of the Jews in Elizabethan England (and continental Europe) and compared and contrasted it with religious persecution of Muslims and Jews in contemporary times, a topic in which many of them already had knowledge and interest.

As we read, my students talked a lot about Shylock and were extremely sympathetic to his plight. They were outraged at the “happy” ending of the play when the young couples force Shylock to convert to Christianity. One could argue that teaching this play fanned some anti-Christian sentiment in a Muslim community, but it didn't feel that way to me. I was happy to see Muslim students, some of whom had previously listened to Holocaust denial rhetoric on the Internet, rooting for Shylock and learning about the historic oppression of the Jews in Europe. I liked listening to a teenage girl wearing a full *hijab* presenting a convincing, memorized rendition of Shylock's “Hath not a Jew hands?” speech.

To extend the literature, I had students compete in teams, debating topics such as “Shylock is a villain in *The Merchant of Venice*” and “Justice is served at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*.” Debates and academic competition are very common in African schools and were quite popular with both students and elders. As it is in any school, having to take a reasoned stance that is counter to one's own opinion is both a frustrating and enlightening experience for students.

The Old Man and the Sea: I first brought *The Old Man and the Sea* into the American Literature course when I had a class that was 75% male and where most of the class had reading levels below sixth grade. Admittedly, the girls didn't like it much, but the boys really engaged with it. The themes of manhood and tenacity, of pride in completing a difficult task and setting your own standards while others mock you, all seemed to resonate with them. The boys in the class were in their late teens. Some lived in neighborhoods where they got involved in gang activity, and few of the boys lived with their fathers. Some were in the country on their own, living with distant relatives. One young man had even fought his way to a refugee camp on his own, avoiding lions along the way. In coming to America, or in continuing to attend school when “thug life” was knocking at their door, these boys knew what it meant to be laughed at by other men. They respected the Old Man's quiet resolution and steady progress toward a challenging goal. They liked his gentleness, wisdom, and the respect with which he treated his young friend, Manolo. It's a book that honors positive male characteristics that are rarely present in American media directed at teenage boys and believe my male students craved.

The level of empathy and engagement was clear to me when some of the boys were visibly upset when the sharks came and destroyed the Old Man's long-sought fish (one boy shut his book and turned to the wall while I read this part out loud) but by the end of the book, some said they liked that the ending wasn't perfect because it was more realistic.

The Kite Runner and Persepolis: Both *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (a autobiographical graphic novel about an Iranian girl in the

1980's) have Muslim characters and are being taught in more and more high schools, which is wonderful. There aren't enough books in the literary canon with Muslim characters. However, my most conservative Muslim students had complicated reactions to images of Muslim characters in these texts.

I bristled when my students wrote that Baba (in *Kite Runner*) and Marji's family (in *Persepolis*) are "not real Muslims" because they question religious scholars and drink alcohol and do things that are prohibited by the religion. Perhaps because of my own inclination towards religious relativism, this comment struck me as exceedingly judgmental. I wanted to say, "Who are you to determine who is and who is not a 'real Muslim'?" In passing this judgment, how are you different from the leaders of the oppressive governments that are persecuting the Afghans and Iranians in the books?" But instead of voicing my judgment, I asked questions and listened, a strategy I found myself relying on in many tricky situations and which served me well.

Another time when I felt caught between my own religious beliefs and one of my student's beliefs happened one day when I stumbled into a conversation a group of students was having in the hallway about the stoning scene in *The Kite Runner*. One of the brightest girls in the class, who was also very serious about learning Islam, was explaining why the stoning of the adulterous woman was proper. I remember the shock I felt while listening to her. I was tempted to jump into the conversation and say, "There is no context in which stoning another human being is morally justified! Do you even believe what you're saying?" Instead, I reminded myself to listen and to try to understand her point of view without letting my own re-discovered prejudices get in the way. I still don't agree with the girl's stance, and I don't understand enough about the *hadith* she cited to summarize her argument authentically here, but I'm glad that I held my tongue at that moment because it also gave me the opportunity to hear other Muslim students question her position and interpretation, too. This was one of the most difficult religious conversations I witnessed amongst my students and I am glad that it happened after I had known the student for three years and we already had a good relationship. I'm afraid if it had happened earlier, I would have let it negatively influence my entire perception of her.

A perspective that the same student had about the books I could accept more easily was that traditional "real Muslims" (as the kids say) in *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* are portrayed as evil while the main characters of the books are less-conservative, more "Western" Muslims and are therefore easier for Western readers to identify with. This made me think about my own reactions to her conservatism.

There's an incredible need for Western people to feel kinship and shared experience with Muslim people, which is why books like *The Kite Runner* and *Persepolis* have sold well in Western countries. But I could see my students' desire to push Western people further, to understand more about the devout Muslim, not just the assimilated, "cool" Western Muslim. I understood how my devout, *hijab*-wearing, Qu'ran-reciting students wanted to see characters more like themselves as heroes rather than villains in the books. So I struggled between wanting to push them toward a more accepting, less judgmental stance on Marji and Baba, and recognizing their perspective that the books perpetuate the stereotype that devout Muslims are dangerous.

One of the concerns my students had was about the *hijab*. In *Persepolis*, Marji and her mom are angry when they forced to cover their heads in Iran. My female students recognized that Marji's experience was common for Muslim women in some countries, but the book perpetuates the stereotype that all veiled Muslim women are oppressed. They explained their own reasons for wearing the *hijab* and vociferously denounced the idea that Islam forces women

to cover. “Her government forced her to wear the veil, not the religion,” they explained. In the years since I’ve left the charter school, I have continued to teach *Persepolis*, but I always also show a short video created by a group of Muslim girls from the St. Paul schools called “What’s With the Hijab?” wherein the girls each explain why they do or do not wear a hijab (TVByGirls). I agree with my Muslim students that it’s important for non-Muslim people to see that there is diversity in the practices of Muslim women around the world.

Other examples of anti-conservative bias come from *The Kite Runner*. In it, Amir and his father are Muslim, but they aren’t very religious. Baba denounces religious leaders early in the book when he teaches Amir his own moral code, saying: “Now, no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft” (17). Amir isn’t very devout as a result. He only starts praying when his father is dying of cancer (my students chuckled knowingly at this and one student explained to me that this often happens in Islam. I assured her that it is common in Christianity, too). Maybe because they are fallible and non-observant, the Western reader is drawn to Amir and Baba and sees them as complex, empathetic and frustrating characters. On the other hand, the evil character of the book is Assef, who becomes a member of the Taliban and perpetuates atrocities (the stoning of adulterers and the sexual exploitation of children) under the guise of Islam.

My students’ concern about the book is that the character who is associated most closely with Islam by the reader is an evil fanatic, and the more Westernized, secular characters (Amir, Baba, Soraya) are the more sympathetic protagonists. Some students pointed out that Hassan and Ali, the faithful and tragic servants, were the most morally upright characters and they were devout Muslims, but I agreed with them that an American reader who is predisposed to associate Muslim men with terrorists is more likely to remember Assef’s evil actions and associate them with Muslim stereotypes than Ali and Hassan’s quiet devotion to Allah, peace, and goodness.

When teaching *The Kite Runner*, I think it’s important to open up a thoughtful conversation with students about the diversity of Muslim characters in the novel. I have asked students to place the characters on a continuum of spiritual devotion in order to spark this discussion. Inevitably, some students go back to the text to prove that Assef’s evil is not truly based in his religion, but in a predatory desire for power.

Lucky Child: A book that was a surprise to me was *Lucky Child* by Loung Ung that I taught as part of the University of Minnesota’s College in the Schools Basic Writing course. It is a memoir written by a child survivor of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge. (Ung’s first book was the more widely-read *First They Killed My Father*). In *Lucky Child*, Ung has left Cambodia for America with her older brother and sister-in-law, but she has to leave behind her beloved older sister, Chou. Ung describes her own experiences in American schools, her struggle to find balance between being Cambodian and being American, and the pain of growing up without her extended family. She alternates chapters about her life with chapters about her sister’s life in rural Cambodia. The sister frequently fears gunfire, works long days, and watches family members suffer with no medical care, but she is connected to members of her extended family and ancestral culture. In the end, we talk about which of the sisters is really the “Lucky Child,” and there is good evidence to support either choice.

There were strong positive reactions to this book in my classes. The students who had grown up in Africa or the Middle East seemed to understand and relate to Chou’s (the Cambodian sister’s) life of family and work and fear as well as Loung’s descriptions of trying to understand and fit in to American culture. The students who had lived in the U. S. all their lives

were very curious about Chou's life and the book sparked interesting conversations between students of different life experiences in my own class. One of my Somali students who grew up in the U. S. quietly confided in me one day that she liked our discussion of the book and hearing about the other kids' African experiences, because she had always too shy to ask her mom or her older sisters about their old lives in Somalia. In this case, reading a book about southeast Asia helped a young African girl learn about her own cultural history.

Maybe more importantly, the book describes the after-effects of trauma. Some of my students grew up in Somalia in the 1990's and were infants when the Civil War broke out. Those who stayed in Somalia the longest had watched people die; they remember hunger; some of them have lasting physical injuries. All of the students know family members who continue to suffer from experienced traumas. However, members of the East African community are often resistant to seeking mental health counseling. It is more common to turn to religion, family support, or denial to cope with after effects of trauma.

I never pushed students to tell me specifically about their own traumatic experiences, but the book opened up a discussion amongst the students about what is otherwise an uncomfortable topic in their community. We could talk about Loung and Chou and their families without (what one of my teaching colleagues calls) "picking off the scabs" of the students' own traumas. The classroom and the literature became a safe place to explore a difficult and important topic.

I have found this book equally effective with native-born American students. I read the book more recently in a mostly white suburban high school and, when we analyzed the sisters' responses to trauma, several of the students related stories of relatives who have returned from active duty in the military and they recognized some of the same types of traumatic after-effects. The conversations this memoir let us have reached into the students' real world.

Caveats and Disclaimers

One of my concerns about writing an article about teaching literature in the specialized environment of a Somali charter school is that I don't want readers to walk away thinking that I've created an "approved reading list for Muslim kids." I can tell you what parameters I was given, what choices I made, and what happened. Please keep in mind that the parameters I was given were from casual discussions with individual people who held sway in the particular community in which I worked. For example, although I was asked not to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, I am sure there are many Muslim families who haven't minded in the least when their kids read it in school. Similarly, I'm sure that some Muslim scholars would have other responses to Abdishakur's question than the one 15-year-old Mohamed gave him. The Muslim world is incredibly large and diverse; furthermore, East African culture permeated our school's culture, and I am not sure (nor were my students) what aspects of their culture were Muslim and which were Somali. Even within the Twin Cities' Somali culture, there is a wide variety of customs and viewpoints.

I also want to acknowledge that I am only dealing here with the major texts I used over a four-year period. The entire English curriculum included expository writing, researching, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, standardized test-taking strategies, creative and personal writing. The entire reading list also included poetry, short stories, and non-fiction, none of which are included in this article.

Final Thoughts

First, in all settings (no matter how mundane you may think yours is), teachers need to listen to their communities and their students and try to make a wide variety of literature relevant to them. This article is a practical example of how I tried to do that in one specific setting. Administrators can help achieve this goal by drawing teachers and community members together on committees and volunteer projects that will foster conversations, both formal and casual. When it's possible, helping a teacher to fund a new classroom set of paperbacks mid-year can also support that teacher's ability to experiment with new texts that might address a perceived need. My students and I were the happy recipients of this kind of fiscal flexibility from my charter school administrators. Teachers from other buildings and districts can also help each other out by lending class sets of books that aren't currently being used to each other. I was able to experiment with some books because I had friends in other schools who were willing to lend me their copies for a few weeks.

Second, many teachers across Minnesota have Muslim and East African students in their classes but don't have the flexibility that I did to investigate these students' cultural reactions to the literature. In my charter school classroom, I was the "odd one out" and the students had each others' (and their school's) support in trying to explain their culture to me, and as a result, I was able to comfortably ask genuine questions about culture. I also had well-educated, multi-lingual adult colleagues who lived in the East African community and were enthusiastic cultural brokers for non-Muslim faculty members and who frequently helped me to interpret my students' experiences from a different perspective.

It is a quite different paradigm for students and teachers when students are more culturally isolated in a more diverse school. In my experience teaching in mostly white, suburban high schools, I have found that minority students are often less comfortable openly approaching literature through the lens of their home culture than the students in the charter school were. Sometimes this hesitancy comes from having fewer peer supporters, and sometimes it stems from their own lack of connection with the traditional customs or religious beliefs of their home culture. I hope that this article helps teachers become more familiar with some African and Muslim values and traditions so that they feel more comfortable asking questions and continuing to learn about these often misunderstood and sometimes feared communities when they don't have the cultural support system that I had.

Recognizing that culturally-specific classrooms like mine are somewhat rare, is there a sure-fire way for teachers in a more diverse situation to choose literature that is culturally relevant to all of the students of all of the different cultures in their classrooms? Of course not. However, the first step is continuing to learn about different cultures. This is critical for all teachers. Here are my suggestions for how to increase your background knowledge so that you can help your students unpack texts in ways that are culturally relevant to them:

- We know that literature transports us just as it does our students; therefore, diversify your pleasure reading.
- Seek professional development courses that are taught by people you don't know. The Minnesota Humanities Center, for example, sponsors quality professional development around the state that explores topics from the history and culture of the Iron Range to Somali literature. Some courses are even online.
- Explore art from a culture you don't know well. Admission to the Minneapolis Institute of Art's permanent collection is always free, and they have extensive Asian, African and Native American galleries, for example.

- Do what you do best: talk to your students. Keep them writing about the world and about literature and about their families. And – this one can be difficult – make sure you talk with your students about your own culture. The exchange is best when it's mutual.
- When it's feasible, travel. Consider applying for one of the many quality teacher-travel opportunities, including the Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad, the Toyota International Teacher Program, or one of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars and Institutes. These programs are designed for teachers and provide free or subsidized travel expenses.

When classrooms are diverse, our professional development must also be diverse and wide-ranging so that our curriculum will evolve to meet the needs of our students.

Note

1. All students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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