MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE AS THE STEPCHILD OF THE CANON: IMPLEMENTING MULTICULTURAL LITERACY IN SPITE OF NCLB

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Rhetoric and Writing Studies

by
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Summer 2011
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Multicultural Literature as the Stepchild of the Canon: Implementing Multicultural

Literacy in Spite of NCLB

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the co-founders of The Puente Project, Felix Galaviz and Patricia McGrath, who believed that post-secondary success for our Latino youth was an academic English program focused on multicultural literature alongside a strong writing program. My involvement as part of the original corps of English teachers trained in the Puente High School model has provided me with a structured and foundational approach to educating all my students for academic success. Your leadership and vision has inspired me to continue my journey so that all students will find their own “puentes” that will lead them to their success. I would also like to dedicate my paper to Elizabeth Radin Simons, my mentor, role model, and friend. Your professionalism in training teachers in the Puente model speaks volumes about your dedication and inspiration. Your success is found in all our students who have become the beneficiaries of your coaching.
Literacy arouses hopes, not only in society as a whole but also in the individual who is striving for fulfillment, happiness and personal benefit by learning how to read and write. Literacy... means far more than learning how to read and write... The aim is to transmit... knowledge and promote social participation.

~ UNESCO Institute for Education
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Multicultural Literature as the Stepchild of the Canon: Implementing Multicultural Literacy in Spite of NCLB
by
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Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing Studies
San Diego State University, 2011

This thesis stems from personal involvement in the educational process of preparing students for life after high school and the negative implications inherent in teaching to state and national standards. The culturally and linguistically diverse student often sacrifices academic rigor in order to achieve competency on these exams. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has caused serious shifts in how and what is taught in the language arts classroom. At issue is the question of academic success and acquired learning for the low performing, multilingual, culturally diverse student.

My research centers on the theoretical views espoused in critical pedagogy and multicultural education. The premise of my project centers on the importance of including a literature-based curriculum which is considered inclusive of multicultural, multiethnic literature. It is difficult to separate one theory from another since together they analyze, challenge, and interpret the politics of institutionalized oppression found in our current educational climate. The complementary nature of both approaches is fundamental to reshaping, rethinking and reacting to concerns about curricular choices currently mandated by school districts attempting to invoke a cookie-cutter approach to mastering state and national standards.

Major concerns revolve around the role of the current Western canon as “core” literature in language arts classrooms and the lack or limited representation of multicultural, multiethnic literature, the over abundance of teaching to mandated state and national exams, and the current pressure to replace literature with expository texts. Evidence in the scholarship reviewed here indicates the inequalities intrinsic in curricular choices when students are tracked due to their linguistic or cultural background as well as the limited acquisition of knowledge and critical reasoning when teaching to the mandates of NCLB.

The ethnographic studies highlighted indicate that when students find relevance in the literature they study, are actively engaged, and find representations of themselves in the literature they are exposed to, literacy rates improve, student mastery of mandated exams occurs, and students become active participants in their educational goals. There are effective programs such as the Puente High School Project which serve to correct this deficiency but which are, unfortunately, not considered the norm for all school districts.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the guidance and support of my thesis committee, the journey to write my thesis would have been a monumental task. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Boyd for attentively listening as I made my case for the need to challenge the current educational mandates and for steering me in the right direction. Your positive and encouraging comments about my pursuit of inclusive curricula made the researching and writing of my thesis an exceptionally rewarding experience. I am also extremely grateful to you for allowing me to trek into areas that I am passionate about and to foster the creation of my voice. I especially appreciate you allowing my metaphoric language to stand alongside my critical reasoning.

Dr. McClish, I owe you a world of thanks for encouraging me to enroll in the RWS Master’s Program and to pursue further study in what I believe is essential training and teaching in the rhetorical approach for our high school students. I have become a better teacher and rhetorician since my first encounter with your RWS 600 course. I know that our paths will continue to cross as we both venture into the implementation of programs that will benefit all students and better prepare them for academic and literacy success.

I vehemently believe that literature is a fundamental part of a society’s cultural code. When as a society we begin to denounce the importance of literature or the marginalization of diverse literature, then a tragic result is the loss of literature rich in imagination and real life experiences that may never be read by our youth. Dr. Serrato, or as I prefer to address you, “Profe,” I want to thank you for being so passionate and outspoken on the issues of
representation in literature, especially in children’s literature. After teaching literature for 25 years, you led me to the “aha” moments of understanding that the literature we select to teach should be regarded as important and crucial for developing positive outcomes for our youth. As a culturing practice, we need to validate the lived experiences of our youth. Your help in emphasizing the importance of placing multicultural, diverse literature in the hands of my students and then opening up those books to be read, devoured, and discussed will be my mission. Gracias.

To the comadres in the 300 pod, Terry, Gracie, Lety, Carla, Minako, Patty, Sandra, Paty, Jessica, Laura, and Virginia, thank you so much for listening to my rants when reading more research about the educational woes we all encounter on a daily basis. Thanks for all your support when I needed class coverage to write and then write some more.

To my wonderful family, I thank you all for your patience and words of encouragement when I felt that this thesis might never get done. To my husband Dean, I know it was a long road, but I am extremely thankful that you never stopped me from pursuing my passionate resolve of writing on what I believe is my life mission of bringing diversity into the English curriculum. To Karen Yumi and Allison Chiyo, my two beautiful daughters, you both never doubted your Mama even when she doubted herself. Thank you both for taking time out of your busy schedules to listen to my words and help me make sense of them! I love you both dearly and I hope you are proud of my work.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel
~Socrates

There is no doubt that the English teacher faces a very complex endeavor when creating a learning environment that too often is prescribed by standards and objectives imposed by a political movement touting that “all students will achieve success” but which often conflicts with the learning needs of the individual student. The pressure to have students become “proficient or advanced” on state-mandated exams has caused English language arts programs to rethink and restructure what lessons should be included in order to maximize students’ achievement on these high-stakes exams. What becomes problematic is that achieving success on these mandated exams is what drives instruction in the English classroom and too often causes philosophical differences concerning how to make learning relevant for all students.

For the almost three decades in the English language classroom, I have been the gatekeeper of knowledge for countless numbers of students. I take seriously my role as educator and feel it necessary and obligatory to construct meaningful lessons which guide students not only to graduate from high school but also to acquire the requisite literate skill and maturity to succeed in post-secondary pursuits. My involvement with the Puente High School Project and the International Baccalaureate program allowed the inclusion of diverse literature alongside the traditional canon. I was allowed to structure lessons to accommodate relevancy to not only subject matter, but also to focus on global hegemony, thereby infusing
within the curriculum opportunities for students to question their role in society, to take charge of their own knowledge base, and to transform themselves from insecure young people into mature young adults, thereby contributing to their academic success.

When considering that the achievement gap between diverse students and their counterparts seems to have widened in spite of federal and state mandates aimed at educational equity for all students,¹ an unfortunate response by districts to raising scores is the dreaded “teaching to the test.” When districts feel compelled to implement remedial and mediocre teaching environments where academic rigor and relevancy is sacrificed for the bigger picture, then students, families, and—to a larger extent—our society are short-changed. For the English language classroom, the infused short-term remedy creates dire consequences in the areas of acquired knowledge, literacy, and writing—the fundamental skills necessary for students to succeed in academic as well as personal pursuits. A primary goal of public education should be structured such that all students develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes they (students) need to survive and function effectively in a “future U.S. society in which one out of every three people will be a person of color” (Banks and Banks, Handbook 23). Sadly, this is not the case. Students of color will make up approximately 46% of the nation’s student population by 2020 (Pallas, Natriello and McDill 18), and a homogenized version of education is being held as the norm for schools across the country. Teachers in both inner-city and suburban schools will likely have students from diverse

¹ Wiener and Hall estimate that 77 percent of students from high-income families get college degrees within six years as compared to only 54 percent of students from low-income families. And while 67 percent of white students get their degrees within six years, the majority of African American and Latino students do not, with graduation rates of 46 percent and 47 percent, respectively. Also see Carey, A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities for work focusing on high schools and colleges and the need to promote high academic achievement for all students.
ethnic, cultural, and racial groups in their classrooms. It is this short-sighted mandate which has caused too many of our diverse populations to graduate from high school with limited academic skills specifically in the area of literacy.

Some have argued that the idea of general education came to America in an attempt to define itself as American and to define American culture, while others see general education as an attempt by educational institutions to ensure that the European heritage remains part of that American culture (Purves 2). The evolution from the first America schools in 1635 designed for sons of certain social classes who were destined for leadership positions in church, state, or the courts, to our current system of public education for all young people, still operates on the same educational structure of teaching the basic forms of reading and writing. It was Benjamin Franklin’s association with the American Philosophical Society that helped bring about the ideas of the European Enlightenment to colonial America and later in 1751 the English Academy established a set curriculum revolving around both classical and modern courses that have since been updated to include what we now term general education (Goldin 8-11). When literature emerged at the core of English studies at the end of the nineteenth century, it settled around a particular vision of the values of literature and of texts that were important to read and to teach. According to Applebee, the historic tradition of teaching English revolves around the high school canon infusing a sampling of a broader tradition of works such as “Shakespeare, some poems from the Augustans, some contemporary work of ‘good’ authors, some classical myths and legends, some prose and poetry of the romantic era, and some selections from the United States tradition” (“Stability” 31). Though some gains have been made to add works from “alternative” traditions, the narrowness of the curriculum is still cause for concern.
The English language classroom has been designated as the epicenter of general education where the development of literacy and writing skills takes place. When students are not reading or writing to grade level, it is the English teacher who is required to undergo vast training in multiple strategies on how best to help students achieve grade-level competency. The revamping of curricular programs due in part to the mandates of state and federal standards, as well as a misguided, knee-jerk reaction to the current policy of limiting literature in favor of a more rhetorical approach to literacy, has caused more harm than good. Clearly, there are merits to a standards approach as a basic foundation on which to build curriculum programs to benefit diverse populations, and there is an undeniable need for student mastery of the rhetorical approach to literary analysis. Nonetheless, the justification to limit or even deny the inclusion of multicultural, multiethnic literature in these restructured programs creates marginalization. A subtle message of non-importance is perceived when limiting diverse literature to be studied or eliminating such works altogether. The token one or two diverse selections per year stigmatize the curriculum and create a “step-child” feeling of not being “good enough.”

Given the recurring concern for the “basics” in education, it is absolutely essential that multicultural education be understood as basic education. Key to the implementation of multicultural literacy is the diversity included in multicultural and multiethnic literature. This literature is as indispensible for students as are core subjects, and when multicultural literature is marginalized in relation to the core curriculum, it is perceived as unimportant to basic education (Nieto, Affirming Diversity 311). Nieto claims that one of the major stumbling blocks to implementing a broadly conceptualized multicultural program is “the ossification of the canon” (Affirming Diversity 311). The canon, as noted by Nieto, assumes
that the knowledge that is most worthy is already in place in public education today and proponents of “good literature” or the classics are steadfast in their belief that the preservation of Western culture mandates teaching of the canon. Diane Ravitch, a historian of education and the former United States assistant secretary of education, supports what she terms a “pluralist multicultural education” because it suggests that a common culture already exists and that we have only to honor it (Nieto, *Language* 196). Ravitch believes that providing a multicultural, multiethnic focus will create a separatist monoculturalism that pits European and European-American history and culture against the histories and cultures of people of color creating a divisive “us vs. them” mentality (“Multiculturalism” 270). In spite of these views, many teachers know that students should receive a full complement of literary representation in rapidly changing culturally diverse classes but school districts impose their own visions for students. The professional literature in education is increasingly providing support for teachers who resist the constraints of the traditional literary canon, which has been demonstrated to be “restricted to the institutions of the materially advantaged” (Guillory 339), but the same cannot be said of school personnel who have a tunnel-vision approach to the acquisition of learning and literacy.

Today’s classrooms are “microcosms of the larger society of the United States: a sea of faces representing a plurality of cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities” (Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber 478). Yet the canon, as used in contemporary United States Education, assumes that the knowledge that is most worthy is European, male, and upper class in origin and conception (Nieto, *Affirming Diversity* 311). Though colleges and universities have taken a lead in offering diverse literature in English course offerings, the same cannot be said for the high school curriculum. Although literature is only one strand of the English
language arts curriculum, it is at the heart of everything English teachers do in the classroom. The *Standards for the English Language Arts* specifically states that students should read works that “reflect the diversity of the United States population in terms of gender, age, social class, religion, and ethnicity” (National Council of Teachers of English and the Association of International Reading 28) and that works should be carefully considered for inclusion in the English curriculum. Yet the debate over implementing multicultural literature in addition to the canon still faces opposition on many fronts (Godina 544). Bloom and D’Souza have focused their argument on the importance of canonical knowledge for the preservation of traditional Western society (Bloom 22; D’Souza 16). Presently, the “demographic imperative,” a term coined by Banks to describe the growing diversification of the United States, is pressing forth issues related to the canon debate that in the past may not have been so forcefully addressed. Banks believes, “If we are to remain a free and pluralistic society, we can neither do away with the Western canon nor exclude the contributions of people of color. The traditionalists and multiculturalists must come together” (Banks, “Multicultural Education” 32). Previously silenced voices now demand to be heard but in the 7-12 grade level, those voices are being limited or “shelved.”

The continuing debate over what constitutes “great” literature only adds to the difficulty in creating a curriculum rich in color and diversity. The current trend of the elimination of multicultural literature and the demotion of such literature to second-class citizenry has become commonplace. There is no evidence that such use of the currently established core literature to demonstrate student proficiency on standardized exams has been
beneficial across all socio-economic-ethnic-language demographics. In fact, the evidence thus far indicates that students have become better test takers, not necessarily better critical thinkers (Van Roekel 11). Key to the dilemma of what is taught in the English language arts classroom is the yet difficult task of creating curriculum to fit the needs of the changing student and conceptualizing English classrooms as places where students engage in purposeful and meaningful literacy practices. The importance of studying literature is the only part of the educational curriculum that deals directly with the actual world of lived experiences. Literature is what gives credibility to personal perceptions, feelings, dreams, and the “stream of consciousness” that is our inner voice (Barden xii). The more practical reason for the study of literature is the exposure to language. Students can use language as a medium for the exploration of critical analysis, to learn how to develop a sense of sophistication when writing by being exposed to the construct of words and symbols, and the importance of context to meaning. The ability to construct text utilizing these skills becomes powerful for the student and it is through the study of literature where this transformation takes place.

In this study, I will evaluate the impact that multicultural literature has had at the 7-12 grade level for the culturally and linguistically diverse student, as well as examine the implications for such inclusion for the “white” student. It is important to clarify that the targeted focus of my project are not the students identified as English Language Learners (ELL), but the culturally and linguistically identified student enrolled in mainstream English

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2Gutiérrez and Rogoff argue that utilizing a cultural styles approach to assessing student learning is a more effective tool in analyzing achievement than the current mode of standardized testing. Cultural styles would include ways of talking about “differences rather than deficits” (19).
classes. Can positive educational outcomes be possible in spite of NCLB when inclusion of the study of diverse literature takes place? Additionally, I will focus on how the effective utilization of multicultural literature positively impacts students’ ability to develop and enhance writing skills through self-reflection, critical analysis, aids in the formulation of critical reasoning skills, and reinforces prior knowledge necessary to become successful in educational settings. It is the ability to apply these essential elements to all academic fields under a multitude of conditions—adverse or otherwise—which ultimately serve as evidence of student empowerment.

With the current collaboration of California state universities and their feeder school districts addressing concerns of academic preparation, it is especially critical that students are introduced to the rhetorical approach to reading and writing. However, such skills should not be limited to just expository texts since the literary standards remain. It is imperative that students gain experience afforded them through the study of literature and find their voices through the literature that speaks to them, thus gaining the confidence in their ability to write rhetorically and to formulate ideas that are thought-provoking. Mary Ellen Dakin, in “Literature, Logic and Language,” argues that our nation’s leaders have been short-sighted in their thinking that in order to have a competitive edge, students’ focus should primarily concentrate on the “intellectual capital of science, technology, engineering and math” (18). Though this advocacy has been the general consensus, it is equally imperative that students understand that logic and reasoning are not limited to the sciences and that literature provides the “cross-examination” to participate in the great conversation of life (Dakin 14). To drive her point home, she states:
In a compelling re-imagining of the 21st century English classroom, Jim Burke assures us that the English curriculum of the near future will still address the timeless modes of comprehension and composition, but the texts and tasks may not be recognizable to us. He cites Robert Schole’s argument for the reconstruction of our discipline “in terms of the long struggle between literature and rhetoric,” with the political and commercial force of rhetoric ascending in priority. “Some will wonder,” Burke writes, “where literature is, where culture can be found in this model.” (14)

The evidence presented in this study will indicate that it is not only skill in test taking that is necessary to show proficiency in these high stakes exams but rather knowledge of how to apply critical reasoning and evaluation through personal identification with literary texts studied. When students have access to a wide range of viewpoints beyond expository texts or the canon, then they develop the important critical judgment and decision-making skills they will need to become productive members of a democratic society (Nieto, *The Light* 104-5). The competent student should understand concepts rather than just memorize; be perceptive observers; be able to write effectively; and, be able to communicate clearly.

As I considered the methodology to answer my research questions, textual analysis of several ethnographic studies which are reflective of students I have dealt with over the last 27 years seemed a logical choice. It will be necessary to track the evolution of the English language arts curriculum in order to determine why proponents of teaching the canon find difficulty in giving voice to multicultural, multiethnic literature even though the changing faces in the classroom require adapting antiquated reading lists to be more reflective of student demographics. The tragedy of using *No Child Left Behind* as a front for limiting access to diverse literature will reveal the misguided rhetoric of administrations that have short-sighted gains in mind. Teaching to a test is not teaching for life-long learning; teaching to the test does not guarantee success for all students; teaching to the test means limited
thinking. The insights into the answers to why teachers chose diverse literature as the basis for this study is important in determining that exposure to multicultural literature factors heavily in student achievement and that such exposure garners multiple benefits for all our students. Ultimately, educators must seek to educate all students and create opportunities for their success as well as instill within all students the belief that they have the power and the right to engage in an arena of knowledge acquisition that invariably will factor into their academic performance.

What I am proposing is not the substitution of one canon over another since that would still create curricula with a monocultural focus and reflect as Nieto has aptly stated a culture where “…little attention is paid to student diversity and the school curriculum is generally presented as separate from community… .This reflects what currently goes on in most schools in American society” (Affirming Diversity 251). Neither do I advocate eliminating the current mandates of standardized testing since this measure of evaluation can serve as a tool, one of several strategies utilized, to better understand how best to serve the educational needs for all our students. Using the results as instruments of change where individualized instruction provides educational equity and rigor for all students should be the main goal. The competitive nature of gaining admittance into universities and the retention of incoming freshmen necessitate that all students should be versed and competent in reading and writing rhetorically. With increasing cultural diversity in classrooms, educators must structure an academic climate that will enhance learning for all students so that they write their way into the university and graduate. Analyzing how current practices have adversely affected our culturally and linguistically diverse students, the overemphasis on a single component limits and overshadows the acquisition of multiple modalities of skills necessary
for student success. Ogbu suggests that reforms such as multicultural education must be
guided by an understanding of the nature of the learning difficulties of students from specific
ethnic groups before attempts to design intervention and strategies can take place (201).

The ideal learning environment for students should be structured so that students will
find relevancy and engagement in their learning, be active participants in improving and
honoring their literacy skills, and hold themselves accountable to a higher standard of learning.
Once students know they have the capacity to achieve at these higher levels, they will
become the gatekeepers of their own knowledge.
CHAPTER 2

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: THE TRAGIC IMPLICATION OF MULTICULTURAL LITERACY ON OUR YOUTH

We are in search of America but not the America that for so long has been defined by Euro-Americans. We are in search of the true America—an America of multiple cultures, multiple histories, multiple regions, multiple realities, multiple identities, multiple ways of living, surviving and being human. No where is this struggle for the true America more profoundly being waged than in the classrooms of public schools in the United States.

~Darder

Education has been immersed in conflict for centuries. Many of the conflicts surrounding education are the result of multiple points of view as to the purpose of education, the definition of knowledge and the arguments over which knowledge or whose knowledge is of most worth. My training and experience as an educator has instilled in me the belief that the purpose of education is to enable individuals to reach their full potential as human beings, individually and as members of a society that advocates equal and quality education for all. When those in power make decisions which directly impact students and teachers daily—from materials to be used in the classroom to certification standards to testing—then education becomes political and often creates division on how best to maximize an individual’s potential for learning. It is important to point out that education is an integral part of our society, yet the philosophical view of how and what to teach often conflicts with the current design of the educational system in the United States currently hijacked by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).
In the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* by Banks and Banks, multicultural education is defined as a “field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women studies” (xii). The underlying belief that individuals will receive an education which will enable them to think and act intelligently, have the necessary skills, knowledge and resources to be able to plan and create change is not taking place for all students. In a study conducted by Greene and Winters, sponsored by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, data collected from the U.S. Department of Education revealed the following about the graduating classes of 1991 to 2002:

- The national high school graduation rate for all public school students remained flat over the last decade, going from 72% in 1991 to 71% in 2002.

- There is a wide disparity in the graduation rates of white and minority students. In the class of 2002, about 78% of white students graduated from high school with a regular diploma, compared to 56% of African American students, 54% of Native American students, and 52% of Hispanic students.

- There is also a large difference among racial and ethnic groups in the percentage of students who leave high school eligible for college admission. About 40% of white students, 23% of African American students, 20% of Hispanic students, and 14% of Native American students who started public high school graduated college-ready in 2002. For the researchers, college-ready is defined as the “minimum set of skills and credentials” (1) required to attend a four-year college.3

- Because of the disparities in graduation and college-readiness rates among racial groups, black and Hispanic students are seriously underrepresented in the pool of minimally qualified college applicants. Only 9% of all college-ready graduates are black and another 9% are Hispanic, compared to a total population of 18-year-olds

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3 For a detailed analysis and calculation of the graduation and college-readiness rates for students, please see both studies conducted by Greene and Forster, “Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates in the United States” as well as Greene and Winters, “Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002”.
that is 14% black and 17% Hispanic. The portion of all college freshmen that is black (11%) or Hispanic (7%) is very similar to their shares of the college-ready population. This suggests that the main reason these groups are underrepresented in college admissions is that these students are not acquiring college-ready skills in the K-12 system (Greene and Forster 1).

According to the researchers Greene and Forester, students who fail to graduate from high school prepared to attend four-year colleges are much less likely to gain full access to our country’s economic, political, and social opportunities. They suggested that to be “college-ready, students must pass three crucial hurdles: they must graduate from high school, they must have taken certain courses in high school that colleges require for the acquisition of necessary skills, and they must demonstrate basic literacy skills” (3).

In January 2002, shortly after the above study was conducted, an Act of Congress known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted with the ultimate goal of closing the proverbial achievement gap in public education in the United States. Referred to as NCLB, this Act advocated accountability and the flexibility to choose what curriculum would work best for K-12 school districts. As a result, NCLB enacted standards-based educational reforms that established measurable goals through standardized testing. Proponents of NCLB believed that this well-intentioned legislative effort would hold public schools and teachers accountable for academic achievement and would further democratize United States education by setting standards and providing resources to schools regardless of wealth, ethnicity, disabilities or language, but quickly the Act’s flawed system of implementation was cause for concern. Christine Sleeter, in Un-Standardizing Curriculum:

[^4]: See No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 for full details of the reforms and consequences for school districts if achievement is not attained.
Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom makes an important distinction between standards and standardization (ix) and describes how standards can be used by teachers to help students attain high levels of academic achievement but that standardization has adverse effects on “students, teachers, and schools because it leads to bureaucratization and to a focus on low-level knowledge and skills that can be easily measured by norm-referenced tests” (x). She goes on to describe how standards can guide effective and culturally responsive school reform, however, believes that attempting to implement standards leads to standardization. The unfortunate result is “an inflexible curricula and teaching strategies, teaching which violates the home cultures and languages of students, and contributes to the de-professionalization of teaching” (x).

To verify that schools were reaching targeted goals mandated by individual states, a “report card” of how schools were doing would be publicized and a series of options would further be spelled out for both parents and schools based on a compilation of results based on these standardized exams. With its emphasis on accountability, testing, sanctions, and rewards, educators expressed fear and concerns with the impact of this legislation on minority groups, multicultural curricula, and on equity issues within the public school system (Fusarelli 71). Opponents to the bill expressed concerns with the standardization approach because the long-term effects would result in an undermining of individual human potential. Further, the focus on competition and punishments would lead to “test-taking robots,” teaching to the test, and even cheating in order to achieve results.\(^5\) The inevitable loss of

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\(^5\) Guisbond and Neill, advocates for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), confirm that the standardized model promotes teaching to the test and narrowed curricula particularly in schools that serve low-income and minority students. The implications are that students taught to take such tests will not be
creativity as well as the quashing of critical reasoning furthered the concerns of many educators battling with school boards, superintendents, and curriculum directors over what should be taught in the English curriculum.

The passage of NCLB was intended to provide equal and accessible education for all students in core subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Social Sciences. NCLB required results be reported by student subgroups. The stated purpose for such breakdowns was to enable school districts to use the information obtained for each subgroup as a diagnostic tool showing where schools needed improvement. The reasoning behind this reporting was to confirm the concerns of lawmakers over the widening achievement gap among ethnic subgroups in our society. Since its implementation, NCLB has revealed a flaw in the interpretation and modality of instruction to be used within the schools, leaving districts to construct their own versions of how to achieve competency. Standardization has become the enemy of diversity; standardization becomes the “equivalent of imposing monoculture on the natural world, has resulted in lost classroom creativity” (Hargreaves and Fink 166) and has constrained schools and teachers in their ability to respond to the diverse students in their classes. An analysis of three decades of educational reform strategies exposed to high-quality curricula, students are most likely to become discouraged and “give up” if they do not achieve competency, and there is evidence in high-stakes testing states that students not attaining mastery are more likely to drop out of school (14).

6 The National Governors Association identified performance-based accountability as a “best practices” vehicle for improving education, stating that “performance-based accountability can create higher expectations, improve teaching and learning, facilitate improved school capacity, and stimulate higher levels of achievement” (Fusarelli 74).

7 Once a staunch supporter of NCLB, Diane Ravitch has changed her stance citing no evidence for the effectiveness of the Act. See Ravitch, “Dictating to the Schools.”
pertaining to ethnocultural diversity in the United States conducted by Skerrett and Hargreaves found that the practice in many schools reveals:

…common curricula and learning standards have institutionalized inequitable systems of academic tracking and uneven student achievement, with racial minority students being disproportionately represented in lower academic tracks while their higher performing, mostly White peers occupy the higher levels of schooling….Moreover, the trend toward increasing curriculum standardization and high-stakes testing has significantly reduced teachers’ flexibility in incorporating more culturally responsive practices into their classrooms. (916)

The results of this study revealed that for the change-oriented teacher\(^8\), as education policies turned increasingly toward curriculum standardization, high-stakes testing, and teacher accountability, many humanities departments eliminated multi-interest and multicultural electives. English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and special education teachers were increasingly alienated from their mainstream colleagues who embraced and endorsed the standards movement. In contrast, standardization reinforced and validated the traditional curriculum and teaching strategies of veteran teachers who lacked professional training or experience with diversity (Skerrett and Hargreaves 935).

NCLB reinforces a culture of blaming students who do not master mandated exams and forces teachers to spend more time on test-prep and drill-and-kill exercises rather than on authentic teaching and learning. School districts do not look at the faces of our students, but rather focus on test scores. In their misguided attempt to create a “one size fits all” approach to teaching, districts have created a scrambling approach to adjust content to be taught in the English language arts classroom. In allowing district-level curriculum teams to limit the use

\(^8\) Skerrett and Hargreaves defined younger teachers, particularly those with culturally responsive teacher training, ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, and teachers in humanities, special education, and other lower status curriculum areas that invariably develop a more multicultural or antiracist curriculum which tend to be more pedagogically responsive to student diversity (935).
of literary texts to be taught to what has been affectionately termed “core” literature, i.e., Shakespeare, Twain, Golding, Chaucer, etc., they leave no room for the inclusion of multicultural literature or, at best, a very selective list from which to choose. The rhetoric behind such moves is often politically motivated since it is School Boards, elected by the community, making curricular decisions that impact and affect students.

Stephen Macedo, in *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy*, expressed his concern that an overly narrow focus on measurable outcomes is inadequate because it ignores one of the primary goals of public education—the development of civically minded, democratic citizens (254). According to L. D. Fusarelli:

> In our quest to play the numbers game, to fulfill largely economic purposes of schooling, we risk robbing our students and our communities of the essence of education—the cultivation of the [habits of] mind and soul necessary to fulfill our human capacity and live in a democratic society. (97)

This concern is very real when NCLB threatens to “halt the development of truly significant improvements in teaching and learning” (Lewis 340) for the culturally and linguistically diverse learner. Even though NCLB does not specifically preclude the use of multicultural curricula as long as the inclusion effectively raises student achievement, school districts respond by eliminating or limiting diversity in favor of implementing similar learning environments for all students irrespective of their learning needs (Valenzuela 252).

Not only do schools have to contend with the fallout imposed by the requirements of NCLB, but the current economic crisis has also adversely affected a school’s choice to acquire material without the approval from district offices. As teachers’ syllabi are scrutinized by administrators, the freedom to choose what curriculum is best suited for the cultural and linguistic diversity found in classrooms no longer exists. The collateral damage
from cuts to education are reflected by the freeze imposed on the purchase of new texts and the funneling of money into staff development activities in which teachers are being brainwashed to believe that all students can succeed on standardized exams—actually, they must succeed or risk the penalty of non-compliance. It is common to hear the phrase “there is no money for books, make do with what there is in the library.” This sentiment causes frustration for educators advocating for the inclusion of multicultural literature and leaving teachers with no choice but to teach from the prescribed canonical curriculum. For the majority of Americans, everyday “reality in America is a multinational, multiethnic, multicultural experience contained within the rubric of American culture” (Antonette 5), yet our students are being subjected to literature that does not reflect that experience.

As a public high school English teacher in the state of California for the past 27 years, I have been witness to the countless squabbles between administration and teachers over the issue of academic student performance, particularly in the areas of reading and writing generally termed as literacy. The annual ritual of analyzing results of standardized tests for many has become a gut wrenching, demoralizing circus where the clowns take center stage and the trapeze artists attempt to keep flying through the air, hoping not to miss the bar and fall to their death. Teachers often are offended by the insinuation of their incompetence and the accusatory tone that not enough has been done for students. Derogatory innuendos of lack of professionalism are hurled back onto the lap of administration with reminders that they have forgotten what it means to be a classroom teacher. Through the screams and the silence, the dejection and disbelief, students remain in the middle. A meeting which was touted as a reflection on what the numbers represent and how best to utilize those scores to drive instruction quickly becomes a battlefield of disgruntled and disheartened parties where
very little is resolved. The few who are confident to speak out are usually the veteran teachers who have become too familiar with the latest and greatest change, only to see the pendulum swing back again. This is the combative environment that NCLB has created. However, this conservative, educational reform platform which argues that standardized testing is the measure by which students will be judged predates NCLB and it seems will continue to create havoc and fear in our schools. While the standards movement implies that raising test scores and closing achievement gaps will bring about equity, this ideology is far from the truth (Sleeter 67-68). Testing and standardizing knowledge do not resolve these issues and unfortunately school districts feel their only recourse to achieving competency is to obligate teachers to teach to the test.

The current educational reforms both at the national and state levels have centered on student skills, state standards, and proficiency levels for all students. When NCLB was sold to the nation as a remedy for the ills of our educational system, many teachers felt that these new reforms would slowly die and go away. How were teachers expected to assure that all students, regardless of socio-economic, limited English skills, and diverse backgrounds be proficient? Those who vehemently believed that “no child would be left behind” hailed it as vital legislation that supported a civil rights agenda because of explicit recognition that achievement gaps are unacceptable (Sherman 675). Once the congratulatory pats on the back were made and the dust settled, opponents of NCLB began peeling off the layers of the proverbial onion, only to find that NCLB failed to recognize the complexity of why minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds struggled in schools. In fact, what NCLB created was a climate of fear and the realization that no single factor contributed to these achievement gaps. Further, high-stakes accountability initiatives did not guarantee
positive changes and test scores did not necessarily equate with quality schooling (Malen and Rice 653-655). According to Darling-Hammond, “The biggest problem with the NCLB Act is that it mistakes measuring schools for fixing them” and ultimately more scrambling to meet the expectations of the Act is still going on today (9).

The threat of school improvement and appropriation by states looms over schools and districts if Academic Performance Index (API) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores don’t improve. Professional development has now become “Professional Learning Communities” (PLC), with the primary focus on establishing common teaching and common core materials at individual school sites. Regulated by each district’s Curriculum Department, teachers have very little input in to what materials to use in the English classroom. It is not uncommon for teacher apathy to walk shoulder-to-shoulder with student indifference when the teaching of literature and personal writing has been quashed due to the imposed restrictions handed down by non-teaching administrators. For the English teacher it is no longer the passionate teaching of literature, creative writing, and effective communication skills; rather, classrooms have been turned into decoding centers where analyzing writing prompts and teaching to the test is the standard lesson. NCLB is what drives instruction—not what is beneficial for all students. The subtle message for students is that if competency is mastered on these exams, then they have achieved success for their high school experience. I strongly disagree with that message. Experience shows that achieving post-secondary dreams of pursuing academic success takes more than just bubbling in scantrons. NCLB does not measure knowledge or critical thinking which are equally important for life-long learning. Is it possible that educators who are forced to teach to proficiency levels on these mandated tests are falling into the trap that the test is everything
and the all-or-nothing approach to accountability? The greater concern is what happens to
the average student who has only received the barrage of test-taking skills and has not been
afforded the rigors of academic success that can be found through literacy? In addition, in
an era dominated by NCLB, mid-performing students risk getting lost in the shuffle since
high stakes testing frequently forces schools to focus resources on lower performing students.
Schools that perform poorly are often threatened with takeover or the loss of resources, and
administrators are challenged to offer more basic and traditional curricula to increase scores.\textsuperscript{9}

It is this mentality that is cause for such great concern when dealing with the culturally,
ethnically, and linguistically diverse student. What educational benefits will they gain from
the mandates of NCLB?

\textsuperscript{9} Morrell asserts that critical literacy research conducted in diverse classrooms utilizing multiple forms of
analysis such as documentation of learning patterns would be a more effective system than what is currently in
place. The findings would empower teachers and schools to address the learning needs of students. Curricular
concerns would fit the needs of students, not the needs of schools striving to meet yearly quotas at the cost of
students’ access to knowledge. This hand-on approach is important because those most affected by the concerns
of achieving success are involved in doing the actual research, thereby allowing for resources to be allocated
accordingly.
CHAPTER 3

LITERACY AND THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

The exigency for literacy is knowledge; literacy is knowledge making
~Paulo Freire

In order to comprehend why literacy is essential for all students, it is vital to understand why it holds so much power. Equally important is the role literacy plays in the acquisition of multicultural knowledge. Just as there are multiple definitions to what is classified as multicultural education, so is it equally difficult to answer the question of what constitutes literacy. For education, literacy prescribes who will succeed and who will fall by the wayside. Those who “have” are outperforming the “have-nots” in literacy education (Morrell 96), which is cause for serious concern. Generally, “the differences in achievement are unfortunately predicted along the lines of race, class, gender, and language background” (Perie, Grigg, and Donahue 2). The expectation is that students who have mastered school literacy—the ability to read and write standard English—are expected to develop into adult citizens who are “innovative, achievement oriented, productive, cosmopolitical, media and politically aware, more globally and less locally oriented, with more liberal and human social attitudes, less likely to commit a crime, and more likely to take education, and the rights and duties of citizenship seriously” (Gee 32). For Harvey Graff this is a “literacy myth” so termed because this is not being accomplished. Linguist James Gee in his work Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses, illuminates the political and communicative norms of the dominate society and then points to the hidden purpose behind
standard literacy education. Gee cites Robert Bocoak and Antonio Gramsci’s assessment of the political use of literacy by noting their compelling argument that:

> The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self interest (or “class interest”) to do so. (40)

For too long, I have been witness to this phenomenon where social and class division in secondary education dictates which students are allowed to enter the college track courses and which are encouraged to remain in remedial and uninspiring classes. Freire looked critically at both the means and purpose of literacy, inside and outside of school: “Reading the world always precedes reading the word and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (Freire and Macedo 35). If teachers teach students to read only the word and not the world, students will become literate in a technical sense but will remain passive objects of history rather than active subjects in an ongoing processes of a democracy (Engle and Ochoa-Becker 13). This is where multicultural literature plays an important role in students’ lives, since identification and celebration of culture benefits literacy.

Historically, the idea of literacy as a “club,” as coined by Gerald Graff in his book Professing Literature: An Institutionlzied History, has been equated with social exclusion—a club where only literate intellectuals can join (x). For Frank Smith, an educational theorist, seeing literacy as a club helps us understand why schools fail. Smith argues:

> …from infancy certain kinds of learning—how to crawl, to walk, to eat, to communicate—occur without regular instruction, because children want to join the club….schools fail because they replace the social, club-like experience that students can see the point of joining with decontextualized courses and programs. (110)
I find the metaphor of the “club” rather unsettling, since for many of our diverse students, inclusion to the literacy club is not a choice afforded them; rather, they are denied admittance often based on low test scores, poor grades, and pre-determined judgments of academic success based on state and national exams. For the diverse student who is denied access to the literacy club, the closed door symbolizes a barrier to achieving literacy and establishes an apathetic and hopeless view of an outsider attempting to negotiate entrance to higher education.

Ira Shor’s analysis of critical pedagogy begins with the assumption that because no curriculum can be truly neutral, it is the responsibility of schools to present students with a broad range of information they will need to learn not only to read and write, but to read and write critically. Critical pedagogy does not advocate substituting one canon for another; instead students and teachers should reflect on multiple and often contradictory perspectives which factor into creating viewpoints that enable students to become critical thinkers (Shor, *Culture Wars* 65). In addition, Shor examines the standard curriculum and comments that “…while full of noble and idealistic words about democracy, it is often at odds with the lived realities of most students” (*When Students* 206).

At its most basic level, what role can literature play in literacy? Saldívar defines literature as aesthetics, form, style, and characterization put together in imaginative writings like novels, plays, and poems (30). I consider literature the medium by which I can engage students—through their creative abilities—to begin to question and consider what the word may suggest and then to consider its significance to their world. So I ask again, what is literacy? Literacy is a term that has often been used in society loosely only to mean reading. However, this limited definition does not convey the power that literacy holds for the
individual. The image of “reading the world” as theorized by Freire reflects the importance of actively participating in the world as a critic and as creator. Literacy at its most basic definition is the ability to make and communicate meaning using social symbols; literacy can either be spoken or written with an intended goal to convey meaning. (Sanacore 164).

Furthermore, using literacy means building upon existing knowledge to transmit that meaning. For instance, a child who knows letter-sound relationships may use that knowledge to construct meaning in written form by writing sentences. This same child uses literacy when attaching meaning to what he/she reads. As defined here, then, in its simplest and basic form, literacy is reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The ideologies inherent in how literacy is taught, the methods employed, and most importantly the curricular adopted have been debated as a possible cause for this inequality. The rumblings that the culture of power oppresses students and therefore is a major factor in students not achieving academic success has also been suggested as a viable cause. Barry Sanders in *A is for Ox* argues that the culture of electronic media is “drastically and dangerously reshaping both cognitive development and social interaction,” which lead many to believe that “literature” is now passé (12). In the wake of standardized testing it is less about “reading the word and the world” and more about scoring well on the exam. It is a dismal state in the educational world when school handbooks cite mission statements which include phrases such as “promote critical thinking and create self-motivated individuals” (*ORHS Student Handbook* 2). How can one promote critical thinking when educators must teach to a test? How can educators become the creators of self-motivated students? Should not the word “self” imply “do on one’s own?” It is this misuse of jargon which further
contributes to an apathetic view of what goes on in the classroom and a sense of contradiction of what real learning looks like.

The Education Development Center published an article in 2006 entitled *What is Literacy*. In that article, the definition of what it is to be literate was borrowed from Paulo Freire’s theory that genuine learning can only occur within a context that is meaningful and relevant to the learner and that learning must be deeply linked to personal and cultural identity (2). In comparing this definition to the reality of what actually happens in the current classroom, there is a huge disparity. Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* believed that literacy goes beyond just the function of receiving the ability to read and write; it really is about the individual’s capacity to put those skills to work in their own personal lives (73). Freire further claimed that students were being oppressed by teaching literacy through a “banking” system where the teacher deposited and the student received. In this scenario, “the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation that oppresses them; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (74). If one closely analyzes how standardized testing feeds that ideology, then certainly a political and sociological statement is being construed here—ideas about agency and power dynamics. How can buying into such a system affect the teaching of literacy? Relying on standardized exams which cannot tell us a great deal about what students are learning, or what is possible in language and literacy education imposes limitations on our students, who have detrimentally been judged and labeled as underachievers.

This evaluation of current practices certainly points to questions about knowledge—that all knowledge, information, and ideas come with attached ideologies and perspectives,
and that in teaching this knowledge, it can be impossible to completely separate them. By teaching to certain expected outcomes, the teacher is limiting a student’s ability to create knowledge or thoughts. Students of diverse backgrounds and social conditions, languages and dialects now populate our schools in greater numbers. For these students, reducing the acquisition of knowledge becomes even more problematic when the limited literature that is approved for study is not reflective of their diversity. Noted scholar Asa G. Hilliard III has stated that “Respect for diversity is the hallmark of democracy” (13); yet limiting multicultural literature, offering remedial courses, and indoctrinating students in rote methods does not respect the diversity found in our schools.

Freire believed that “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (77). It is fair to state that the current trend of limiting diverse literature rather than including such richness in English classrooms further exemplifies Freire’s philosophy. By Freire’s own definition, it would be impossible for students to create true knowledge. The classroom rich with diverse literature will become a dialogic atmosphere where students’ lived experiences and cultural appreciation for diversity would set the stage for student empowerment.

Though many teachers may not consider such acts political, teaching and learning in this sense is inherently political. Often viewed and designed as a form of hidden agenda, the current methods utilized by districts to construct learning environments where teaching to the test is seemingly motivated by the interests of the privileged, or, as Freire identifies them, the “oppressors.” The question then becomes, how can education be liberated and will such liberation cause students to take ownership of their own learning? Freire advocates that people (students) need to develop a consciousness of “self” in the world, and that education
should propel this ideal (79). With this in mind, how does education play out on a day-to-day basis? Education must have substance. How best should a system now seemingly standards-centered refocus into a more student-centered, environment of self-discovery? This is so important to discern since at the heart of all of this is the belief that students are lacking the literacy to pave a path for themselves in society. Some find fault in the fact that Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was based on work done in Brazil; however, as a theorist of critical pedagogy, his findings can be just as applicable to the current situation schools in the United States are facing: too much teaching to a standardized test and less about acquiring knowledge and literacy. The narrative power of literature provides individuals with a necessary framework for interpreting our own pains and frustrations; such connections can only be meaningful if students find relevance and meaning in literature they can relate to.

In the midst of defining what literacy really seems to be, the one common thread uniting this debate is the importance of redefining our roles as educators, students, and as a society.

In *The Violence of Literacy*, J. Elspeth Stuckey begins by linking the theory, research, and practice of literacy in the United States to political economy and social opportunity, cogently exposes how literacy in this country, as both a "skill" and a profession, is used to perpetuate privilege, disadvantage, and injustice, and further argues that conceptualizations of and attitudes toward literacy are highly influenced by the myth of classlessness in American history and culture. Stuckey explains the sociological shift in the 1930s from the categorization of American class into two groups – working and business classes. In buying into the myth that we are a classless society, then how can there be an explanation for why people fail to attain satisfactory lives? “In the face of the promise of ‘equal information,’ are
we to assume that large groups of people watch passively as their economic security, psychological well-being and standards of living erode?” (17). It is the reason why so many of us despise the NCLB propaganda; if the playing fields were truly equal, then why would students want to fail? Stuckey proposes that it is literacy itself which is especially oppressive as a system because it legitimizes itself. Her argument is that literacy is enacted as “incremental, daily violence against those who are not favored by the system” (127):

The truth is that literacy and English instruction can hurt you, more clearly and forcefully and permanently than it can help you, and that schools, like other social institutions, are designed to replicate, or at least not to disturb, social division and class privilege. (123)

If one examines how students are indoctrinated into the varied systems of basic rote methods of skill building designed specifically for the underachieving and low performing students, then there is validity to Stuckey’s argument. This phenomenon can certainly be what allows administrators and district curriculum offices to limit multicultural, multiethnic literature and hide behind the mandates of NCLB. The contextual and dialogical nature of literacy as a meaning-making strategy plays a critical role in student comprehension, and when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve. This improvement should occur because culturally relevant texts allow readers to access their cultural knowledge or culture-specific prior knowledge as a psychological tool to understand the intended meaning of the text (Stuckey 130).

Stuckey defers to cultural theorist Henry Giroux’s assessment that literacy studies should be concerned with comprehension rather than merely the words themselves: “Print does not dominate; comprehension of print does. To comprehend is to perceive ideas within
words (symbols)” (qtd. in Stuckey 53). This further leads Giroux to separate literacy from the social matrix by splitting the ideology of literacy into two areas: the instrumental approach (literacy as a method to instill knowledge associated with positivism and conservatism, also known as logic and methods from eighteenth century science) and the interactionist views (self-fulfillment, self-actualization, becoming) (Teachers as Intellectuals 54). Giroux sums up his philosophy: “Literacy is not a blunt instrument of domination. Literacy is a political phenomenon that represents an embattled epistemological terrain on which different sociological groups struggle over how reality is to be signified, reproduced, and resisted” (Teachers as Intellectuals 58).

In America on the Edge, Giroux makes very clear that there is an ethical and political duty to educational theory and practice:

Critical pedagogy makes clear that schools and other educational spheres cannot be viewed merely as instructional sites, but must be seen as places where culture, power, and knowledge come together to produce particular identities, narratives, and social practices…schooling is not merely about the production of skills, but about the construction of knowledge and identities that always presuppose a vision of the future. (5)

Giroux exhorts that the system currently in place needs to be redefined and restructured. Curricula need to address the lived experiences that different students bring to the class, and limiting that knowledge is a problem that truly needs to be addressed. The successful classes strive to break away from the “traditional” modes of teaching literacy. Of all the proposals that Giroux advocates for future success in teaching, the most important is “linking the language of critique to the language of possibility and to be keenly aware that critique and hope must inform each other so as to avoid a crippling cynicism or an empty utopianism” (America 5).
Those in the front lines of teaching often are stuck in the middle when attempting to create learning environments which are more inclusive as opposed to exclusive. Giroux’s ideologies resonate with the intended philosophy of educating all students:

Rather than viewed as a technical method, pedagogy must be understood as moral and political practice that always presupposes particular renditions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, values, citizenship, modes of understanding, and views of the future...critical practice should provide the classroom condition that enhance the knowledge, skills, and culture of questioning necessary for students to engage in critical dialogue with the past, to question authority and its effects, to struggle with on-going relations of power, and to prepare themselves for what it means to be critical, active citizens in the interrelated local, national, and global public spheres. (Giroux and McLaren 48)

Definitely teaching to state and national mandated exams certainly is not the answer. Though students may score higher each year and become proficient test-takers, the reality is that too many will graduate from high school with limited knowledge and very little opportunity to gain reasoning and critical thinking skills necessary to find success in post-secondary institutions. Certainly this investigation is only the start to a greater search for empowering students to take charge of their own knowledge—an investigation that certain includes the teaching of multicultural, multiethnic literature. When students are judged by how well they score on exams and what they have learned as they get shipped off to their next year’s English classes, many will be subjected to the same rhetoric of NCLB and the lack of diverse literature. For educators, there is a moral and ethical responsibility to not only give students more than just the mandated curriculum, but also to take the lead on how that knowledge should be disseminated. It is equally imperative to design an environment of learning that works best for all students in order that students become the beneficiaries of literacy practices that will create and build on knowledge. It is important, then, to look at how limited inclusion might cause more harm than good.
Teachers who attempt to challenge NCLB still find it difficult to integrate multicultural literature into their curriculum despite the need for more inclusive texts. Though the current theories of language and literacy learning emphasize the importance of building upon students’ knowledge, particularly cultural knowledge, many language programs are built around a “scope and sequence” format. In a study conducted by Garth-McCullough, students demonstrated great comprehensive reading gains when assessed using selections which included references to experiences and cultural knowledge they possessed. Robert Burroughs in “The Secondary English Curriculum and Adolescent Literacy,” noted that utilizing this format (scope and sequence) hindered the ability to accommodate nontraditional authors. He argued, for example, “the genre of slave narratives is problematic. Typically, narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are surrounded in the curriculum by novels by Hawthorne, Crane, or Melville” (Garth-McCullough 2). Alongside the canonical works, the inclusion of such diverse texts can be cause for marginalization. Later on in this paper, I will present the benefits that prior knowledge on reading comprehension holds by highlighting important gains for students when diverse literature is used as a standard measure for reading comprehension.
CHAPTER 4

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE AS AGENCY
OF EMPOWERMENT

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

~Adrienne Rich, “Invisibility in Academe”

With the discussion of the importance of multiculturalism in education today, multicultural literature is still negotiated as a political rather than a literary movement. It has been labeled as a movement to claim space in literature and in education for historically marginalized social groups and is still considered a controversial topic from conservatives who believe that what is best for students is already in place (Cai 72). The belief that “all students are miseducated to the extent that they receive only a partial and biased education” (Nieto, *Affirming Diversity* 312) is evident in textbooks and curricular choices which reinforce this bias. The development of an inclusive curriculum is compounded with conflicting ideologies of an appropriate canon representative of diverse cultures and how to accommodate such selections within the existing canon. From a pedagogical perspective, multicultural literature should be made an essential part of a pluralistic curriculum rather than just perceived as a means to fill up space in a designated month. Multicultural, multiethnic literature should be utilized to provide greater access to literacy, encourage critical thinking, foster philosophical discourse, teach valuable skills and promote cultural understanding. Further, multicultural literature should also serve to “excite imagination, give credence to creativity and expand overall literary appreciation” (Muse 2).
I assert that empowering students to read literature critically will afford students the opportunity to make meaning from the literature discussed. It becomes paramount to have students engage in self-discovery and self-reflection of the literature studied, rather than informing students of concepts as so often happens in English classrooms where students are unmotivated to read and respond. This resolve of creating empowered individuals who can “identify, critically analyze, and even take action to solve problems related to cultural differences” (Cai xviii) is only a minor benefit of exposing students to a varied selection of multicultural, multiethnic literature. Another aspect of the inclusion of multicultural literature in the classroom primarily focuses on the “need to make visible underrepresented groups and to counter negative images and stereotypes” (Bishop, “Selecting Literature” vii). The educational benefit of these strategies then becomes a legitimizing of image, heritage and cultural experiences which provides opportunities for building self-esteem which translate into academic achievement in the area of literacy (Bishop, “Defining” 221). In a study comprised of adolescent students, it was noted that personal examinations of culture became essential elements to engaging students in the study of literature:

Memoirs, autobiographies, and other forms of personal narratives serve as guiding lights in the students’ personal writing endeavors. From journal entries to autobiographical short stories, the various forms of personal narratives lend themselves to the maturation that occurs during adolescent and teen years. They provide a close, safe place for students to discover and to react to the culturally diverse world around them. (Muhammad 14)

There is an impressive collection of scholarship on the various ways in which schools work to disenfranchise nonmainstream youth (Edelsky 19-22) specifically in the areas of literacy, language, and ethnic-based disadvantage. Covertly embedded in the curriculum taught at the secondary level school, standardized testing limits academic rigor and is
becoming increasingly difficult to counter its effects on many of our diverse students today. Schooling, in fact, as a culturing practice, is designed to benefit mainstream, middle-class students (Portes 438). Though children’s literature for the primary levels seems to have surged ahead in the inclusion of diverse literature, it becomes apparent that as soon as students enter the high school level, diversity comes to a screeching halt. With the emergence of the necessity to develop a more multicultural practice of teaching in the K-12 levels springing from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Western canon is still heralded as the foundational basis for teaching literacy and democratic values. In his book Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education, Gerald Graff points out that at the high school level European and American male authors such as Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Twain, and Hemingway still dominate the required reading lists in the nation’s high schools (48). Further, Graff found that most of the books by authors of color in the cases he examined were optional rather than required readings (48). Applebee found that of the ten most frequently assigned reading book-length works taught at the high school level, only one title was by a female author—Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird—and none were by a writer of color. Works by Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Dickens lead the list (Applebee, “Stability” 31). The implied message is that a multicultural focus in the study of literature is not worthy of inclusion.

Though integrating the voices of previously unheard groups is not a simple process, especially with school districts under fire to raise test scores and the fear of being taken over as written in the NCLB Act, schools have lost the ability to have a voice on curricular selections. English departments are directed to settle for what already has been established, mainly the antiquated canon. In fact, for some school districts the novel and other forms of
“literature” have been shelved because of perceived irrelevance to national and state-mandated standards. The articulation of secondary schools and universities has further dictated the need for a more rhetorical approach to literacy and writing, thereby taking center stage over the teaching of literature. Administrators and school districts fall into the dreaded trap of misconstruing what rhetorical analysis really entails and believing that literature has no place in the English curriculum. On multiple occasions, the English teacher must defend, define and attempt to answer the question of the importance of literature and its relevance in the English curriculum.

There is no definitive answer to why studying literature is important, but Bergevin reasons that:

> to study literature is not to practice the variety of style and creativity of writers apart from anything connected to everyday life; the reason why students should read and study diverse literature is to engage and consider all forms and varieties of the human experience demonstrated by diverse literary texts. (20)

Literature is the impetus for establishing an educational setting infused with humanizing ideas and issues. Dakin offers an example of how “facts can be shocking things—six million Jews killed in World War II. But these numbers don’t resonate nearly as much as the diary of a young girl” (19). Literature has a way of coming to all of us with “messages” and statements about life and the world. It becomes necessary, then, to insist upon pluralism within the literary selections included in classrooms today as depictions of the multiethnic and multi-valued nature of the real world. Through carefully selected and shared

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10 A collaborative effort with the Sweetwater Union High School District and San Diego State University to improve rhetorical reading and writing skills has cause for concern for many English Language Arts teachers. Though an excellent forum for discussion on how best to prepare students for college writing and reading, the curriculum director for the high school district has mandated the removal of all fictive literature from English classrooms. For more on the district’s stance, see Magee, “Literary Classics Shelved.”
multicultural literature, students can also begin to learn to understand and to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse cultures. As students learn to attach value and understanding of their own cultural diversity as well as that of others, so too can they begin the foundational appreciation and respect of the artistic contributions of people from a multitude of backgrounds (Norton 34).

What is being advocated here is not based on new theories or beliefs of equitable education. The 1996 *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* specifically states that teachers of English language arts should:

…use the English language arts curriculum for helping students become familiar with diverse peoples and cultures. In a multicultural society, teachers must be able to help students achieve cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Teachers must be willing to seek and to use materials which represent linguistic and artistic achievements from a variety of ethnic and cultural perspectives. In such diverse cultural contexts, students explore their own perceptions and values. (National Council of Teachers of English 14)

It becomes imperative, then, that curriculum lists begin to move toward a transformative ideology for the English classroom. This advocacy coincides with just one of the many goals of multicultural education. According to Banks, an advocate for transformative curricula believes programs should be designed to impact the values and beliefs of students and “challenge the basic assumptions and implicit values of the Eurocentric, male-dominated curricula institutionalized in U.S. schools” (*Transformative Knowledge* 21). Banks differentiates these ideals in the following manner:

When the curriculum is infused with ethnic and gender content without curriculum transformation, the students view the experiences of ethnic groups and of women from the perspectives and conceptual frameworks of the traditional Western canon. Consequently, groups such as Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos are added to the curriculum, but their experiences are viewed from the perspective of mainstream historians and social scientists….When curriculum transformation occurs, students and teachers make
paradigm shifts and view the American and world experience from the perspective of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender groups. *(Transformative Knowledge 21)*

For the students who begin to view these concepts, events, and situations with lenses that enable validation and empowerment to become a reality, students are given the ability to “construct their own interpretations of the past, present, and future” *(Banks, Transformative Knowledge 25)*.

Though there are multiple aspects of multicultural education, the area that can have the greatest impact on student learning is found in the English arts curriculum. With a major focus on literacy, an appropriate vehicle for engaging students and empowering them is through multicultural literature *(Nieto, Language 106)*. Multicultural literature is a chain that helps to link the goals of multicultural education together. It is essential to define multicultural literature as works that “reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world” *(Bishop, “Selecting Literature” 3)*.

Giroux suggests that changes made in the ways in which we culturally imagine difference made manifest in the academy can result in a “new language” that will allow for the articulation of cultural institutions that no longer need to rely upon practices that oppress and hierarchize individuals. Resituating pedagogical practices that open up rather than close down the borders of knowledge and learning *(Giroux, Pedagogy 77)* is important to creating an environment of inclusion and validation. Multicultural literature then serves as a tool for teachers to educate about differences, but should also be a catalyst to celebrate differences. As the researcher Dong has stipulated, the deeply rooted, liberal-humanist ideology stressing that “we are all the same” has added barriers to acknowledging and exploring issues of diversity *(381)*. Reading multicultural literature helps to illustrate the belief that each
individual is in fact different and that we all have different life experiences and stories of our own to tell (381). This is why the Puente Project has been successful in recognizing cultural diversity and utilizing difference to inspire critical analysis and thought-provoking discussions. Students immersed in an environment where critical analysis of multicultural literature is the center of instruction recognize the ways in which “difference is constructed, defined, and hierarchized” (Antonette 11). This allows for the critical reasoning and articulation of ideas around issues that matter to students, which in turn greatly enhances students’ ability for academic growth.

There are a myriad of goals that would benefit the restructuring of schools to follow the multicultural, educational model. First, proponents argue that multicultural education increases a student’s sense of self-worth. With multicultural knowledge comes the backbone for developing cultural inter-group harmony, the ability to think, work, and live in a multicultural society which Banks cites as becoming a reality in the twenty-first century (Educating Citizens 87). Another goal of multicultural education is that of working with cultural pluralism in mind. With this thinking, educators modify fundamental educational goals in an attempt to promote equitable learning for all students. When school personnel support cultural pluralism, the important question they ask is: How can we help our students develop understanding and respect for those who are culturally different from themselves? It becomes logical, then, that empowering students enables them to become independent and interdependent learners. It promotes social action; it helps students take an active role in improving the quality of their school and the quality of their communities. As a result, students become the beneficiaries and advocates for equitable education, an advantage that can only become a reality when districts and schools allow for diverse literature and where
teachers use multicultural perspectives in their instruction. Equally important is the acknowledgement that through such learning taking place—through the inclusion of multicultural, multiethnic literature—this allows for the dialogic process of questioning, issues of identity, and relevance to learning. Teaching with a multicultural perspective means that teachers see culture, race, socio-economic status and ability as powerful variables within the learning process. When teaching from a multicultural perspective, students can begin the process of challenging assumptions and stereotypes; for teachers and schools, this means actively and critically examining their role in changing the curriculum so as to allow students to become empowered citizens (Banks, *Multietnic* 145).

Though at the college level the “canon wars” on the surface may seem to have been won by the multiculturalists, and while reading lists may have broadened to be more inclusive of women writers and “minority” writers, this transformation seems to have eluded the high school curriculum. Analyzing responses from a random sampling of 650 secondary schools across the United States, Applebee concluded that literature selections taught in the English language classroom remained very narrowly defined:

In the present survey, only 16 percent of the selections chosen for study during a five day period were written by women, and only 7 percent were by non-White authors. The narrowness of the selections is particularly troublesome given some 20 years of emphasis in the professional literature on the need to move beyond traditional selections, to better recognize the diverse cultural traditions that contribute to contemporary American life as well as to the broader world of which we are a part. (*Tradition* 122)

In an attempt to counter the achievement gap for many underrepresented students, an academic English class specifically targeting the Mexican American/Chicano population, incorporating literature based on the foundations of multiculturalism was piloted in California. The program’s success has shown that the development of cultural literacy and
an environment of inclusion foster an academic setting where all students are able to acquire critical reasoning skills, strong cultural identities, and hone academic writing.

I was one of the original corps of English teachers chosen to implement the Puente model at the high school level. My professional collaboration with the team of educators who shared the same commitment to providing and structuring a learning environment of trust and respect made the creation of curricula with a multicultural focus a manageable yet at times a difficult task to carry out. The foundational ideology of implementing an academic writing course with an ultimate goal for students achieving critical analysis and independent thinking via a multicultural literature-base approach was not fondly welcomed by the English department at our school. Citing too much Mexican-American literature as “inadequate and not substantial” to teach writing or even to be considered in an English class, too many teachers expected Puente to have a short reign at the school and anticipated its quick demise. The program which began in 1993 is still in existence today and has proven to provide an academic core of instructional strategies which prepare all students for the rigors of the honors track.

As the first cohort of students moved from their freshmen to their sophomore years in Puente, students were challenged to enter the two-year International Baccalaureate Program (IB) for their junior and senior years. Students knew the benefits of the IB program as well as the rigidity of the curriculum. Puente students had been versed on the stringent requirements necessary to gain admittance into the IB program, but many were determined to reach the level of academic rigor and effective literacy skills mandatory to be successful in this prestigious program. As the Puente program continued to grow, and as more students gained the confidence and academic knowledge necessary for entrance into the IB program,
they became the model for successful writing, literary analysis, and cultural literacy. What follows is a brief review of how an academic course in which multicultural literature is included alongside the “canon” can garner great results.

The Puente High School Project began in the fall of 1993 in five California school districts to address the issue of the lack of representation of Latino youth in higher education. Latinos now are the nation’s largest minority group, and in California they compose the largest portion of the school age population, totaling around 42% (Gándara and Moreno 465). Yet Latinos are the least likely to attend college and obtain a degree. Great ethnic disparities are evident in the colleges and universities nationwide and especially in California. More than 30% of Asian high school students qualify to attend the University of California, as do about 13% of white graduates, but less than 4% of Latinos meet the entrance criteria for admission (Gándara 10). The Puente Project was established as an early intervention and college preparatory program based on the community college program which was successful in increasing the low transfer rate of Latino students from 2-year to 4-year colleges and universities (Laden 34). The basic strategy for the high school concept was to successfully have Latino youth enroll directly into 4-year colleges.

The curricular focus of the Puente High School Project centers on the development of critical thinking and writing skills. The instructional component is composed of a 2-year-long college preparatory English class in which students are enrolled in their freshman and

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11 Puente was initially designed to target non-immigrant, English-speaking, Mexican American students as they enter high school in the ninth grade. Latino students from other counties also participate as well as other ethnic groups. At the heart of Puente’s goal is changing the consciousness of the school and the community about the potential for these students. For further review of the dismal numbers of Latino students not achieving academic success and the necessity for programs such as Puente, see Gándara, Choosing Higher Education: The Educational Mobility of Chicano Students.
sophomore years. The Puente teacher focuses on intensive writing process instruction with a major Latino literature focus. However, the literature is not exclusively multicultural. The literature is integrated into what a traditional college-preparatory curriculum would look like in order for students to be able to enter their junior and senior years fully prepared and capable of achieving success in the advanced placement or honors classes. The use of writing portfolios enables students to learn to critique writing, assess their own progress, and set high performance standards for themselves. It is important to state that the class is composed entirely of a heterogeneously skilled cohort of approximately 30 students and is intentionally designed to model the type of instruction that might normally be reserved for gifted or advanced writers. The Puente model features small groups responding to each other’s writing, an experience which helps students to become better, more critical, readers and listeners.

The program was purposely designed to target nonimmigrant, English-speaking Mexican American students since studies showed that for most ninth-grade Latinos in California—approximately two thirds—they are most at risk for dropping out of school (De La Rosa and Maw 32) and are ineligible for admission to the university (Latino Eligibility Task Force). The program attempts to serve a broad range of learners and in striving to impact the literacy development of this traditionally underserved group, the Puente English class embraces the long-standing belief that “meaning connecting” and “meaning making” are fundamental to any literacy curriculum in a democracy (Pradl 531). The Puente curriculum integrates both literary and expository texts; Mexican American literature with texts from the traditional literary canon; uses writing process pedagogy moving students from self-expression to analytical and critical writing; and bridges the cultures of the Puente
students and the standards that the mainstream academic curriculum requires of them (Pradl 529). It is this effective and successfully proven model of inclusion that will benefit underserved students whatever their ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic background.

Since the curriculum and strategies in the Puente model stress “meaning and the means for constructing meaning” and provide “opportunities to discuss what are read and extend knowledge” (Adelman 65), student achievement rises. Researchers who observed Puente classes found communities of inquiry:

Students openly shared their own responses as well as those of their parents; and some were in conflict. It became apparent that students were taking advantage of their opportunity to declare such unspoken feelings which are too often censored among their peers. It was obvious that such feelings emerged due to the “safe” environment that had been cultivated by the program. (Gándara 107)

For students who may never have been exposed to such fundamental strategies to build on literacy, for the underserved student, writing has been shown to develop best when it is integrated with other areas of the curriculum and connected to a student’s background and cultural experience (Needels 92). In regards approaching expository texts, such writing demands abstract logic and external knowledge. While the preliminary writing focuses on personal narratives to build on identity and sense of community, the Puente student has journeyed into academic writing that is essential for success at the university level. Cazden, researching and observing a writing class of Puente students, was startled to find how her approach to organizing a response to a topic differed dramatically from the students’. She observed, “a shared routine of events shaped the event they were discussing, value was placed on sensory details, and the writer’s impressions and feelings served to ground any subsequent interpretations or judgments” (Cazden 8).
Cultural identity is crucial to the development of literacy and by “providing a range of literacy experiences and explicitly linking them to their cultural sources” (Ferdman 201), students become masters of their knowledge. With the validation of one’s personal and cultural identity, it becomes clear that students spend more time delving into exploration of multiple narratives, analysis of expository texts, and writing at an academic level that is required at the post-secondary level.

Puente students were amazed to find connections to texts that reflected their diverse backgrounds—“I never thought there were Chicano writers. I was surprised when I heard. I think it has influenced me. The whole book of Sandra Cisneros, everything she said I could relate to” (Gándara 40)—which supports my assertion that when culturally and linguistically diverse literature is used in the classroom where the content provides a personal connection, this begins the creation of knowledge, opens up opportunities of self-exploration, and begins the questioning process which invariably leads to multicultural literacy. Unfortunately, as students move out of the Puente model into mainstream classrooms in their junior and senior years, the pressure to conform to the traditional canon in the English curriculum where there is either no multicultural literature included or at best very limited becomes a “culture shock.” Students accustomed to providing personal reflections and connections over the previous two years encountered lack of validation which provided a new dilemma regarding relevancy and engagement of literature.

In 1998 Gándara reported, “Puente students in the matched sample attended four-year colleges at nearly double the rate of non-Puente students who began high school with exactly the same academic and background characteristics” (155), which serves as a very powerful indicator of the importance that such an inclusive curricular program offers students.
CHAPTER 5

APPLICATION OF MULTICULTURAL CURRICULA: CASE STUDIES

It’s a story I can’t forget….written by a Chinese American about Chinese Americans. Before this, I had never read anything like it. This book was an inspiration to me. It made me become proud and unashamed of my culture.

~ Shirley, Sophomore Student

“Diverse Learners, Diverse Texts: Exploring Identity and Difference Through Literary Encounters”

The project thus far has concentrated on the overwhelming scholarship supporting curricula representative of our student populations. I have chosen the following case studies to demonstrate that positive results mandate the inclusion of multicultural, multiethnic literature and that such inclusion should be considered a requisite for all schools desiring to improve student achievement, establish academic rigor, and provide opportunities for academic discourse which will have life-long benefits for knowledge-acquisition.

In the first study, Steven Athanases centers his research questions on the importance of multicultural literature in students’ lives and the impact reading diverse literature had beyond the classroom (“Diverse Learners”). An important finding was that students’ engagement with the multicultural text often tackled difficult issues with positive outcomes reflected in students’ ability in questioning and making connections and comparisons with other culturally diverse populations. The inclusive curriculum also invited a search for other diverse literary texts to read.

Too often educators forget that students come to school not as a blank slate, but with prior knowledge in many areas which can benefit students’ academic growth. In Ruanda
Garth-McCullough’s case study, the use of multicultural readings generated evidence that tapping into that prior knowledge reaps multiple benefits in literacy and that providing ethnic and cultural texts for students to engage with promotes higher reading skills for all levels of students. While a large amount of money is invested in programs for the lower-performing student and it is assumed that the higher-performing student will always do well, the mid-level student is too often neglected and has somehow managed to slip through the cracks. The detriment to this student is the lack of academic rigor and the belief that “average” is just fine. The results found that the mid-performing students did exceptionally well again providing evidence that diverse literature should be included in English language classes.

In my last review, the debate of whether white students should also be included on discussions of culture is posed by researcher H. Richard Milner. The scholarship discussed thus far indicates that multicultural, multiethnic literature is important for all students. The teacher, Dr. Wilson, operates on the premise that educational equity for all students is exposure to the various viewpoints found in both canonical as well as multicultural literature. The merit of Dr. Wilson’s view is based on how best to provide a curriculum which provides academic discourse and a true picture of what it means to live in a pluralistic society. I include this review because I advocate inclusion not eradication of the canon. Education is filled with multiple viewpoints and all students should have the accessibility and opportunity to find their voices.

**Cultural Identification**

In an attempt to go beyond simply hypothesizing about the positive values of inclusion of multicultural content in the English classroom, Steven Athanases conducted an ethnographic study with the primary goal to document the impact that such diverse curricula
had on students and their reaction to the literary selections. Hoping to conduct a noteworthy ethnographic review, the researcher posited three research questions which substantiate my argument that the inclusion of multicultural, multiethnic literature holds powerful educational and personal implications for our students:

- When two teachers working in multiethnic settings implemented more inclusive curricula, what did students report about diverse literary works they read?
- Which texts did students find most memorable and meaningful and why?
- What functions did their encounters with these memorable literary works serve the young people?

It is important to note that both classes were culturally diverse which provided a similar sampling by which to examine how diverse populations responded to equally diverse literature. The participants were two urban 10th grade English classes of ethnically diverse students, each class from two different urban high schools serving predominantly low-income families. The ethnic diversity for each school was relatively similar and though nearly half of each class spoke a language other than English at home, most students reported that by their sophomore year they spoke English fairly confidently.

The teachers had commitments to addressing diversity in curricula and both had a major concern centered on difficulties in engaging students in reading. The teachers were identified as thoughtful about their literature teaching as well as their interest in supporting student learning. What factored heavily in the formulation of this study was the approach teachers took to teaching the diverse texts: instruction was grounded in elicitation of student literary response rather than the pursuit of canonical interpretations and classroom discourse was exploratory not merely a recitation of facts. The hypothesis was that these two
instructional features would maximize rich exploration of diverse literary works by diverse learners.

Two years after completion of the classes, data was collected through questionnaires regarding memories and reactions from their exposure to diverse literature in their English class. Also, curricular and instructional choices, analysis of discussion lessons as well as studying how students learned about literature and diversity revealed that the texts students found most memorable and meaningful where the texts students identified with. Students were able to rationalize that their kinship and identification with characters in these works stemmed from personal concerns, family nostalgia and loss, adolescent challenges, culture, gender, and sexual identity (Athanases, “Diverse Learners” 280). When classroom discussion on cultural issues led to private reflections on the development of cultural identities, the result for many students was a sense of validation about their ethnic heritage and served as an affirmation that “my people played in the building of America” (Athanases, “Diverse Learners” 285).

The affirmation of identity was not the only benefit in this study. For students in each class, some of the texts served to look at social inequities in substantive ways for the first time. For a recent immigrant from the Philippines, for example, after reading Black Boy by Richard Wright, he shared his lack of knowledge about racism in this country as well as the treatment of African Americans. Though he had heard in school in the Philippines that there had been problems for African Americans, his reading of this book inspired him to read more about these issues. Conversely, United States born students had known very little about the history of African Americans and when reading texts written by African Americans valued this new learning.
Evidence pointed to some student resistance to either literary characters or challenging conversations about texts, but the teachers were quick to present texts which either clarified reasoning for literary portrayal, or in the case of one of the teacher’s class, Reiko Liu, choosing to read “Dear Anita”\(^{12}\) because some of her students had expressed homophobic responses to Marguerite’s struggles with sexuality during the study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The results also made quite clear the importance that instruction plays in fostering students’ thinking about literature, identity and diversity.

The most telling result of this ethnography is the obvious necessity for such diversity of literature in the classroom. Two years after the observations had been done, through written reflections and discussions, students reported how enraged they had become in their senior English literature course with a teacher who taught mostly through lecture, who elicited merely factual information, and who was always in pursuit of canonical interpretations of canonical texts. They noted that the value of self-discovery that they had made as students in their 10th grade English class was a powerful tool in making connections between the books in school and the experiences of their personal and community lives:

Classroom discussions on cultural issues scaffolded readers’ private reflections on the development of cultural identities. Sometimes the readers continued to discuss classroom issues on highly engaging cultural themes with friends and

\(^{12}\) Steven Athanases describes the responses of this multiethnic class of sophomore students on a lesson dealing with gay and lesbian experiences. The teacher, Reiko Liu, engaged her students in this lesson when concerns over similar feelings were expressed in Angelou’s work. Brian McNaught’s essay “Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual” illustrates how a careful selection of text, a classroom climate that welcomes thoughtful discussion of diversity, and sensitive treatment of gay and lesbian concerns can deepen students’ understanding about identities and oppression, “which, in the context of an ethnic literature curriculum, can help students develop a deeper understanding of the common ground that oppressed groups divided by difference share” (“Diverse Learners” 231). Athanases’ article, “A Gay-Themed Lesson in an Ethnic Literature Curriculum: Tenth Graders’ Responses to ‘Dear Anita,’” was a result of his first study discussed here.
family members and sometimes explored in more private internal reflections. For Alberto, the reading of two short works by Filipino authors allowed him a special connection to the literature that likewise fostered pride. He spoke to his parents about both works over dinner…. Having this privileged access to cultural content and literary meaning engaged Alberto and fostered a sense of validation about his ethnic heritage, helping him to see the part that “my people played in the building of America.” (Athanases, “Diverse Learners” 285)

The on-going debate on whether the inclusion of multicultural literature at the secondary level benefits the culturally and linguistically diverse student—for that matter all students—will continue to be debated as long as governmental mandates such as NCLB lead education in the wrong direction. It is crucial that anyone involved in educating students be aware that there is still much to be done to close that achievement gap. Athanases in his ethnographic study points to the utilization of methods which at times have lacked the rigor needed to make results noteworthy, where interventions have been only short term but which are necessary if the diversity of literature is to become more than an after thought or a politically correct statement:

This study substantiates the promise of teaching multicultural literature and marks the need for redirection in conversations on content integration to the essential nature of instruction. Our curricular theorizing must include the voices, preferences, and reported learning of diverse learners and analyses of the essential role of discourse that fosters their reflections on literature, culture, and identity. (“Diverse Learners” 293)

As an advocate of a more inclusive curriculum that is reflective of our culturally and linguistically diverse students, I maintain it becomes even more apparent that research conducted thus far is going unheeded. The unfortunate reality is that school districts are more concerned with student achievement that is measurable through percentages and scores.

This study substantiates the promise and the power of multicultural literature, which can increase the value students place on constructing meaning, exploration of interpretation and discussion of culture and identity for themselves. After all, many school mission
statements claim they are all about creating critical thinkers, self-directed learners, sensitivity to diversity, and becoming active members of their community. This study shows that when students are exposed to diverse texts, they become diverse learners.

**ACCESSING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE TO TAP INTO LITERACY**

I have stated in this paper the importance of creating, adopting, and utilizing an inclusive curricula to promote critical thinkers and, equally important, to guide students in increasing their knowledge base. This has been highlighted by the review of several academic scholars who have themselves conducted a plethora of studies. The findings have demonstrated the positive and encouraging results gained by students. An area which has especially proven to be beneficial for increasing multicultural literacy is tapping into students’ prior knowledge. Equally important is understanding and acknowledging that our students enter classrooms with prior knowledge. As educators, this knowledge can further assists teachers in assessing where they need to begin structuring lessons in their quest in literacy development. Over the years I have always wondered how I could best determine the level of skills my students came to the class with each year and began measuring growth by beginning with a baseline writing piece. This afforded me the insight into where I needed to focus my lessons. This study was chosen because I believe that too often students are not given credit for what knowledge they already possess and for the teacher this bit of information could be insightful and helpful in designing and creating diverse literature selections. Also, over the years I have found difficulty in determining comprehension levels for all my students. This is may not be of concern for the higher-achieving students, but this is cause for concern for my lower and mid-level students.
The operating premise of this study is that culture influences knowledge, beliefs, and values, and those factors are what determine comprehension. If, when reading, students have access to tools that they develop in other sociocultural contexts, their comprehension will increase. Therefore, it should stand to reason that prior knowledge should increase comprehension because it will enable students to draw on their own experiences as a frame of reference for understanding the context and details of the story (Garth-McCullough 5).

The argument I have presented in this paper, that diverse literature is essential to empower student learning through identification and cultural knowledge of the texts read, is a major factor in discussing this study and serves to strengthen my position.

Ruanda Garth-McCullough, the researcher of this study, explores the relationship between cultural orientation of literature and reading comprehension to determine its effect on low, mid, and high level readers. Students’ reading comprehension performance was analyzed to determine the role that culturally-bound prior knowledge plays in the comprehension process for the three identified levels (1). Garth-McCullough noted that “literacy instruction is a clear example of content that often conveys cultural orientation through language, values, meaning, beliefs, style rituals, and preference….texts are culturally loaded” (4), yet prior knowledge has received less attention than other strategies for improving comprehension.

Underperformance of African American students has been debated and analyzed from many perspectives and the reasons why still remain unsettled. These arguments of African Americans’ low achievement levels often hurl blame onto students, their families, communities, and socioeconomic conditions for the assumed lack of ability, interest, and motivation (Garth-McCullough 2-3). Garth-McCullough, in this study stipulates that
educators must better identify the learning process variables in the classroom that either interfere or promote students’ performance. Further, the researcher purports that social and linguistic experiences are especially beneficial since they influence students’ access to and comprehension of curricula (Gee 52). By analyzing the prior knowledge of an economically and academically diverse group of African American students, this study explored the relation between the cultural orientation of literature and student literacy rates. The following were the targeted concerns:

- While related research offers theoretical support for incorporating students’ cultural experiences into the classroom, there is a dearth of empirical studies examining the effects of using culturally relevant materials on student achievement.

- Traditional research on reading has often focused on the psychological processes of the individual. More recent research views comprehension as the construction of the meaning of written communication that results from an exchange of ideas between the interpreter and the content in a specific communicative context (Harris, Hodges, and Association of International Reading 385).

- It is believed that when the intended message relates to readers’ experiences, they are better able to invoke background knowledge to construct the intended meaning. For this study, students’ prior knowledge of text content is explored to assess its effect on comprehension.

- The framing of this study utilized Wertsch’s Tool Kit Analogy which posits that individuals use the tools they have available to them, such as language and prior knowledge to construct meaning and that tools, whether classified as technical (computer) or psychological (sign systems) play a role in mediating human action.

The target participants of this study totaled 117 eighth grade students; all students were African American whose average reading level was measured at a seventh-grade level. Students read six short stories which were taken from young adult multicultural anthologies and students completed demographic, prior knowledge, and reading comprehension instruments. The short stories were divided into two sets, each containing three stories, each
of which represented different cultural orientation: African American, Chinese American, and European American.

The main purpose of the study was to determine the role cultural relevance plays in the building of literacy skills. A basic assumption in this analysis is that cultural knowledge is a significant tool that mediates the comprehension process. It was noted that though some students may appear to be low performing, in fact they are being assessed with material that “does not match their schemata” (Garth-McCullough 15). As expected at the end of the study, the high-achieving students significantly out-performed the other students in all three sets of texts, but the greatest revelation was that students’ level of culturally bound prior knowledge of the African American stories’ content significantly influenced literacy rates despite their prior achievement level. Garth-McCullough reveals that given the improved performance of students when they interact with texts based in a familiar cultural context, multicultural texts can be an effective tool in boosting literacy achievement for all students, including lower-income mid-performers. Such an approach may capitalize on the opportunities to enhance talent amongst students that are in jeopardy of being under-nurtured in the current educational climate of NCLB.

The results of this study verify that prior knowledge improves literacy rates, especially for the disenfranchised students of color. This investigation highlights the supportive role in acquiring literacy skills for African American students, but it should also reflect how the use of diverse literature can benefit all students, at all levels of academic achievement. Garth-McCullough claims that “the results provide validity for culturally relevant teaching by exploring the relationship between prior knowledge, curricula, and performance” (22). The study confirms that allowing for the inclusion of multicultural
literature is important for students who perform in the middle ranges, those who are disenfranchised, and for those students whose cultural experiences are unrelated to many of their academic tasks.

In the era of NCLB and limiting critical analysis and critical reasoning, the results indicate that the improved performance of students when they interact with texts based in familiar cultural context, multicultural literature serves as an effective tool in improving literacy achievement for all students, especially lower-income, mid-performing students.

**MULTICULTURAL LITERACY FOR ALL?**

I have claimed that several reasons for developing an inclusive curriculum where multicultural, multiethnic literature is supported in the classroom are to empower students to take ownership of their learning, to have students comprehend the value of identifying their cultural identities, and to provide not only academic but cultural literacy as well. Certainly the documented case studies reveal how students responded positively and grew personally and academically from the exposure and involvement with diverse curricula. This demonstrates a positive promise for proving the importance of transforming curriculum from a Eurocentric perspective to a multi-ethnic focus, especially for the student of color. Is a multicultural curriculum necessary for teaching in a predominantly white teaching context?

In H. Richard Milner’s ethnographic study, the author sought to understand an African American English teacher’s multicultural curriculum transformation and teaching in a suburban, mostly white high school. Using Bank’s model of multicultural curriculum integration, the study focused on a context that might otherwise be ignored because there was not a large student-of-color representation in the school. Evidence is certainly needed to better understand how the use of multicultural literature manifests itself in class settings.
where students are predominately white and attending suburban schools. This is important because white students will interact with multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, and multiethnic people in the United States just as people of color will interact with mainstream students. However, Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol state that “in suburban schools in which the population is basically white and middle-class, multicultural education is often viewed as unnecessary” (87) and schools with this demographic perpetuate the erroneous belief that the study of diverse literature is unwarranted and unnecessary.

The researcher in this study was primarily concerned with the following questions:

- What is the nature of the multicultural curriculum and what are students learning or not learning from the choices selected?
- How was the curriculum transformed to include gendered, cultural and racial meaning?
- How were the experiences of the students maximized to reflect learning opportunities?

The uniqueness of this study revolved around an African American teacher who was race and culture conscious, and who intentionally developed, incorporated, and transformed lessons of race and culture in work that focused on student learning opportunities. The school itself was an economically affluent Midwestern suburban high school with approximately 86% of the schools population European American, 4% Black or African American, 10% Asian American, 2% speaking limited English and 2% who came from low-income homes.

One of the ways the teacher transformed the curriculum was by providing a set of experiences and a multitude of examples to guide students through self-reflections as they worked to understand others. Borrowing from Bank’s words, “students need to understand the context to which their own lives and fates are tightly tied to those of powerless and
victimized groups” (Banks, *Introduction* 81) and Dr. Wilson, the teacher, believed students needed to gain a level of self-knowledge and awareness.

The teacher reported:

They need to know…especially in my senior composition courses, I try and go beyond the Eurocentric literature. Most of the contributors to literature were made by White men. The main thing I consider, besides my kids then, is the importance of exposing the kids to writers who make up the world: the Hispanics, and the Hispanic Americans, the Asians, and the Asian Americans, the Africans, and the African Americans. You see? Women—women are also important because most of the writers were White men. I want my girls to read about women, too. I try to broaden their horizons. They are on their way out into the real world, and everybody they meet in the world might not look like the people here. To me, this is what’s important in the decision making. (qtd. in Milner 406)

It becomes obvious that the teacher is asserting the need to connect her students’ own experiences with new ones that may enlighten them about issues of race and culture. Of special note is the fact that the teacher wanted the female students to be exposed to women writers. Clearly, as hooks explained, women are often left out of the conversation and content in the classroom (47). It becomes quite clear that the issue of culture was central in the teacher’s thinking about student learning. Exposing the students to “the other” and to “the self” was important given that:

Many of these kids don’t have any idea about how other people around the world live. They are sheltered. They are good kids, but they just don’t see it; so because for years I’ve been the only Black teacher they encountered, I try and plan and develop a set of experiences for my students that will make them better human beings when they leave. That’s why we all participate in self-reflections to help find our niche per se. We have to discover what we’re good at, you see? And part of it is helping them understand that we aren’t all the same, and it’s not their fault that things are the way they are, but we certainly need to know about it. Knowledge is power, and power is change. (qtd. in Milner 407)
It is evident that the teacher was attempting to help her students develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions necessary to function well in the world—a point that multicultural theorists often point to as essential for all students (Arias and Poynor 531).

The use of the multicultural curriculum was utilized by the teacher to broaden or change the mind-sets to think about others in more relevant and meaningful ways. There were instances, however, when delving into sensitive issues caused “discomfort” for students, and it was important to treat such areas with care and sensitivity. What I find especially important to this study was the teacher perspective—as teachers we teach what we know, suggesting that the worlds we know, live in, and negotiate influence how curricular choices are conceived and how they are represented inside and outside the classroom (Milner 396). Dr. Wilson, the teacher in this study, wanted students not only to better understand differences and similarities among people, but she also encouraged them to take that knowledge and become change agents “through their knowledge about the social and political” nature as exposed through the literature, class discussions, and their personal experiences.

The battle for teachers and schools to include a multicultural, multiethnic perspective, even when students of color are not the majority in the school or the classroom, still must be included. According to Dr. Wilson:

What I want to talk about is basically how we teach a book called To Kill a Mockingbird—how we don’t intently focus on the political, social, and racial aspect of that book. There are two parts to that book…I didn’t have any Black students in that class my first year, and I’ve found that when I do have Black students or Asian students or Hispanic students, they see what I’m trying to do and say because we live those experiences. It is my White students who don’t understand, and I say that there are cultural differences that exist when you teach in a predominantly White situation. They [cultural differences] ought to be
explored if we are doing what we need to do—preparing our kids for the real
world. (qtd. in Milner 414)

Giroux theorizes that such conversations of social issues and questions of identity
generated from the inclusion of diverse curricula in a classroom where white students are the
majority help students comprehend the role they play in societal issues of culture:

Of course, more is at stake here than avoiding the romanticizing of minority
voices, or the inclusion of western traditions in the curriculum. Multiculturalism
in this sense is about making whiteness visible as a racial category; that is, it
points to the necessity of providing white students with the cultural memories that
enable them to recognize the historically and socially constructed nature of their
identities. (Schooling 9)

This is vitally important since the inclusion of multicultural literature should not be used to
benefit some and exclude others. That would defeat the whole goal of inclusion which is
necessary for all our students.

The research and theories presented here have made it clear that teachers and school
districts need to rethink, renegotiate, and transform curriculum from a top-heavy focus on
canonical or traditional models—in which many ethnic groups are either misrepresented or
not represented at all—to curricula that are inclusive of different racial, linguistic and cultural
groups (Arias and Poynor 420). Additionally, pedagogical approaches must meet the needs
of students. As Ladson-Billings maintains, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that:

serves to empower students to the point where they will be able to examine
critically educational content and process and ask what its role is in creating a
truly democratic and multicultural society. It uses the students’ culture to help
them create meaning and understand the world. Thus, not only academic success,
but also social and cultural success is emphasized. (“Good Teaching” 160)

Ladson-Billings further explains that culturally relevant pedagogy:

uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of
the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not
seeing one’s history, culture, or background represented in textbook or
curriculum…culturally relevant teaching is pedagogy that empowers students
intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. (“Reading” 317-18)

Though an emphasis is placed on the methodology employed by teachers to bring a more diverse educational atmosphere into the classroom, it is equally important to provide the materials for students to engage in discourse of culture, knowledge, prejudice, and identity. By infusing multiple views and perspectives into the curriculum so that it is not only representative of one dominant view or way of experiencing and thinking, as Banks declares, students are given opportunities to engage in critical thinking and to develop more reflective perspectives about what they are learning (Educating Citizens 93). The integration of writing and reading from a cultural perspective is also a promising means of engaging students in academic discourse, which further serves to enrich students’ ability to achieve academic success (31). Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol proposed that “students learn to be reflective, to adopt different perspectives, and to understand how what they are taught—the knowledge that schooling offers—has been shaped historically, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically” (97). By transforming our curricula, students will think critically and develop the skills to formulate, document, and justify their conclusions and generalizations” (Banks, “Multicultural Education” 32). Banks postulates that the transformative approach pushes students to look with the head and the heart as they critically examine issues both inside and outside the classroom (“Multicultural Education” 34). Similar to Freire’s pedagogical theory of what literacy should enable students to do, what I consider equally important is that diverse curricula provide a rich context for equity pedagogy because both “transformative curricula and equity pedagogy promote knowledge construction and curriculum reform”
(Banks and Banks, “Equity Pedagogy” 155). The end result then assumes that the cultures of all students are valid and which in turn ensures academic success for every student.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The growing diversity in our society beckons that we move from excoriating diversity as a weakness to legitimizing it as a strength.

~Michael Pavel, Introduction Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Difference

James A. Banks has eloquently stated in his An Introduction to Multicultural Education, “Just as fish are unable to appreciate the uniqueness of their aquatic environment, so are many mainstream American students unable to fully see and appreciate the uniqueness of their cultural characteristics” (Banks 2). This sentiment is what cements my position on the importance of including a variety of multicultural, multiethnic literature selections in the English language arts curriculum at the secondary level. The Puente High School model has documented the success students achieve when the diversity of literature is representative of their cultural backgrounds. By focusing students on the analytic skills of literacy in order that they might gain access to economic and social opportunities, the Puente English instructional model extends the boundaries of democratic inclusion in education (Pradl 539). This is critical in light of the stringent guidelines being imposed by NCLB and the misguided approach by school districts nationwide that mandate standardized exams. Mandated testing has caused philosophical dilemmas for teachers who at the outset of their teaching careers envision themselves teaching multicultural literature as a means to build on students’ personal experiences and to broaden students’ understanding of racial and cultural differences, only to find their goals difficult to implement. In Jane Agee’s case study of an
African American teacher’s struggle to teach in test-driven contexts, the teacher, Tina, was asked how she might approach multicultural literature in her classroom. Tina stated:

I believe that [it] is important that students be exposed to all types of literature. . . . I’m interested in how you would introduce multiculturalism in the classroom. Do you recommend that teachers explain to students why they are reading a particular novel, or do teachers simply need to carry on with the novel without giving any type of explanation? (qtd. in Agee 756)

Also, Tina was conflicted:

I am very concerned with promoting personal experience with literature; however, I do believe that I would be doing my students a disservice if I do not expose them to literary devices….If we ignore those aspects of English, how will our students be prepared for other classes? What about those standardized tests that are not just representations of students’ abilities? These areas of literature are indeed on these tests. (qtd. in Agee 758)

At the beginning of her first year of teaching, Tina wanted to change the literature curriculum and help students become thinkers. She also wanted them to do well with traditional skills like literary analysis, and perform well on standardized tests. But at the end of Tina’s third year of teaching in the English classroom, she found that her goals were incompatible with the mainstream ideologies driving curriculum and instruction at her school and failed to accomplish her goal of using inclusive literature in her curriculum citing restrictions due to testing standards (Agee 758).

If as a society we truly embrace that education must be a “life-giving process of joy and growth founded on the ethic of care and action for social education” (Ross and Pang vii), and if we believe that together a powerful foundation for schooling is basic for every student, then our educational laws, policies, politics and methodology for achieving this ideal must reflect a socially just society. Students should not be identified through degrees of achievement or be assigned labels of competency. Rather, students should be regarded as individuals who find relevancy in learning and reaching their own potential of success. As
educators, we must believe that we can make a difference in the lives of all students through active rather than passive action for equal access to education. When this is accomplished, all students become active learners and participants in our society where they will think, question, collaborate, and take a positive role in making our democracy just. In order to ensure that our classrooms are centers for academic achievement for all students, schools should be committed to providing equitable education and creating educational environments which empower students to analyze, to become integral members in communities of learners, and have the capability to effect positive change in our world.

The multi-dimensional tenets of multicultural education should be considered as the foundational structure for all schools. However, though the scholarship and research verifies that revamping curricular choices which are reflective of a pluralistic society benefit students and provide the skills and literacy to make informed decisions for their future, inclusion for too many is still a vast and overwhelming concept to accept. The ethnographic studies reviewed here demonstrate that the use of multicultural literature can help students master essential literacy skills as well as helping to form communities of learners. Multicultural readings can be highly motivating and meaningful and students are more likely to master skills when content deals with their lived experiences, which creates relevancy, and in turn encourages engagement:

A curriculum which values diverse cultures in an equitable way is self-affirming….It makes a statement to students about the importance of their present and future roles as participants and contributors to society. Research findings by Ogbu (289) point out that significant school failure does not occur in cultural groups that are positively oriented toward both their own and others’ cultures. These students demonstrate a higher educational success rate. (Milne 6)
To develop a true community of learners in the classroom, educators must strive for integration of multiculturalism throughout the curriculum. Reaching this level of community, as has been evidenced and demonstrated using the Puente High School model, involves a facet of unspoken trust that can only happen when students find validation in their surrounding educational environment. Research confirms that multicultural materials do affect students’ attitudes, achievements, and concepts (Landt 693). Therefore it is important that educators bring students into the academic world by honoring and building on what they know and by providing students with the opportunity for personal as well as academic growth.

Gregory Jay, in a call to end the study of “American” literature and “construct a multicultural and dialogical paradigm for the study of writing in the United States” (46), asserts that students of color often feel “insulted, embarrassed, ashamed, and angered when reading and hearing negative portrayals of their ethnic groups or not hearing anything at all” (116). Therefore, the content of the curriculum should be developed in a way that it does not reify stereotypes and racism. Jay reiterates that the “canonical status of a text is often justified by reference to its superior ‘power’ and its endurance ascribed to the timeless claim it makes on readers” (61). The implication then is demonstrating that diverse literature establishes the power to move a reader:

Teachers have the responsibility to empower previously marginalized texts and readers, and to teach in a way that we risk surprising and painful changes in the interpretive habits, expectations, and values of our students—and of ourselves. If we acknowledge that the aesthetic power of a text is a function of the distribution of material and cultural power in society, our pedagogy cannot help but become politically embroiled. In teaching students to value other cultures and other world views…we as readers and writers may become agents of change, not just subjects of discourse. (61)
In 2005, former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch wrote, "We should thank President George W. Bush and Congress for passing the No Child Left Behind Act .... All this attention and focus is paying off for younger students, who are reading and solving mathematics problems better than their parents' generation" (“Multiculturalism” 8). However, in 2009 Ravitch changed her mind. In a commentary in *Education Week* entitled “Time to Kill NCLB,” Ravitch states:

I was known as a conservative advocate of many of these policies, but I've looked at the evidence and I've concluded they're wrong. They've put us on the wrong track. I feel passionately about the improvement of public education and I don't think any of this is going to improve public education. (30)

In her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, she attributes the failure of No Child Left Behind to the way the law requires school districts to use standardized testing. Ravitch started to see the danger of the culture of testing that was spreading through every school, community, town, city, and state (*Death and Life* 32-34). In addition, states responded to NCLB by dumbing down their standards so that they could claim to be making progress. Some states declared that between 80%-90% of their students were proficient, but on the federal test only a third or less were considered proficient. Because the law demanded progress only in reading and math, schools were incentivized to show gains only on those subjects. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in test-preparation materials. Meanwhile, there was no incentive to teach the arts, science, history, literature, geography, civics, foreign languages or physical education. In short, accountability turned into a nightmare for American schools, producing graduates who were drilled regularly on the basic skills but were often ignorant about almost everything else. Colleges continued to complain about the poor preparation of entering students, who not only
had meager knowledge of the world but still required remediation in basic skills. (Ravitch, “Standardized Testing”).

Ravitch concedes that:

...on our present course, we are disrupting communities, dumbing down our schools, giving students false reports of their progress, and creating a private sector that will undermine public education without improving it. Most significantly, we are not producing a generation of students who are more knowledgeable, and better prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship. That is why I changed my mind about the current direction of school reform. (“Standardized Testing”)

Though the critical pedagogists and multiculturalists have certainly begun a movement of enlightenment, there is still a considerable need for more research on the implementation of all levels of multicultural education. The results will unquestionably verify the positive outcomes that can be gained by all students when transformative curricular choices reflective of our pluralistic population show equitable educational goals as well as societal issues of justice. The implementation of curricula balanced with multicultural and canonical works can form a greater breadth of study for students; a writing initiative does not mean that literature should be tossed out in favor of expository texts since both forms function specific needs for a well-rounded platform for writing; and as long as college entrance requirements and political mandates enter our classrooms, as educators we must be steadfast in our beliefs that knowledge acquisition far outweighs the dumbing down caused by teaching to these high-stakes exams.

I acknowledge that canons are as Purves defines, “capricious human selections among artifacts and are subject to change as the criteria change” (5). Taken in this context, it might be reasoned that the “canon wars” will continue to exist as long as there is disagreement on
what is considered inclusive. Catharine Stimpson takes a reasoned and instructive look at these wars and the impact on multicultural education:

A literary canon, whatever the name, gets formed in the manufactories and networks of history. Literary scholarship can and does trace these processes. A canon is the consequence of turbulent, impure historical dramas. When the last act seems to be over, a canon stands forth as “the canon.” Each drama has three sets of actors: texts (visual, oral, musical, written), institutions, and audiences. Because all of these actors change over time, the drama of the canon must be performed again and again. (180-81)

I consider studying Aristotle and Shakespeare as important as studying W.E.B. DuBois and Anzaldúa. As educators it is imperative that students obtain a broader view of how language evolved, how cultures influenced Western civilization, and that “knowledge is a social construction, that it reflects the perspectives, experiences, and values of the cultures that construct it…” (Banks, “Multicultural Education” 34). It then falls to curriculum planners—teachers, districts, schools—to select and include literary texts that represent the diversity in our classrooms and to remember that revising canons is necessary as students and cultures change. It is time to fan the embers of the dying fire that began with the civil rights agenda to gain representation of multiple cultures in our educational settings. It is time to relocate the multicultural curriculum from a stasis of dreaming and reflection to what could be, to actions and realities of what must be.

No district or school can consider that it is doing a proper or complete job unless its students develop multicultural literacy. It is imperative that school districts, administrators and teachers stop fostering a climate of fear and stop hiding behind NCLB. It is time that they acknowledge that a multicultural, multiethnic curriculum is necessary to increase educational equality for all students—both gender groups, students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and for linguistically diverse students. The evidence has shown that
programs devoted to inclusion provide not only quality educational opportunities for
students, but serve to fundamentally prepare students for life after high school.

My project was undertaken because I believe too few speak out when wrongs are
being committed against our youth. Mumblings abound in meetings, yet too few want to
rock the boat; maintaining the status quo is not acceptable. Depriving students the
opportunity to explore their options by placing them in remedial classes because of their
designated label assigned by misguided administrations reacting to NCLB is limiting
educational growth; depriving students the ability to voice concerns about how they will
achieve success and proceed on their intended paths because they find no relevancy in classes
causes apathy; not supplying students the tools necessary to transform themselves into
productive members of our society is a tragedy. I walk into the classroom knowing I have a
responsibility to change lives, inspire and foster multiple viewpoints, and transform students
to owners of their own knowledge base. Sonia Nieto states: “In thinking about why learning
needs to be more centrally connected with multicultural education, an image came to me: the
light in students’ eyes when they become excited about learning. There is nothing quite as
dazzling as this sight” (The Light xix). I want to see the fire in their eyes, the passion in their
writing, the confidence in their step; I want to leave the classroom each day knowing they
want to return ready to engage in academic discourse and take on the roles of future leaders.
When students know they are validated and that they are as equally important as anyone else
on our campuses, then success will become a reality. This is a tall order to fill, however, but
taking little steps toward change will eventually turn into triumphant leaps of achievement
for all students. Adopting an inclusive literature focus is only the beginning of a larger
picture of effective change. With the emphasis on student-centered outcomes, teachers have in their power the ability to “ignite that flame.”

The research has shown the transformative approach is best for achieving academic success in our pluralistic society. At the heart of this approach is the teacher. The transformation for students requires the guidance of teachers, and the attitudes they bring to the classroom can set the tone for how students will view themselves academically and how they will take charge of their own learning. More research on how teachers can influence student outcomes is beyond the scope of this paper, but certainly further study would be warranted. My strong conviction that curricular development that creates opportunities for student interaction with texts studied, that challenges students to participate in academic discussions about relevant and thought-provoking topics, and the requisite literacy skills necessary for engaging in the dialogue of life is evident from what has been presented in my paper. Placing diverse literature in the hands of our students will bring balance to the current educational structure and serve to form a more inclusive methodology for enhancing our curriculum. No longer should the mindless testing regiments of NCLB dictate what is best for students; no longer should we have to choose whether to include Anaya over Twain; no longer should we sacrifice poetic literature over expository texts. No child will be left behind when as educators we acknowledge that students need an extensive repertoire of skills that will prepare them for all facets of their life. Implementing a multicultural literacy should not be considered just a passing political trend but a transformative ideal that has been too long in coming.
REFERENCES


