
Ribbons, Racism, and a Placenta

*The Challenges and Surprises of
Culturally Relevant Teaching*

Kate Lyman

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Building on the work of scholars in the area of culturally relevant teaching, Lyman's study captures the power of attending to knowledge students bring with them as they enter her second- and third-grade classroom. Capitalizing on conversations she overhears on the playground and in the classroom, Lyman builds a unique curriculum that attends to the needs and concerns of her students while meeting—and often exceeding—the standards those same students are expected to master. By examining recordings of classroom interactions, field notes, student work, and district measures, Lyman shows the power of a curriculum that has direct relevance to her students' lives.

* * * *

PROLOGUE

I was told that I needed to find a framework for how I would study my teaching. I was puzzled. I had put the sweat and tears, the fears and triumphs of a whole year into the writing of it, as well as the political, educational, and humanistic beliefs that have sustained me through 20 years of teaching. For me, my story of this year of teaching was enough. It was my framework.

Academicians and friends made suggestions. Was my framework "action research"? What about "narrative inquiry" or "feminism"? I was tempted to look up some of the articles I had read in my graduate classes, in the hope of discovering a framework that would fit my paper.

Once I started to focus on *why* I wanted to write about my teaching, the framework that emerged from red ribbons, racism, and a placenta was that of culturally relevant teaching. I had found my sought-after framework.

First, I believe in the power of the story. This is, after all, a story. It is a narrative of my teaching experiences. Although it contains aspects of "research"—taped and recorded interactions, extensive field notes, and collections of student work—it is, in essence, a story. That there is more than one version to these accounts is something I realized when I heard my student teacher recount her version of a story that I use here (the one about the student's reaction to the bloody placenta). The facts were different. "Is that how it happened?" I asked her. "Yeah, I was there," she attested. We were both there, but our stories were different. But the differences weren't important. In the telling of the story, the essence of the experience was conveyed. In fact, as Tim O'Brien writes in *The Things They Carried* (a soldier's account of the Vietnam War), "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 204). I tell these stories, in part, simply because they are good stories. Even people who aren't teachers enjoy them. But the purpose of my storytelling is not essentially entertainment.

But when I started putting more of my stories in writing, it became clear that my narratives were often related to the issues of social justice and equity that were a focus in my classroom. As I told or read my stories to larger audiences, such as my narrative inquiry class, my Wisconsin Writing Project group, and my action research cohort, then—when I finally became convinced to submit a story for publication—I became more aware of the political potential of my storytelling.

The second part of my framework brings me to the political aspect of my writing. I wish my politics could fit neatly into a category of social thought. "He (she) is a Marxist . . . a po-mo queen (A what? Oh, a post-modern feminist) . . . a social reconstructionist," I would hear in graduate

school classes. But none of the academic papers I have read influenced my political thoughts to the extent that my life experiences have. I was brought up by parents who had advanced degrees in English and positions teaching at a university. My thinking was influenced by my parents, who were "liberal" in politics, at a time that being "liberal" could mean being blacklisted as a Communist. As the "campaign manager" in my eighth-grade class for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, I became infused with the era's Camelot idealism, a belief in the possibility of social change that has stayed with me for the last 40 years. Cynicism about and awareness of fundamental flaws within our system came with learning about the civil rights struggles of the late 1950s and the 1960s. While I was a student at the University of Wisconsin from 1964 to 1968, I marched and demonstrated against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. This experience moved me much later to become involved in actions and delegations supporting groups struggling for freedom from U.S. control in Central America. My thinking was also influenced by reading feminist literature and attending Equal Rights Amendment rallies. I began to critically review and permanently alter my own views and understanding of social constructions of femininity. Finally, bringing up three daughters—on my own—made me more aware of women's issues, both in relation to psychological and social pressures on girls and women and in regard to economic status. I broadened my conceptions of what it meant to be underprivileged economically, at least as much as my middle-class background and my status as a single mother dependent on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) would allow. Coming to some understanding of gender and economic oppression was a factor that helped sensitize me to issues of oppressed groups and move me to work with racial minorities, gays and lesbians, and people with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). So it was my life experiences, rather than one specific train of social or political thought, that led me to my belief that profound social changes must occur before our society can be considered democratic or equitable. I chose to teach, however, not because I thought I could change the inequities of our society through my work, but because through reaching kids and their parents, by working with student teachers, and by planning and talking with other teachers, I felt I could practice my beliefs. Also, I've been realizing lately that reaching other teachers through my writing may be a way to work toward meaningful changes in education.

Why am I telling this story? The more I think about it, the more complicated the answer becomes. However, the easiest part of the answer is that I am telling this story because I was doing action research. Twenty credits' worth of graduate school classes had convinced me that very little in the writings of the academics would help me tell my story. When I tried

to understand concepts like "dialogic heteroglossia" or "institutional hegemony," I always found myself looking back to my classroom experiences. Action research enabled me to look to myself and my colleagues, the classroom teachers, as the experts and to my classroom as the source of data. I had faith that, if I closely observed and reflected on the daily interactions that occurred in my classroom, I would find "answers" at least as profound, and certainly more entertaining and easier to read, than those contained in the academic articles. In choosing this particular story, out of all the possible stories, for my action research, I found my topic in my journal. The most compelling narratives in my journal always centered on the issue of practicing culturally relevant teaching with my class. For a while, I toyed with narrowing my discussion to the topic of the work I was doing with poetry. But, although the use of poetry did fit in with my final telling, focusing on the poetry sessions felt like a lie; it wasn't the essence or the "story truth" of the year's experiences.

BURNING ISSUES

"When you introduce yourself, let me know if you have any burning questions about the human body or birth," requested the mom of one of my second graders. Mary, a nurse in a hospital, had volunteered to speak to my class of second and third graders about an aspect of our current unit. Listening intently to each other, students patiently waited their turns to say their names and articulate their questions. "Can you live with just one kidney?" "How can twins be a boy and a girl?" "Sex . . . well, I know what it is, but I just want to know more about it." "Why do people make so much noise when they have sex?" "How does the placenta come out?"

After answering the questions and talking about her job of assisting with the birth and care of babies, Mary surprised the class with something she had brought from the hospital—a placenta. Anticipating exclamations of shock, possibly disgust, and certainly giggles, I was impressed by the students' reaction. In a single voice, they expressed their wonder and excitement in a slow crescendo: "WHOOOOOA!" There wasn't an inattentive child as Mary held up and explained the function of the umbilical cord, the sac, and other parts of the placenta. With their hands protected by latex gloves, the kids took turns touching the placenta. "Yuck!" exclaimed a girl who was returning from a resource class. "What do you mean, 'Yuck'?" someone challenged, "That's a placenta. You had one, too." "But mine wasn't that bloody," the newcomer protested, at the same time inching over to get a better view.

Looking at the placenta, a human organ, ejected that day from the body of a woman who had just given birth, I felt moved and inspired. The

placenta, along with the students' questions and their exclamations of wonder and curiosity during hands-on exploration, struck me as symbols of the power of a relevant curriculum. It was an appropriate and dramatic climax to our unit on the human body, the last of several units that were central to the students' lives, interests, and experiences. For all my effort to measure the success of the curriculum through test scores, journal writing, transcriptions of classroom discussions, and samples of student writing, I realized that the true impact of the curriculum was most simply and profoundly demonstrated by that softly articulated "WHOOOOOA!"

In the early 1970s, when I returned to school to get my teaching certification, I read in *Teacher* by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) that Maori children who had failed to learn how to read or write using traditional methods could achieve literacy by learning words organic to their culture and experiences. The image presented in this book of children reading and rereading battered cards displaying key words like "kiss," "cry," and "ghost" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 67) stayed with me through the 1970s and 1980s, and into the 1990s. As I taught preschool through third grade at Lowell, Lincoln, Midvale, and Hawthorne schools, I learned that, although "culturally relevant teaching" worked well with all children, it was particularly important in motivating low-income children and children of color. My experiences were confirmed by the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings, who studied successful teachers of African American children. Ladson-Billings found that

... culturally relevant teaching attempts to make knowledge problematic. Students are challenged to view education (and knowledge) as a vehicle for emancipation, to understand the significance of their culture, and to recognize the power of language. As a matter of course, culturally relevant teaching makes a link between classroom experiences and the students' everyday lives. These connections are made in spirited discussions and classroom interactions . . . By owning the form of expression, students become enthusiastic participants in classroom discourse and activities. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 94)

"As a researcher," wrote Ladson-Billings, "I am cynical about the potential for change. But as an African-American parent I am desperate for change. I cling to the possibilities held forth by culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 91).

This school year struck me as the perfect time to take a closer look at my practice of culturally relevant teaching. Although I have always worked with diverse groups of students, this year was the first that the children of color would outnumber the White children. At the beginning of the year, I had in my class 22 children (10 boys and 12 girls), including

six African American children (pseudonyms are used throughout: Jeremy, Henry, Anitra, Valerie, Tony, and Tonisha), four biracial children (two identifying themselves as "Black"—Kendra and Renee—and two calling themselves "half Black" or "mixed"—Lena and Dana), two Asian American (Hmong) children (Blia and Joel), one Mexican American child (Steven), and nine European American children (Emily, Cassie, Junior, Samantha, Caleb, Sarah, Ian, Jana, and Adam). The students' families were also socioeconomically diverse, with more than half being low-income (as defined by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches). For the most part, parents had blue-collar or white-collar jobs; only a few were professionals. About half of the students lived at a low-income housing project.

The class also was very diverse in terms of academic achievement. On the districts' primary language arts assessment, the students' reading levels ranged from Preprimer 1 to eighth grade. Two students spent part of the day in a classroom for children with learning disabilities, and three spoke languages other than English at home. I was continuing with 15 students I had taught in a first-grade and second-grade combination the previous year; seven students, including three students who were new to the school, were new to my classroom.

The three second graders new to Hawthorne were of immediate concern to me because of their oppositional behavior, lack of participation in academic activities, and low reading and writing skills. On an initial Running Records screener, Renee and Henry scored at Preprimer 1 level and Tonisha scored at Preprimer 2 level. In practical terms, they were non-readers and very aware of it. They also had no confidence in writing; they were reluctant even to try invented spelling. Henry's first attempt at writing is unreadable. Renee's is hard to decipher through the erasures (she was trying to get the correct spellings from her friend, Anitra). Tonisha wrote a few words that she knew: "cat" and "dog." When I came over to her table to see her work, she said anxiously, "Are you going to make me erase it all and write it over again?" The moms of all three of the children said that their children were "slow" or "behind" and/or had "bad attitudes." The children's previous report cards showed below-average marks, mainly in behavior and language arts. Comments on their report cards include, "[Renee] is capable of doing better work"; "I would love to see [Tonisha] show more enthusiasm about learning"; and [Henry] has a tendency to take things—very quick—toys, candy, pencils and things that were in the teacher's drawers."

Although I was concerned about these three new students, I had many other children who were lagging academically or whom I knew to have serious emotional or behavioral issues. In this class—unlike others I've had—it soon became apparent that all the African American or biracial students were significantly behind in reading and writing skills and/or

had social or emotional issues that were causing them to “act out” in class or that were alienating them from school. I desperately needed to discover a curriculum that would not only lessen the academic gaps but also create the sparks needed to ignite the students’ passion for learning. It also soon became apparent to me that if significant learning were to occur, a cooperative classroom community needed to emerge and supersede all the interpersonal conflicts and cultural differences.

I have always had an intuitive faith in the efficacy of culturally relevant teaching, but this year appeared to be the perfect opportunity to take a closer look at my own practice. I decided to collect detailed records of day-to-day classroom experiences by writing in a journal, taking written and videotaped records of classroom discussions, and collecting students’ writing and records of their standardized test scores. Looking back at my data, I realize that I have gained knowledge of how culturally relevant teaching looks in action. Each thematic unit that I describe below has taught me something about what works, or doesn’t work, in the teaching of relevant issues to a diverse classroom.

NAME-CALLING

Some of the Best Lessons Arise From Classroom Incidents.

Because I was continuing with 15 (out of 22 total) students from last year, I was not expecting a difficult first week of school, but I was wrong!

August 28: First day of school! WOW! . . . Tonisha was a challenge. She defied most of my directions, only complying when I threatened her with consequences . . . Aside from the clique of African American girls, who, if I can’t get the upper hand, will try to run the classroom, a Kindergarten temper tantrum from one of the third graders and a kid who wasn’t on his Ritalin, something else was bothering me about the classroom dynamics. I couldn’t put my finger on it until after school, until I realized that . . . I am missing four of the strongest leaders from last year: Jordan, Calandra, Nathan, and Alexia. Those kids were the ones I turned to when other kids’ faces looked blank to analyze a situation in a story, to have a unique solution to a math problem, or to explain the injustices of the world. This class, I realize, now has a big hole.

I had planned a wetlands unit with another teacher, but now I had doubts about it:

I am worried about this wetland unit. Is it too far removed from these kids’ lives to be interesting? But there is a marshy area right across from the projects . . .

On Friday of the second week, 12 kids were involved in a major fight at recess. Eight of the kids were from my class. I spent most of that Friday afternoon piecing the stories together; the physical fight (nine girls cornered and beat up three boys) turned out to be the culminating act of several recesses' worth of angry and bitter incidents of name-calling and threats. After an hour or so of discussion and problem solving, all the kids involved were given in-school suspensions for the rest of the day, and all the parents were reached through notes or phone calls.

Although I regarded the discussions and consequences as necessary steps to quell the violence, I also decided to have a whole class discussion on name-calling the following Monday:

September 10 . . . I knew I had to find a way to stop the fighting, or teaching reading and writing in my classroom would become impossible. I knew I had to let them know in no uncertain terms that verbal or physical abuse would not be put up with, that severe consequences would ensue. I knew that the moms of these kids wanted, above all, even above academic success, good school behavior, I knew they'd back me up . . . I decided to let the kids brainstorm insults. I would write them down and we would discuss why these words make people so angry. I discovered a poem perfect for the occasion, "Coke Bottle Brown" by Nikki Grimes in her 1994 book *Meet Danitra Brown*.

Coke Bottle Brown

Dumb old Freddy Watson called my friend "Coke Bottle Brown"
(So what if her bifocals are big and thick and round?
"Pay him no nevermind, Zuni," is what Danitra said
Then hands on hips, she turned away and lifted up her head.
"Me, Danitra Brown, I've got no time for Freddy's mess.
Can't waste time on some boy who thinks it's funny bein' mean.
Got books to read and hills to climb that Freddy's never seen."
Then dumb old Freddy Watson called me "Toothpick legs" and spit.
I stared him down, and abled my fists and said, "Okay! That's it!"
But suddenly I thought about the words Danitra said.
I rolled my eyes and grabbed my books and turned away instead.

September 11: We had our discussion about name-calling today . . . These were the names that they dictated: Fucker; Bitch; Asshole; Whore; Black Nigger; Yo' mama _____!; Back to you; You an ugly mama too!; Cry baby; You're ugly; You look like a boy; Crackhead; Gay bitch; You're gay; Hype; Dummy; Sissy; Idiot; Drug dealer; Sick bitch; Gay bitch; Pistol; Stupid brat; Shut up!; Blackie; Faggot; Jackass; MF; Shithead; Black ass; Let's carjack her!

Kids talked specifically about some names and why they hurt ("I don't like people saying things about my mama 'cause my mama's not that kind of person.") We role-played different ways to handle name-calling and I read the poem, but I realized that we had a long way to go. That this was a relevant topic I had no doubt. Kids who were often stumped at math and reluctant to volunteer ideas about science had their hands up continuously. They felt heard, certainly, and important. They were the experts.

NAME-CALLING CONTINUED AND STEREOTYPING

Issues Concerning Oppressed Groups Often Cannot (and Should Not) Be Isolated; Interconnections Are a Natural Part of Culturally Relevant Teaching.

The terms that came up in the discussion on name-calling fell into natural categories. We talked about how the names fell into certain categories, like racism, sexism, and homophobia. We defined and discussed each category.

Kendra brought up "homophobia" and I wrote it on the board and talked about what it meant and how it's related to words like "faggot" and "gay bitch." There were some negative reactions (among kids new to my class) to the word "gay." Tony said, "I hate gay people." After school he met one of Caleb's moms, Anne. Caleb went up to Tony and said, "Well, do you like my mom?" He said, "Yeah." Caleb said, "Well, my mom's gay, so I guess you don't hate gay people."

That weekend I sent home a copy of the "Danitra Brown" poem and an assignment to write about a time when they were called a name. The stories that the kids wrote were about a range of issues, from physical differences to sexism to homophobia to racism.

When I was in 2nd grade some Body said I was little (by Jeremy)

You are drty

You are drty

ha ha ha ha

then I ran home (by Steven)

When I stand in line to Play tether ball people say "you probably can't beat anybody."

And I just egnore it. (by Jana)

A kid at scool made fun of me because I had two moms and thretend me not to tell. It made me mad and sad and scard nd I wanted to figt him. (by Caleb)

My cosint said I couldn't come in the play stor becose I was brown. (by Lena)

*One day somebody call me and some other peole a neacger and we dod not like that.
(by Anitra)*

Looking back to September, I realize how crucial the name-calling discussions and activities were. They were a beginning to helping bridge gaps of understanding among the kids in the class, a way to help Tony understand how his hurt at being called "Blackie" was linked to Caleb's distress at hearing kids put down gay people and to Jana's struggle to define herself as a girl who defies constructions of femininity by competing with boys at tetherball.

In other discussions throughout the semester, I have been reminded how the problems of one oppressed group are linked to those of other groups. Never have the kids let me get away with isolating them. Typically in November, children receive confused messages about happy Native Americans, who (when they weren't being violent and savage) were helping the Pilgrims have a nice time in America. To counteract those stereotypes, I decided to show the filmstrip "Unlearning Native American Stereotypes." Before the filmstrip, I started a discussion on what a stereotype is. No one seemed quite clear on the definition, so I asked for volunteers to demonstrate the meaning of the word. Jana came up. I said, "Jana is a fantastic tetherball player, right?" The class agreed emphatically. "Jana's a girl, so all girls must be good tetherball players." "No!" protested Samantha. "I'm a girl and I'm really bad at tetherball!"

"But Jana's a *tomboy*," someone called out as if that explained everything. "That's why she's good at tetherball."

I wrote the word "tomboy" on the board and asked what a tomboy was.

"It's a girl who wants to be a boy!" someone said, with conviction. I wrote that down, along with other descriptors, like "loud," "likes to get dirty," and "gets into fights." I checked out this definition of a tomboy with Jana, who, although she loves all sports, from ice hockey to competitive swimming, is one of the most soft-spoken and unaggressive children in the class.

"Jana, do you want to be a boy?" "Are you loud?" "Do you like to get dirty?" Jana answered every question with an emphatic "NO!"

"Well, there you have an excellent example of a stereotype!" I pointed out. I was rather surprised but also pleased that my lesson on Native American stereotypes had turned into a powerful learning experience about gender constructions.

THE COURT SYSTEM

Current Events Can Provide the Spark to Ignite the Classroom; You Never Know What Hidden Talents Your Kids Might Have.

I was still struggling with how to make my wetlands unit more compelling when the verdict from a murder involving a well-known African American athlete was announced over the school's loudspeaker. We had a long discussion, not only about the news (almost everybody had an opinion) but also about the court system and how it works. As I noted in my journal:

Our discussion was a big hit. I couldn't contain the energy and enthusiasm.

I decided to go with the interest and have the class conduct a mock trial of the wolf from the book *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka. This book, which tells the traditional folktale from the wolf's point of view, is—intentionally or not—relevant to the lives of oppressed minorities, particularly male African Americans. The wolf describes himself as being misinterpreted, unfairly judged by a society in which all the power is held by the pigs (the police are represented as pigs, and the press is also run by pigs). The wolf, who starts off with a bad reputation and then is caught up in a series of unfortunate circumstances, doesn't have a chance to prove his innocence. I asked my husband, Jack, a legal services attorney, to be our resource person for the trial. I warned him about the class, however, telling him that it might be more difficult to control than previous classes.

October 23: This morning we did the trial of the big bad wolf. This class, which all the "specials" teachers say is so difficult, sat for an hour and a half while Jack explained our legal system and then helped them facilitate a trial. They not only sat still; they were focused, appropriate, attentive. There was not one behavior problem.

Tonisha stole the show. She was a stellar defense attorney. Strutting back and forth, with her hands behind her back, she grilled the witnesses, never once losing her composure . . .

"And where exactly was you at 7:30 a.m.? And what was you doing? . . . Uh huh . . ."

Caleb's (prosecuting attorney) closing statement did not hold a candle to Tonisha's. Looking hard at the jurors, she said,

"And how could he have gone to the store? It's three blocks away. He has no car. There's no bus. He had to borrow the sugar. And he didn't kill the pigs. It was an accident! And what was that third pig doing calling his grandma names!"

The jury found the wolf innocent.

Jack enjoyed the experience; he was very impressed with the class, especially Tonisha. "She's a better advocate than a lot of attorneys I know," he said. I made the mistake of telling Tonisha how much Jack and I liked her performance. "Jack says you should be a lawyer when you grow up," I told her the next day. A few minutes later, when I reminded her to stop twirling around and get to work on her writing, she said to me slyly, "But if I go straight to lawyer school, then I don't need to do this work!" But even when the side of Tonisha that her mom calls the "bad attitude" comes to the forefront, the image of Tonisha the attorney still remains fresh in my mind.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

The Students Are Likely to Know More Than You Do. In Addition, You Can't Rely on Prepackaged Materials to Teach Socially Relevant Topics.

The school district supplies teachers with a scripted, prepackaged kit to use in teaching about alcohol and other drugs. The kit, "Here's Looking at You, 2000" (Comprehensive Health Education Foundation, 2000), contains posters, puppets, and videos, along with a script giving students simplified solutions, such as "Just say no." However, as Jonathan Kozol states in *Amazing Grace*:

If only enough children, we are told, would act the way the heroes do, say no to drugs and sex and gold chains and TV and yes to homework, values, church, and abstinence . . . we could turn this thing around and wouldn't need to speak about dark, messy matters such as race, despoliation, and injustice. (Kozol, 1995, p. 154)

I gave the kit to another teacher and instead decided to teach about alcohol and drugs by having students share their own ideas on a "web" and by having discussions branching off of related literature, such as "The Seller" by Eloise Greenfield (1991), from *Night on Neighborhood Street*.

The Seller

*When the seller comes around
Carrying in his many pockets
Packages of death
All the children go inside
They see his easy smile
They know his breath is cold
They turn their backs and
Reach for warmth
And life*

November 20: Discussion of the poem: "The Seller"

Kendra: The "packages of death" are packages of crack and cocaine. The sentences "Easy smile . . . breath is cold" probably mean they know he's trying to sell crack. He is near death. When it says that they turn their back it means that they go to a family member, talk to them about it.

Emily: He is selling alcohol and drugs and cigarettes. Kids don't want to take drugs and get hooked on them.

Lena: The line "Seller . . . death" means that people are dead. They're burying them—all the children go inside because they don't want to die, ". . . cold" means he's not breathing. They're trying to get away.

Junior: The packages of death are guns in packages. They came to kill.

Cassie: "Packages of death" are guns. People are going inside.

Samantha: Any kind of thing that would hurt someone. Children think he could sell them to somebody. He's mean inside, but he doesn't show it. He acts like a good person.

Caleb: The "packages of death" are bullets and gunpowder.

Anitra: They're dead people in packages.

Jeremy: It's guns.

Anitra: It's little pieces of body.

(I redirected them to the poem several times, reminding them that the packages were so small that they fit in the seller's pocket.)

Sarah: It's drugs and alcohol.

Kendra: (Still sure of her initial response): It's crack. It can kill you. Is crack the drug that you cut up with that little shaver thing and sniff it up your nose?

Anitra: With a straw.

Jeremy: That's cocaine.

Kendra: Crack you can shoot up with a needle or put it in your mouth.

Ian: The packages are guns and bullets.

Tonisha: The seller is selling weed and stuff like that. The kids are trying to get away from him. They don't want to grow up like that.

Cassie: It's cigarettes and cigars. They can kill you. They plug up your lungs.

(I remind them how you can get cigarettes—by buying them at the store. Why would the seller be selling them on the streets? Cassie, still convinced it's cigarettes, says that he could be selling them to kids.)

Kendra: It's that green stuff. You stick it into white paper and then they light it up and smoke.

Kendra, Renee, Jeremy: That's blunt! Some people use brown paper or white paper. It's the same thing.

Tonisha: Crack dealers be callin' people up to the corner.

Junior: The guy is trying to sell crack or cocaine to them, so they run away.

Kendra: It almost killed someone in my family.

Anitra: Usually people be sellin' little packages of crack or cocaine.

Ellen: Ritalin. It could be Ritalin. My little sister takes Ritalin because she's hyper.

(I try to point out that Ritalin is a prescription drug for people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, not an illegal drug that's sold on the streets, but Ellen insists.)

No people take to get high, like crack or cocaine. I know. And they take too much and it can kill.

Renee: There could be a pocket knife in the package.

Lena: It could be crack. Someone in my family does crack. They try not to show me, but he left it on the floor. It was brown little pieces of grass and a ball.

Tonisha: My m—someone in my family, She promised me one thing, that she wouldn't do it again. She thought I was stupid or something. She promised. But she got all broke doin' it. I was scared because she was all hyped up. But I'm not stupid. I heard her talking to my uncle. I knew what she was doin'. But I made her promise she wouldn't do it again. Now they don't do it no more.

Kendra: Someone in my family, we put her in a group home. We put her in a hospital. Then she got pregnant and was doing crack and now she is off crack, but she's pregnant.

Obviously, this class had a lot of information about and personal experiences with drugs. Not only did their knowledge exceed the bounds of the

Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) curriculum, but it also showed my ignorance in some areas. I checked with the school nurse about the uses of Ritalin. She told me that Ellen's information was accurate. Ritalin is indeed a drug that is being sold on the black market. It is taken by adults as an upper, an amphetamine-type drug, to lose weight and stay awake. Also, it is taken by crack users to smooth the descent from a crack-induced high. So much for teacher's knowledge. I quizzed my friends to find out what a "blunt" is and was told that it is a Jamaican-style reefer. The district's "Here's Looking at You, 2000" curriculum may need an updating.

A resource I found more useful was *The House That Crack Built* by Clark Taylor (1992). I prefaced reading the book aloud by asking the kids to describe a house that crack built:

"All broken down," they said. "Old, broken windows, people going in and out selling crack." Then I showed them the picture on the first page, an illustration of a mansion with a swimming pool. "This is the house that crack built." Renee, who often seems lost in class, raising her hand and then saying, "I forgot," or "What was that again?" spoke up. "It's a rich house, 'cause they got rich from selling all that crack." (Taylor, 1992, p. 121)

Since the interest in this book was intense, I decided to use it for my reading group with Renee, Henry, Tonisha, and Dana, all of whom had tested at a Preprimer (kindergarten) level at the beginning of second grade. I knew that the book would be considered at least a year above their levels, but I thought it would be a motivating change from the kindergarten primers. I sat down with Renee and Henry, while the instructional assistant read with Tonisha and Dana. They took turns reading, using their fingers to mark the words. Asking for help only occasionally, they read through the book confidently, reciting the last page in unison:

*And these are the Tears we cry in our sleep
that fall for the Baby with nothing to eat,
born of the Girl who's killing her brain,
smoking the Crack that numbs the pain,
bought from the Boy feeling the heat,
chased by the Cop working his beat
who battles the Gang, fleet and elite,
that rules the Street of a town in pain
that cries for the Drug known as cocaine,*

*made from the Plants that people can't eat,
raised by the Farmers who work in the heat
and fear the Soldiers who guard the Man
who lives in the House that crack built.*

UNIT ON AFRICAN AMERICANS' STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

**Including the Voices and Experiences of the Students'
Families Can Enhance the Relevance of and Add
a Multitude of Perspectives to a Topic.**

This year, as in previous years, I used Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday as a springboard to explore the many facets of African Americans' struggle for freedom in the United States. Along with background biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman, the class read biographies of other African Americans. We engaged in many activities that helped bring those stories to life, including role-playing famous people, reenacting the Underground Railroad, watching segments of *Eyes on the Prize*, and writing fictitious slave autobiographies.

The assignment to write a story "as if you were a slave" resulted in some of the best writing to date. Two of the biracial girls, Lena and Kendra (both second graders), reached new levels of sophistication in their writing. Lena had started the school year as a solid reader, but a rather limited writer.

Over the Summer (August 29)

*I saw a blue-jay it was pritty! I like flowers. There are all kinds of flowers. I
think flowers, birds are pritty. Me and my little sister like flowers.*

In the autobiography assignment, Lena made tremendous strides in using descriptive language in narrative to express experience and meaning.

Emily (March 22)

My name is emily. I am 28 years old. I have dubble twins. Their names are Lanny, Anwon, Lynnda, Cortes. I sew inside the house. I've bin sewing all my life. I have a hussband. His name is Nathan. he is 29 yuears old. He was born in 1846 and I was born in 1845. He worked on the field he howed all the weeds out of the gardan. I am very brave and so is my hussband. I am thinking about running away but oh no the master reads my mined he waches me while I look at the forest like the sky preparing for thounder I dort to the forest and with no ferher or do [no further ado] he shots me. Blood goshing blood coming out of my shoolder. Thinking about turning around but thinking abot the wipings I've got I hide in a bush. I take a leaf off a tree and bandeg

my shoolder. I check to see if the slave cacher is nere. I run fast without looking back I run through a swamp, ponds, creeks, rivers, soon I come to the ohio river I look all aroune. I find a boat. I quick get in. I quick get acerost the river. I reach Căneda. I am free free free!

This assignment may have been particularly meaningful to Lena because of her yearlong identity struggles:

(September 20—Lena was unhappy, whiny, disobedient. [The student teacher] got a chance to talk with her, and it turns out that the girls who jump-rope will not accept her. Lena is biracial, but acts White. The girls who jump-rope are all conceptually Black. I think that Lena is having some profound identity problems. I think that at home [with a White mom and White stepdad] she lives in a White culture, yet is constantly aware that she is not White.)

Lena displayed an interest in the Black history unit and a culminating sense of pride and awareness when the unit culminated: "You know what I feel lucky about? That I'm half Black!"

Kendra experimented with the use of dialogue (including dialect) and humor in her first-person slave narrative.

Shanada

By Kendra

I be workin all night in the kichin. One higt I had two set's of twin's in the master's soup. I was tring to get the sening (seasoning). I pulled all 4 baby's up fast and went to my cabin. My master toke his wibe (whip) and wipt me and my baby's 82 times. We scremed loud we woke up my boy frind. Who was 16 just like me. My master said "you make her have baby's in my soup? Ha, ha, ha. I atae (ought to) wibe (whip) you to." "No you wont." my boy frind sied. Anoter slave came runin and sayin "It's the free time. We is free. We is free. We is free. It is the free time" "We is free, a free slave. We is free slave!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" we shouted with glory. that is the end of my life.

I decided to try to help create a closer link between our studies and the students' families by asking students to interview a parent or grandparent about the civil rights movement. I wrote out interview questions: "What do you remember about the Civil Rights Movement? How did you learn about it (personal experience, TV, school, and so on)? How old were you at this time? What do you remember about the leaders? How has the Civil Rights Movement changed our lives? What still needs to be changed to achieve justice and equality?" When I shared my plans with another teacher, I was warned that I might get negative, even racist reactions. I decided to take the risk. I hoped that our classroom activities were bringing the students closer to an understanding of the struggles endured and the bravery shown by African Americans living in the United States

during the Civil Rights Movement; what could bridge the achievement gap better than learning about the students' own families' involvement in and feelings about the movement?

January 30: The added perspective that we have gained from parent and grandparent interviews and presentations has given depth that the unit lacked in the past. Stories have come out from Black and non-Black families alike that have amazed me. Caleb's mom's experience [as a Catholic growing up in Tennessee] with the Ku Klux Klan burning a cross on her family's front yard and killing their dogs was particularly fascinating to the class. I think that we too often think of the African Americans being the sole victims of racism.

From Sarah's interview with her mom: "Once I was called a nigger lover. My best friend was Afro-American. Sometimes I was sad, but my parents helped me feel strong and brave."

Grandparents of two of the White kids and one aunt were active in the movement.

Samantha's mom said, "I remember my oldest sister going to Alabama to help Black people register to vote, and my father being very upset about it."

Cassie's grandma came in and talked about how she and several others from their church collected petitions to get an NAACP chapter started in a city in Oklahoma.

How did the relatives interviewed learn about the Civil Rights Movement?

Family, school, TV, personal experience, books, other people, church?

One African American parent answered this way,

"I was there. I remember the marches in Chicago."

Another African American parent who *was there* volunteered to speak to the class about his experience hearing Martin Luther King, Jr., speak. He told the class that he was so impressed with the power of Dr. King's speeches that he went to hear Dr. King whenever possible. This parent impressed the class by reciting from memory several parts of Dr. King's speeches. Henry, who usually tries to find any excuse to avoid working on a writing assignment, sat down enthusiastically to work on that week's class news.

Aaron's Speech

I don't believe my eyes. Somebody met Dr. King. Aaron (Dana's dad) went to see Dr. King. Aaron was 20 years old when he saw Dr. King. Aaron did Dr. King's speech. It was good and his speech was, "I have a Dream."

This year has been the first year that I felt the kids are realizing that, although the Civil Rights Movement was an exciting and powerful agent of change, it did not eradicate racism and inequity. The last question of the interview, *"What still needs to be changed to achieve justice and equality?"* gave parents an opportunity to communicate their feelings about this issue to their children and to their classmates.

"Mainly I say racism. It's still racism going on," responded one African American parent.

"Maybe if we could rid the world of so much prejudice that still exists today," said another.

"That we use hearts and not our attitudes to live together," was another response typical of Black and non-Black family members.

"Equal pay for equal jobs," was mentioned more than once.

"There is still a lot of prejudice and oppression and poverty. We need to continue to educate fairly and provide equal opportunity for all," summed up one parent.

Many of the interviews were done with parents, who ranged in age from 7 years old to 20 years old at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. It was interesting that, even though they were young, they still remembered it having an impact on them. The intergenerational personal histories, in some cases from grandparents, helped make this unit come alive for the classroom.

AIDS AWARENESS UNIT

The Realities of the Children's Lives Will Connect With a Relevant Topic. A Class Project That Includes an Element of Activism Will Cement a Classroom Community.

I wasn't sure if I should do a unit on AIDS this year because 15 of my students had been in my class last year when I taught an extensive unit on the subject. However, at parent-teacher conferences, a girl whose sister had been in my class last year asked to learn about AIDS. Also, the topic was coming up frequently.

September 29: Yesterday I (again) saw the kind of focused attention a topic of relevance can bring. (Another teacher) came into the classroom to give me the \$10 he had pledged for the AIDS walk. One of the kids said, "Why are you giving Kate money?" He explained, and Renee asked, "What's AIDS?" Several students responded, both from my class last year and new students. Some kids talked about activities we did last year during our unit

on AIDS. Lots of hands were up; people were interrupting with questions and comments. I was aware that everyone was participating, including the African American students whom I have had so much trouble getting involved. There was a clear difference between this discussion and our discussion of the wetlands, when I often have three or four children answering all the questions.

I asked the class why they were so interested in AIDS. Jana raised her hand, and then said, "It's so interesting, why? I really don't know why. It just is really interesting." Anitra said, "It's because all the teenagers talk about it." I had a sense that AIDS was part of the street talk and street reality for the kids who live in the projects; Anitra's comment confirmed my suppositions. Kendra answered, "Well, some of us have relatives with AIDS. And there's this house by my house that's for people with AIDS—you know, so they can live there and people can take care of them and help them." Tonisha could relate to this comment (she lives by Mendota Mental Health Center). "Oh, it's like the house for the crazy people! Except they're different. I mean, they're the same, but they're different. People don't die from being crazy, but they die from having AIDS." Tonisha spoke animatedly, excited by her new insight.

November 3: We had a mundane protective behaviors lesson on Monday, which ended up being very intense, as do most things in this class. This is a routine brainstorm in which kids list things that are unsafe. Second on the list (after "hitting on others in the family") was "not wearing a condom." "Why?" I asked. "Because of teenage pregnancy and AIDS." After continuing a list of about 50 unsafe behaviors, ranging from "Riding no-handed" to "Sexual harassment," I started a column on "How You Can Be Safe." "Wear a condom when you have sex, unless you want babies," was first on the list.

I decided to do a curriculum web on AIDS to learn what the students know about AIDS and what they want to learn. My housemate arranged to film the AIDS web for a video project she was doing for a graduate school class. I had just announced to the class that it was AIDS Awareness Week and I was about to write the word "AIDS" on a large sheet of paper when Kendra and her mom appeared at the door. Both looked distraught. "Sorry Kendra's late," apologized her mom. "My cousin is dying of AIDS; in fact she will probably die tonight. The whole family's upset. Kendra wants to see her cousin, but I don't want her to. She looks like a skeleton; it would be too scary for her." Kendra joined the group with her head lowered and her chin cupped in her hands; she was not her usual animated self. Slowly, she started joining in the discussion. "My cousin is dying of AIDS," she contributed. "She wants to die at home. She's so far into the AIDS process that she doesn't want to go to the hospital. She just sits there. She doesn't move. We're going to see her today." The next day, Kendra wrote a story about her cousin.

Hi my name is [Kendra], My sackint casin Wande died of AIDS. "a. acquired." "I. Immune." D. Deficiency" "S.Syndrome." she had AIDS for 9 years. she got it from drugs. I miss her. the end.

Last year our class had made red ribbons and sold them to raise money for AIDS. I had tried not to repeat the project this year because I didn't think I could duplicate the excitement and pride created by that project. I thought that it might be disappointing to the kids from last year's class if we had negative responses to our efforts and/or failed to raise as much money. However, after we did the web, one student suggested, "Let's sell red ribbons again and get money for people with AIDS!" "Yeah!" chimed in several others. Henry's half-jesting comment that our class should keep part of the money was quickly hooted down. "No, we can't do that. We're raising money for people with AIDS!" "Well, let's take a vote," I suggested. Every hand went up.

Someone suggested that we give the money to the moms in the Madison AIDS Support Network (MASN), instead of to the children in the support group: "The moms are the ones with AIDS."

"But, listen," said Adam. "Let's say we get one hundred dollars again. If the medication costs two hundred for one bottle, then we are only buying half, only half for one person. But one hundred dollars for the kids' group to spend will mean a lot more!" Discussion and debate followed, with the proposal of giving half the money to the kids and half to the moms gaining support.

On Friday (video camera rolling again), I asked for volunteers to count the money we had collected that week. I was worried that we would have only \$30 to \$40. Kids had diligently checked off lists of Hawthorne staff members so that no one, from the student teachers to the principal to the custodian, was not solicited. However, unlike last year, this year only a few parents had been in to buy ribbons. When someone ran up to Caleb's mom, she pointed out that she was wearing her ribbon from last year. "I was ready for you guys!" she said. Tonisha volunteered to count the dollar bills, and Jeremy opted to add up the change. Tonisha checked and double-checked her calculations.

"Sixty-six dollars! WHOA!" she announced. Jeremy carefully made piles of coins and added a can half full of pennies.

"I got nineteen dollars and twelve cents," he said, adding his figures to Tonisha's on the board.

I gathered the group together to view the results. Tonisha shared her figures.

"What did you count?" someone asked Jeremy.

"Oh," responded Jeremy, "You know, pennies, quarters, nickels, dimes, and them big old things. There were two of those." Kids shared strategies for

adding the two numbers together: Sarah wrote "85" and Adam added ".12." Tonisha added the dollar signs. I asked them to figure out how much more we needed to make \$100. When they settled on \$15, they jumped up and cheered; we were close to surpassing the \$96.91 the class had made last year.

December 6: I think back to September when I apprehended two kids stealing. They had devised a rather elaborate plan for sneaking Emily's necklaces off the art teacher's desk, meeting in the bathroom, and hiding them under their clothes until they could stash them safely away in their backpacks upstairs. Who would have thought that I would have no second thoughts about trusting Tonisha, Jeremy, and various helpers to count out \$85.00? Yet, as I worked with other kids around the room, only intermittently checking on the progress of the money counting project, it never occurred to me to worry about the security of so much cash.

CONCLUSION: CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING WORKS FOR ALL KIDS

December 10: Today, as I watched the kids writing quietly at their tables and desks, constructing fictional stories about AIDS, I thought about my worries early in the semester:

I need to get a grip on these internal tensions for the class to function . . . How will I cut down or eliminate such incidents (the playground fight) as happened last week? . . .

They all have histories (already, by second grade) of school failure. They have been pegged as discipline problems by their former teachers and their moms. They have started school with "attitudes," meaning not only attitudes of disobedience and lack of respect for "authority," but attitudes of street-wise toughness. They have picked up the walk and talk of their rebellious teenage siblings or neighbors . . .

I wonder about the academic split in this class. All the high achievers (except for two biracial girls) are White and all those achieving below grade level are African American. I have six kids reading at a preprimer level. They are all African American or biracial. I have seven kids, five White and two biracial, reading from a fourth- to eighth-grade level. I'm most concerned about the first six. Not reading at all at second grade is unusual . . .

Will the integration of topics of high interest to my African American kids improve their reading and writing skills? . . .

The papers (research on wetlands animals) aren't great, but they'll do for a first research attempt. I feel guilty that all the casualties are African American. If I were a better teacher, this wouldn't happen.

As I watch them write, I realize how much has changed. Renee, Henry, and Tonisha have all made gains in reading, from one level (Renee) to a whole year's growth in 3 months (Tonisha). Renee is contributing meaningfully to discussions. She is beginning to write:

you ca gent HIV fom playeing the prcn wo gant the HIV.
 you ca gent HIV fom plas gams yet the prcn wo gant the HIV.
 or you ca gent HIV fom reed wo the prcn wo gant the HIV.

Henry has softened up. He shows a very vulnerable side under his toughness. He, too, is writing and even volunteering to share his stories with the class. This story he requested to read aloud to the class twice:

I do not have AIDS. I know somebody that has AIDS. Around my house is a boy 10 years old. He told me that he got AIDS. I think I will get AIDS when I grow up because I might forget to use safe protection for having sex. [edited for spelling]

Kids have questions about Henry's story. They wondered why he thought he would get AIDS and if other African American boys, like Henry, envision contracting AIDS as a likely part of their future.

Tonisha is still intense, but involved, enthusiastic, less frequently oppositional. She was totally absorbed in the AIDS unit. At first she balked at the writing assignment, doing a lot of erasing and starting over several times. "Can it be a true story about someone in my family?" she asked. "Sure," I said, "Kendra wrote about her cousin and Emily is writing about her uncle." Tonisha sat down to write and didn't stop until she finished this story:

AIDS

My gamaemom [grandma] died ove AIDS Be cas she was going wethe some one wa [who] had AIDS and he's stell alive. I hat ham becos he cod [killed] my gamaemom. his name os Owie Navr come back Owie be Cos my whole fimey [family] hates you in clating [including] me Owie I whs [wish] you wan [wouldn't] did that cod [killed] my gamaemom I hat him vare vare much I hapy [hope] you no neve come back and he never will come back!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

After school, Tonisha wanted her mom to know that she had filled up a whole page and a half (her longest story so far this year). Her mom said, "She's reading and writing a lot better, I've noticed that!" I asked her if she minded if I included this story in a book of kids' stories about AIDS. "No, I just was worried that other kids might treat Tonisha different if they knew that her grandma died of AIDS. It's okay with me; I was just worried about Tonisha." I was able to assure her with confidence that such discrimination would not happen in *this* class.

The students from last year who had started off the year in crisis, either from family stress or because the classroom dynamics had changed with the addition of the new kids, have filled up the holes left vacant by the kids who had moved. Kendra is definitely now a leader, both socially and academically. Jeremy, once pegged as a troublemaker with a borderline IQ, has (with the help of medication for ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder]) become a math whiz and a confident contributor to group discussions. The class feels like a unit, a positive community. Ironically, a new child, whom the principal purposely assigned to my class ("She'll be a good influence on your kids. She's *blonde*. And I think she's a good student.") has been posing major problems, both for me and the others. Lena and Kendra rushed in from recess today, very upset. "Ellen discriminates!" they said, in one voice. "She said she wouldn't play with us because we are half Black!"

Ellen is coming without the benefit of our monthlong exploration of the effects of name-calling and stereotyping. She is also coming into a closely knit classroom community, with internal rules of operation that she is yet unaware of. Ellen, too, coming from a school history of frequent moves and a family damaged by domestic abuse, has problems of her own to figure out. It will take her time to realize that stellar academic performances alone will not give her a place of prominence in this community.

I have focused in this study on my African American and biracial students' growth in reading, writing, and participation. However, I believe that the other students (White, Asian American, and Mexican American) benefit as much from this curriculum as do their classmates. Curriculum that deals with the real world and enables the children to be active participants and agents of change, brings out the best in all kids.

During the AIDS unit, Caleb came in with a big smile on his face. "I have an announcement to make!" He opened an envelope containing a big wad of bills. "I made \$51.05 from selling red ribbons at my moms' bowling place. It was kind of scary, going up to perfect strangers, but I did it! I even got five dollars for a ribbon . . . well, they gave me a five and I gave them four ones for change." Caleb took out a crumpled sheet of paper. "Here's the math work. We now have \$136.17 in all!"

At writing time, I suggested that everybody write a story about AIDS. Several kids asked if their story could be part fact, part fiction. "Sure," I said, wondering what they had in mind. When I saw Cassie's title, "The Ghost with AIDS," I was skeptical. "Well, I like ghost stories," she said defensively. This was her story.

The Gost whth AIDS

Once upon a time there was a gril hwo got AIDS from drugs. Her name was Sue. She was 8 when she diad. Her gost comes out evry niht. Some times she comes out in the day time and talks to kids about AIDS. She says . . .

"You ca'nt get AIDS from kissing, hugging, being frands, going to the same bath room, You can only get AIDS from un prtacted seks, durgs, your mom having AIDS, tocing some bodys blod."

She will stop coming out when AIDS gos away.

Blia wrote a fictional story:

A Wnaman wow get AIDS

Oens ther was a wamon who get AIDS. Her name was Mai. She had a fian name Pa. Pa was nice to her. Now Mai is 20 yis old too. Pa tok her to the soiy [store] and biat her some madsn [medicine] to eat. And Pa tok Mia to her houe to sepp [sleep] fro awhiyl. She died win she was 40. Pa war role sad.

Adam wrote a science fiction story about how AIDS started:

The fikshinl beegening of AIDS

Long ago ther was a planit cold [called] Bla and ther wer lats of aleens on it thae had onlee one probom thar was a dozez [disease] cold Araim. One tim a aleen got a spas sip and left the planit then the saps ship ran uot of gas and krashd on rth [earth] but wut the aleeen didn't know is that he had Araim and wen he got ot of the spasship he spred Araim to the wrld. PS the hemins [humans] named Araim AIDS.

Finally, several students decided that a letter to the government was in order. Here is Emily's:

Dear Prasadont Clonton,

Plesae loer pricis for the matason for AIDS. Pepole with AIDS want to live loggor. Evin thwo I Don't have HIV or AIDS I want siintists to find a cure for AIDS. I want to help people with AIDS. My class is hlping peple with AIDS by seling red robons. We ernd \$136.17. Thars a lot of way's to help pepol with HIV or AIDS so plesae loer the price of the matason for AIDS Ples?

Sonsirly [Emily]

THE CONSCIENCE OF A NATION

Kozol's book *Amazing Grace* examines the effects of "ghettoizing" the castoffs of society. The South Bronx, whose residents are almost all either African American or Puerto Rican, has a very high percentage of people who are or have been affected by poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and AIDS. "One quarter of the women of Mott Haven who are tested in obstetric wards are positive for HIV" (Kozol, 1995, p. 4). Kozol's book is a tribute to the people who survive—or don't survive—against these tremendous odds. However, in giving his book the subtitle *The Lives of Children and the*

Conscience of a Nation, Kozol is focusing on the people who live elsewhere in New York and in the United States, people who passively accept the plight of the inhabitants of the South Bronx and of others similarly ostracized from "the good life." He questions the consciences of people who can live comfortably in their affluence, while children lack basic human rights, like hospital care, clean air, safe housing, food, and protection from violence:

The search for explanations of the sadness heard in many of the voices of the people I have met is not answered by the factual questions one might ask about "environment" or "health care" or "the public schools." The questions that need asking seem to go beyond these concrete matters. One wants to know instead how people hold up under this terrible ordeal, how many more do not, how human beings devalue other people's lives, how numbness and destructiveness are universalized, how human pity is at length extinguished and the shunning of the vulnerable can come in time to be perceived as natural behavior. (Kozol, 1995, pp. 185–186)

A culturally relevant curriculum provides a forum in which the minority children in our society can actively participate in their schooling and can learn and develop their strengths and talents. But a culturally relevant curriculum is equally important for the White students. First, many of them, too, are outside of the American Dream; they are females, they come from alcoholic or abusive families; they have gay or lesbian parents; they are disabled or poor. (As I run through my class list, I cannot think of a single child who does not fit into at least one of these categories.) But even those children who may grow up to "make it" in the mainstream of U.S. society need to learn that they are part of a larger community that they, too, are responsible for. Projects like learning about and raising money for people with AIDS teach children respect, compassion, and activism. When my students gave their \$153.67 to the MASN representative, the woman (who is HIV-positive) told them that what they did was commendable. However, she asserted that even more important was that they "Keep doing things like this. Keep caring about people and working to help them, so that you will continue to do so as an adult, so that you will work to change the world. Far too few adults do what you did."

"How does a nation deal with those it has cursed?" asks Kozol (Kozol, 1995, p. 186). Education can offer no more than a partial answer, but in a nation in which, says Reverend Overall, "... social blindness is accepted as a normal state of mind ..." (Kozol, 1995, p. 188), culturally relevant teaching can begin to help children create a vision for the future—a vision of a caring, healthy, and just society.

REFLECTIONS

It's almost May. My students are far from perfect. The principal says they are the noisiest class in the hallways. I got a report that Henry had stolen a Popsicle from the lunchroom last week. Renee still scores a Preprimer 1, Level 5 on the Running Records Inventory. Although Tonisha has progressed almost to a fourth-grade level in reading, she still has days when she needs to sit on my lap in order to calm down enough to listen to a guest speaker.

But when I think back on how this year started, I realize that our individual and collective progress has been significant. The students' reading levels, as measured by the district's Running Records Inventory, increased during the academic year by an average of about two years. Although the gains of the African American and biracial students ranged widely (from Renee's increase of one level to Tonisha's increase of 3.5 years), the average improvement for that group also was about two years. At the end of the year, the average reading level in the class was 5.1, with the African American and biracial students at 3.8, still significantly above grade level. All third-grade students—except four students classified as learning disabled (LD) or English as a second language (ESL), who were not tested—scored above the state standard on the state third-grade reading test.

The gains in writing are more difficult to quantify. The average score in the class on the second-grade district writing sample was 6, which is considered at grade level and is an average score in the district. However, the many pieces of writing I collected throughout the school year clearly show that there was a significant gain in all aspects of writing skills, including mechanics, sentence construction, writing to a topic, organization, and using voice.

Looking through student portfolio records, I realize that behavioral progress could be measured by the decreasing number of pink slips (office referrals) during the second semester. Student progress in motivation, participation, and community building is much better illustrated, however, by my journal entries and narratives and by the children's stories. The students' final self-evaluations revealed that behavioral and academic progress are integrally connected with learning about culturally relevant issues. When asked to write about what they had learned, what they felt proud about, and what they need to work on, two second graders and one third grader responded:

I now [know] a lot nouw. I love Being in 2nd grad. I learned a lot about Aids. Now I can read about Aids. I need to work harder on my homework. (Tonisha)

I have learned a lot about the reprdtsn system, making frainds, Jews and notsys. Now I can writ better than when I started. I need to work harer on math. I'm really prod

about my reading and writing. Sometimes I forget to put . , ! ? [punctuation] in my storys. (Cassie)

I have learned a lot about newspapers, A.I.D.S., math, books, things on the news. Now I can write, read, do math do my homework well. I need to word harder on not getting my name on the brod. I am really proud about read[ing], math. [I need to] raise my hand when I want to say sometime. (Anitra)

Also, through this year's process of self-reflection, data collection, and observation, I have learned a lot about culturally relevant teaching; above all, I've gained confidence in its power. Using culturally relevant curricula is, in essence, controversial:

Subject matter in these classrooms is regularly tied to the lives and experiences of the children. The teachers challenge the students to bring the community into the classroom. The teachers are not afraid to tackle controversy and/or issues that may seem too adult for their students . . . (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 78)

Along with other Hawthorne teachers, I currently find myself embroiled in a conflict between teaching staff and school and district administration about our decision to display a photographic exhibit of gay and lesbian families called "Love Makes a Family." After an emotionally draining three weeks (garnering support from staff and parents, communicating with the press and the teachers' union, battling an evasive administration, and answering to a small but vocal minority of angry, hostile, and often hateful parents), I remember my feelings at the beginning of the photo exhibit project.

April 12: When (another teacher) brought up the possibility of having the photo exhibit of gay and lesbian families here, I heartily agreed, but at the same time something inside me balked at the idea. I felt some fear, maybe, but mostly I just felt tired. I didn't want to have to go through all the controversy that we had encountered last spring when we did the filming for "Don't Look the Other Way" (a documentary about teaching issues of homophobia in elementary schools). I just wanted to finish off the year on an easier note—endangered animals, maybe, or cooperative games. I had done racism, name-calling, alcohol and other drugs, AIDS, the Civil Rights Movement, the human body, and birth and reproduction. I wanted a rest from teaching potentially controversial subjects . . .

And then I remembered my conversation with Caleb's moms. I had asked them if they were planning to participate at the protest that night (at an evangelical church sponsoring an inflammatory, anti-gay minister). They both said that they supported the people who were picketing the church, but that

they were too tired to go themselves. "I've gone to so many marches, so many rallies," said Jane. "There isn't a day in my life when I'm not confronted with homophobia. I'm just tired of it. I'll let the younger people do it for me. More power to them!"

I'm not any younger, and I'm also tired, but I can't look the other way.

The administration's conflicting messages and muddled tactics, along with full coverage by the press (Hawthorne School was in the front-page headlines for a week and on television news and radio talk shows), created even more of a controversy out of the photo exhibit than I had originally anticipated.

However, the reactions to culturally relevant curricula from administrators and parents are not always so predictable. I had not expected that Sarah's mom's decision to use a placenta for her presentation on birth would have the effect of raising administrative eyebrows. The principal admonished Kendra for running in the hall (Kendra was on her way to the bathroom because she had felt sick to her stomach after touching the placenta) and then paid a rare visit to the classroom. "What was wrong with Kendra? . . . Did you inform parents about this? . . . What is Kendra's mom's reaction going to be?" I explained about our unit. I reminded the principal about the frequent newsletters we send home. I reassured her that, in fact, Kendra's mom would be thrilled to hear about the activity, especially because Kendra's sister was going to have a baby soon, an event that Kendra was fully informed about and was participating in, even to the point of planning to be present at the birth. I tried to explain the wonder and fascination experienced by students and teachers alike. But, like the unit about the placenta, a culturally relevant curriculum has to be experienced to be fully understood. And culturally relevant teaching also is organic. It grows from the unique combination of students, teachers, families, and events in the particular classroom and community. There are no formulas, no right or wrong answers. There are only constant questions, constant challenges, constant surprises. I never start out a year knowing exactly what I will teach, nor do I have the security of knowing that what I attempt will succeed. Yet, in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's words:

I've got to do what I believe. And I believe in all I do. It's this price one continually pays for stepping out of line. I'm feeling too old to pay it. But I must do what I believe in or nothing at all. (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 198)

Sitting here in the crowded, stuffy computer room of the UW-Madison Memorial Library, on my seventh hour of typing and revising, I find

myself remembering the words and melody of a poem that we read over and over this year, a poem that a visiting poet-in-residence spontaneously put to music.

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken winged bird
That cannot fly.*

—Langston Hughes ("Dreams," 1932)

EPILOGUE

It has been more than 10 years since I wrote this account of my action research. When I first thought about how the process changed my life, I thought that not much has changed. I am still teaching second and third grade at the same school. I still teach culturally relevant curriculum, trying to inspire my students to learn through topics and activities that are central to their lives and interests.

However, teaching the way I believe best helps students learn has become more and more difficult. Curriculum is dictated to us through increasingly confined and difficult standards, standards that, unfortunately, due to my students' cultures, funds of knowledge, and academic preparation, are increasingly irrelevant to them and hard to meet. Furthermore, curriculum more often comes in boxed kits with "teacher-proof" scripts. All of our science curriculum is now supposed to be delivered through that means. And my students are even more diverse and less part of the mainstream Euro-American culture. For the last five years I have had clusters of up to 90 percent English language learners, some with histories of education in their first language, but more with little or none. Seventy-five to 85 percent of my students are at or below the poverty level. Many of their parents do not speak English. Most do not read or write in English. Yet, in spite of all these differences, standardized testing has taken up more and more of the curriculum. Because of the No Child Left Behind Act, third graders now have to take a standardized, high-stakes test, the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam. We are told to start "test prep" in September and continue throughout October. Then in November, we spend a large chunk of our academic time on testing.

So, somehow, I must find the time to teach the way I have described here. And I do find the time, but it is squeezed in between the testing and the mandated curriculum.

Writing about action research inspired me to pursue writing about education. I used a section of the chapter (the one on AIDS) to write a story for the education journal *Rethinking Schools*. Since then I have had eight other articles published. The topics have ranged from teaching about child labor, homelessness, and the Civil Rights Movement to doing a direct action project for hurricane victims in Nicaragua. I have also written about high-stakes testing and about the value of animals in the classroom. Most of my stories have been related to using culturally relevant curriculum.

After completing my master's degree in curriculum and instruction (in multicultural education), I again went back to the university to study teaching English as a second language. In my classes and readings, I learned that teaching culturally relevant curriculum is even more important for the success in school of English language learners. Not surprisingly, bringing the students' cultures and background knowledge into the classroom can bridge the language and culture gaps that impede learning. Also, my studies reinforced my practice of exploring social justice issues and then incorporating social action into the classroom. "Critical pedagogy" makes the curriculum more meaningful to all students, but it especially speaks to students on the periphery of the mainstream culture.

Some of the topics I deal with have changed along with the experiences and the histories of my students my classroom. We still explore homelessness and the Civil Rights Movement, but now we spend several months studying the cultures and family histories of the students in my classroom. Social action projects range from the local (appearing at the school board meeting to lobby for the right to have animals in the classroom) to those on a national scope (writing to the president about threats to arctic animals because of global warming). Many of the ideas and impetus for our curriculum come from the students.

I am nearing retirement age. I know that I will miss teaching. But I will not miss all the time spent preparing for and administering tests. I hope that the pendulum will swing away from rigid standards, boxed programs, and high-stakes testing to teaching students relevant, motivating, and action-oriented curricula. I hope the day will come again when teachers are supported not only for their students' gains in test scores, but also for the way they help connect student learning to their families, their communities, and the world.

REFERENCES

- Ashton-Warner, S. (1963). *Teacher*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Comprehensive Health Education Foundation. (2000). *Here's looking at you, 2000*. Retrieved January 25, 2007, from <http://www.chef.org/prevention/looking.php>

- Greenfield, E. (1991). *Night on Neighborhood Street*. New York: Dial Books.
- Grimes, N. (1994). *Meet Danitra Brown*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books.
- Hughes, L. (1932). *The dream keeper and other poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kozol, J. (1995). *Amazing grace: The lives of children and the conscience of a nation*. New York: Random House.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1991). Like lightning in a bottle: Attempting to capture the pedagogical excellence of successful teachers of Black students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 3(4), 334-344.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). Blurring the borders: Voices of African liberator pedagogy in the United States. *Boston University Journal of Education*, 172(2), 72-94.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1997). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- O'Brien, T. (1990). *The things they carried*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Scieszka, J. (1989). *The true story of the three little pigs*. New York: Scholastic.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The house that crack built*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.