TEACHING FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCY: USING FICTION TO LEARN ABOUT ‘OTHERS’

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ABSTRACT
This article describes a 7th grade Language Arts teacher’s investigation into whether she could use her district-prescribed literature selections to effectively increase her students’ awareness of sociocultural issues. She used an instructional strategy called Think-Aloud to explicitly discuss social and cultural issues as they related to the characters in the literature. Data indicate that through the Think-Aloud discussions, occurring each week with each literature selection, her students gained a deeper understanding of the literature and of socio-cultural issues such as discrimination and prejudice.

INTRODUCTION
I, Meredith Murray, am a white woman who has been teaching for five years, the most recent two in seventh grade Language Arts. At the time of this study, students of color made up approximately one third of my class, while two-thirds of the students were white. While pursuing my master’s degree, I began to worry about how learned cultural misconceptions were evident in the way my students responded to literature regarding the experiences of marginalized groups. When race or discrimination came up for discussion in the classroom, a fairly rare event, tempers flared, accusations were hurled, and the discussion tended to end in uncomfortable, unresolved silence. This conflict and silence are at odds with an important goal of education, which is to encourage caring, acceptance, and tolerance in our students (Noddings, 2005, p.154). I worried that these characteristics were not visible here, in my own classroom.
Through my master’s program I became more aware of how the institutionalized school system tends to cater to the dominant, mainstream (white and middle class) culture (Hughes 2004), and I saw a need for a curriculum that would teach my students, especially those who were from mainstream backgrounds, to coexist with “others”—those they see as unlike them and potentially threatening. Inspired by the work of Maxine Greene (1988), I decided I wanted to help my students alter their gaze (how they perceive the world and their part in the world), and in addition create an educational context that would at least begin to develop in them a political consciousness and an awareness of some of the socio-cultural issues that are all around them, and to make power relations more visible to them (Greene, 1988). I knew that these were challenging goals under any circumstances, but they were rendered more challenging by the fact that in my district teachers have little control over the literature they use – at least not until state tests are over in April. Therefore I took on the challenge of figuring out how I could use the fictional literature required by my fairly traditional district’s Language Arts program to increase my seventh graders’ awareness of social and cultural misconceptions. I wanted to create discussion on topics like culture, race, and other diversity-related issues in positive and productive ways, within the constraints of my required curriculum. My research question was: Could I use the prescribed Language Arts curriculum and literature anthology to increase my students’ awareness of cultural misconceptions and socio-cultural issues in their own realities? Racism was a focus; however, my plan was to be open to whatever socio-cultural issues came up during my classes, and to discuss prejudice, discrimination, and “others” related to any diversity issues identified by my students as relevant to the texts and their lives.

**Participants and Context**

My participants in this action research project comprised the 21 seventh grade students in one of my 2009-2010 Language Arts classes. Two-thirds of the class was male. Six of the students identified as black or African American, one as multi-racial, and one as Asian/Pacific Islander. The remaining students were white. Nine students were classified as transient, meaning they had moved multiple times during their schooling years. All but two students were considered to be performing on or above grade level in Language Arts. The remaining two were performing just below grade level, as indicated by formative reading and writing assessments. None received special services at the time of the study.

My junior high school houses approximately 400 students in grades seven and eight. The racial make-up of the school is 62% White, 32% Black, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3% Multiracial. Fifty-seven percent of the student population is low-income, indicating that social class bias may be part of many of my students’ experience. The school is located in a suburban setting in the Midwestern U.S. The seventh grade Language Arts curriculum is skill-based, focusing on the development of vocabulary and comprehension, and uses an anthology developed for the state by Prentice Hall (2007).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

*The Think-Aloud Intervention.* To fulfill my goal of increasing my students’ socio-cultural awareness, I decided to use a research-supported and commonly used strategy for teaching reading called “Think-Aloud” (Davey, 1983). In this strategy a teacher explicitly states her
thoughts during the reading aloud of a text with the intent of modeling for students how the text is processed and internalized. I believed this strategy would be useful because by thinking aloud I could demonstrate how I learn about “others” through the literature and thus help my students construct new learning about “others.” To implement the strategy I created a graphic organizer designed to encourage students to think about text evidence, or what is evident in the text, extensions, or how the text evidence is meant to be interpreted, and adding more, or adding personal thoughts and/or connections about the text evidence.

My plan was to use the Think-Aloud strategy to explicitly discuss culture and socio-cultural issues as they related to the characters in our literature, and to facilitate in students the construction of new meaning about their lived experiences. Prior research has shown that such approaches can help students acquire new knowledge about themselves, their peers, and the world in which they live, as stories reflect a wider world, containing its values, norms, and taboos (Desai, 2006). In addition, discussion of analogies to real-life events and emotions can provide insight for students into themselves and their peers (Parsons, 1987). Armed with this information, I hoped to do with my prescribed literature what Lea (2006) described in her use of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). In Lea’s study, *The Giver* was examined for parallels between our world and the world of Jonas, an adolescent preparing to assume his place in his community. This young adult novel presents the concept of “colorblindness” in the context of a community in which individual differences are not acknowledged. Lea showed how this novel can be utilized to teach students that differences do matter and should be recognized by others.

Reading and discussing literature in critical and culturally relevant ways offers students the opportunity to discuss difficult situations or issues in a safe space (Brooks & Hampton, 2005). For example, socio-cultural issues of race and discrimination can be discussed within the context of a book and as the experience of the character. Brooks and Hampton (2005) explored the nature of racism in such a way using Mildred D. Taylor’s young adult novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976). In this case a secure environment was provided for students to understand and confront the impact of racism on their own lives as they experienced it with Cassie, the young narrator of the story. In another study, Vyas (2004) gave Asian-American students a safe place to discuss home and school discontinuities within the context of an after school literature club. In doing so, the students not only constructed meaning regarding their own experience, but Vyas also learned much about their identity making processes. I hoped to follow these examples using the literature prescribed to me.

*Data collection and procedure.* For three months in 2009 I implemented my modified version of the Think-Aloud strategy and collected data. Using Think-Aloud I first modeled how I identified the socio-cultural context of the literature, how I reacted to it, and how I connected to it. Then I introduced appropriate dialogue for discussing culture and “others,” also using the Think-Aloud method. I wanted students to become increasingly participatory in this process, so after those initial two steps, I asked my students to perform Think-Aloud in small groups, and then individually.
My primary data sources were observation and student work. I used field notes to record daily observation of each Language Arts class session, and then reflective journaling to process the information collected. The focus of these observations was on how students reacted to the literature, and the kinds of connections they made to it, along with my reaction to each lesson. In terms of student work, I collected and analyzed the Think-Aloud charts, which asked students to identify socio-cultural issues in the text and to share their own relevant opinions or experiences. I also asked students to anonymously respond to questions based on their experiences and ideas of socio-cultural issues and conflicts, providing me with an additional data source.

To analyze my data, I reviewed my journal and observation notes, focusing on information that seemed relevant to my research question of whether I could effectively use the prescribed Language Arts curriculum and literature anthology to increase my students’ awareness of socio-cultural issues in their own realities. I analyzed the students’ Think-Aloud charts in terms of how aware they were of these issues in the selections from our anthology, and how they articulated this awareness. I analyzed students’ anonymous responses to the questions by looking for patterns and then organizing their responses according to these patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
In order to address socio-cultural issues, I felt my students needed to understand the meaning of culture. Therefore I initiated the intervention and the study by posing one question to my students: “What is culture?” A lone student raised his hand after approximately 30 seconds of wait time. This slow start indicated one of two things: 1) that my students did not have a clear idea of this concept, or 2) my students were reluctant to speak in class. My previous experience with this particular group of students made me think the former. The lone student volunteered “a way someone lives?” It was not well developed, but it was a start. Therefore, during the first week of the study, we (my class and I) spent time working on the broad concept of “culture,” focusing on what it might look like and what it might include, so my students would be able to identify it in the stories to come. We created a class web on the white board, including both abstract and concrete concepts such as behavior, government, tolerance, laws, rules, games, language, economy, pets, and symbols. I then decided to extend the activity by assigning each student one of the ideas from the class web and instructing them to expand on the idea by creating a visual aid, which would hang in the room as a future resource for them. The visual aids students submitted the following day were webs of their own, where they listed behaviors and ways of thinking that further demonstrated the cultural aspect they were assigned. Figure 1 is a small sample of the results:

![Figure 1: Two student-identified components of culture](image-url)
I had now initiated reflection on the concept of culture, but I decided that before implementing the Think-Aloud I should find out how they might react to discussing culture in our classroom. I posed two questions for them to respond to anonymously, which I then collected and analyzed. The questions were: 1) how does talking about culture make you feel? and 2) is talking about culture positive or negative, and why do you think so?

Concerning the first question, approximately a third of the class responded that they had never thought about culture before and it would not affect them to start now, writing responses like “I don’t care either way” or “I could care less if we talked about culture.” Another third of the class chose not to respond at all. The remaining third was split in half. One side of the group indicated that discussing culture would be fun and interesting. A student wrote “talking about culture makes me feel [intellectual].” The other side, however, thought it might divide the class. A student noted that “it’s a mixture of white and black in our class and you don’t want to have people think that you are prejudice[d] or anything like that.” Another student responded “I really don’t like talking about race or anything with –ism on the end, because everyone is the same.”

While most students seemed unconcerned with our upcoming lessons, it was the few who were uncomfortable that made me most ready to pursue my course of action. It was also apparent that they had very limited views of culture, confining their ideas to “race” or “black and white.” That handful of students also demonstrated that the “colorblind” ideology was alive and well in my room, as well as the tendency to believe that recognizing a person’s race is a form of prejudice. As for the students who did not participate, they were likely either too uncomfortable to respond or simply taking advantage of the fact that I had no way of knowing who had participated and who had not.

In regard to the second question, again about a third of the class declared that talking about culture was positive. Students wrote things like “it will advance my knowledge,” “we are learning about something new,” and “it will be interesting.” The remaining set was again divided. Half called it a draw, declaring it to be both positive and negative “depending on who you ask.” The other half believed it to be negative, because it would “separate people,” and “profile people and put them in groups which isn’t fair.” Again, this small group of students appeared to believe that recognizing difference is in itself a form of prejudice.

Once I had data on the students’ general feelings about such discussions, I introduced our Think-Aloud. Using the selection we were currently covering in our literature anthology, I modeled in a graphic organizer the examples of culture I had found in the selection, and then explained how I thought the author intended each to be interpreted or what its purpose in the selection was. Last, I demonstrated to students how I organized my thoughts and experiences in relation to the text. The selection in our anthology, titled “Melting Pot” by Anna Quindlen,1 was an essay in which the author reflected on her

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1 All of the story selections discussed in this article are from Prentice Hall Literature, Grade 7. (2007). Boston: Pearson Prentice Hall, Boston.
experiences living in diverse neighborhoods. A portion of the graphic organizer that I used for modeling this Think-Aloud is shown in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2: EXCERPT FROM GRAPHIC ORGANIZER USED TO INTRODUCE THINK-ALOUDS**

<table>
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<td>“The letters in the local weekly tabloid suggest that everybody hates everybody else here, and on a macro level they do.”</td>
<td>Looking in on a community, it looks like groups of people dislike other groups of people who are different from them.</td>
<td>This doesn’t seem fair. I know that sometimes, I don’t like someone right away, but when I get to know them, I feel differently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I like you, therefore you aren’t like the rest of your kind, whom I hate.”</td>
<td>People might like an individual, but dislike the group they are connected to.</td>
<td>I remember watching a TV movie that was about a friendship between a boy who was black and a boy who was white. In the movie, the white boy thought the black boy was very smart and talented, but wouldn’t believe that other people who are black could be too.</td>
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This particular essay provided many opportunities to examine the author’s society and culture, as living among diversity was the author’s focus. However, putting the Think-Aloud together took more time than I had anticipated because it was not a technique or strategy I had previously used during reading, in the classroom or otherwise. I was thinking about the literature in a new way, and it did not come naturally. During the previous school year, “thinking” about the literature had been limited to applying a reading skill, such as predicting, and a literary analysis skill, like identifying the point of view. This new activity required me to think more critically and analytically about the text I was teaching. This was exciting, and I knew it would be beneficial for my seventh graders. However, I had to keep in mind that if it did not come easily to me, it would not come easily to my students, especially since (as I came to realize) the other selections in our anthology were not as rich in socio-cultural issues as “Melting Pot.”

Using the graphic organizer excerpted in Figure 2, and following our reading of the selection, I led a class discussion in which I demonstrated to the students how I expected them to use the Think-Aloud strategy as a way to participate in and contribute to class discussions of the literature. I also used the session as an opportunity to introduce or revisit vocabulary that I hoped they would use and become familiar with, like stereotype and profiling. An excerpt of the discussion I led, based on my field notes, with paraphrased student responses in italics, is presented here:
On page 144, the author expresses that she believes the melting pot is evident on a micro-level, or person to person. I think this means people have the ability to melt together, or get along. It seems to me that when people apply stereotypes to large groups, that would be when problems can come up.

“People might not understand others’ experiences when they are from a different country, like in “Suzy and Leah” [a story previously covered in class, in which one girl is a middle-class American and the other is a Jewish refugee from Germany]. I don’t think they understand their worth.”

“Is this like in the Middle East? Where it’s all wars and fighting. It seems like no one gets along, but if we went there, we might find people who are friends, even though they are different.”

A student’s connection of the theme of “Melting Pot” to a previous selection, “Suzy and Leah,” is a highly-valued skill according to our state’s Board of Education, known as a “Text-to-Text” connection. That this particular student performed this skill flawlessly and effortlessly as a result of the discussion showed that the required curriculum was not in the least bit undermined by the inclusion of culturally responsive teaching practices. Indeed, without the demonstration of the Think-Aloud, the connection may never have been made, as our Language Arts program tends to stress the teaching of skills and literature selections in isolation of one another. Additionally, the student stated that people from different countries might not value others. Another student followed up with a relevant example, both to the discussion and to the reality of the students, comparing the selection to ongoing strife in the Middle East. This connection, known as “Text-to-World,” is also valued in the community of reading and learning, but what pleased me most about the responses is the transition from the text to misunderstandings based on applying stereotypes or making assumptions about groups of people. Initially, in the planning of the research project, identifying discrimination or prejudice in reading selections and in reality was to follow several weeks’ worth of Think-Aloud. However, the discussion moved to that point so readily and easily by my students that it seemed counter-productive to hold off on it.

At this point, before going further, I decided to ask my students to respond to another set of anonymous questions about experiences in school with stereotyping, profiling, and related issues. My goal was to understand their individual thinking, and to be prepared for the kinds of conflicts that could potentially escalate during class discussion. Results indicated that most students were not accustomed to thinking about and identifying these kinds of issues. For example, one question I posed was: “What misunderstandings or conflicts based on race have you seen at school?” About three-fourths of the class responded that they had not witnessed conflicts based on race, or admitted that they simply didn’t pay attention. The remaining fourth of the class shared examples of what they perceived to be racial conflict. One student stated that s/he had witnessed a fight on the bus that had occurred when a friend decided that a boy was acting racist. Another student wrote “people don’t let white people play basketball.” What interested me about this response is that although the student was obviously referring to students of color, probably black students, they
somehow felt it was better not to include the word black, as if writing that word in and of itself would be racist. Another student noted that “black people get in more trouble than white people [for dress code]” and that a teacher had been seen talking differently to a white and a black person. The final, and most detailed response described how an eighth grade girl had called a person a white girl as an insult, referring to her mixed heritage and the white people she chose to associate with. These examples and the lack of responses from one-fourth of the class gave me a sense of how my students viewed the school world around them. I was now ready to move forward.

Through the demonstration of my Think-Aloud and the discussion of “Melting Pot,” I had seen that many students were enthusiastic and ready to be in charge of their own discussion; however, I needed to reach the remaining group of less engaged students, who had contributed little or nothing to the discussion. Therefore, rather than immediately assigning every student a Think-Aloud with the next selection and making individual students responsible for the discussion, I decided to instead assign a Think-Aloud for students to complete in groups, which would then be presented at the end of the week. My hope was that students who had not participated in class would be encouraged to participate by their group-mates and by the fact that every student would be responsible for presenting their ideas through the use of a visual aid. I also modified the assignment so that students would look back at selections already covered in class rather than new selections. This way, students were already familiar with the plot and characters and could focus on the socio-cultural context without worrying about comprehension and vocabulary of a new story. I was curious about which selections the groups would opt to cover; not all of the selections in our anthology were as rich in socio-cultural issues as “Melting Pot” had been.

During the week that students prepared their presentations I witnessed an enthusiasm for the activity that I had not seen with any previous assignment, group-assigned or otherwise. In my field notes I noted how I sensed that the project was meaningful to students as they sought me out or used computers to cross-reference the correct use of words like “stereotype,” “bias,” “bigot,” “hypocrite,” and “dehumanizing.” They were particularly zealous when it came to creating their visual aids, applying computer skills and research skills as they searched for pictures and background information to support the context of the selections.

Four of the five groups chose to present on “Suzy and Leah,” a short story that takes place following World War II and that is told through the diaries of Suzy, an American girl who lives in the community where a refugee camp has been set up, and Leah, a Jewish refugee who has been orphaned by the war. In this selection, students see how each girl judges the other without knowing her. By the end of the story, each girl realizes she misunderstood the other.

The choice of this selection over any other in the anthology suggests that the topic or theme of the selection needs to deal with a clear socio-cultural issue for the students to work with. This meant that I would have to be more active in future discussions than I had previously
thought. (I had originally wanted it to be completely student-led). Not all our selections have themes imparting messages about making judgments or feature characters experiencing socio-cultural conflicts. I made the decision that students would take turns fulfilling the role of discussion leader for Think-Aloud discussions, as initially proposed, but I would scaffold as necessary with my own questions and examples to help students recognize the connections between the text and their own lives, as well as how the text can be used to discuss socio-cultural issues, with the hope that at some point, students would become more skilled at doing this themselves.

Each group presented their selection and Think-Aloud satisfactorily. Group members were engaged in their own presentations and as audience members. It was apparent that a large amount of thought and effort went into the presentations, as they were prepared to discuss and defend their identification, explanation, and connection to the socio-cultural context of the story. The activity also satisfied my desire to see all students participate and contribute, and made me feel confident that each student would be capable of providing the rest of the class with thoughtful discussion in our upcoming selections. I instructed students that from that week on, each of them would be completing their own Think-Aloud chart for each selection. A student would be randomly selected by having their name drawn out of a set of popsicle sticks representing the class. That student would be in charge of leading discussion; other students would use their charts to contribute to the discussion or pose their own questions to the discussion leader. The students were receptive to this, and I think that having the opportunity to explore first with a group had given them more confidence.

Data from my field notes indicate that through these Think-Aloud discussions, occurring each week with each selection, my students gained a deeper understanding of the story, the characters, and their own personal ideas about life. Following are two examples, one from a group presentation and the other from a student-led discussion. These excerpts come from my reflective journal, which was based on my field notes:

1) With “Suzy and Leah,” a group shared that they think the character Suzy should have kept her opinions regarding Leah to herself “since they were ignorant.” An audience member chimed in “Isn’t it good to share your opinions? You have to be able to speak up for yourself.” The group members’ response was that “you can give your thoughts about someone if it’s going to help them or you, like if they are bothering you. Suzy was just being mean. You should keep that to yourself.” Another student quickly pointed out that Suzy was keeping it to herself, because she only wrote her thoughts down in her journal. The group members conceded, and it appeared that the discussion was going to stop there, so I involved myself by posing this question to students: “Suzy’s ideas about Leah were kept private in her journal, but did they affect how she spoke to Leah or how she behaved towards Leah?” My students agreed yes and then I requested that they find evidence in the text that supported this response (a state-mandated skill), which they did. The conversation culminated with students generalizing that prejudging, even if not shared, could still influence a
person’s actions, evident in their tone, word choice, and nonverbal communication.

2) In the selection “Seventh Grade,” Victor starts seventh grade trying to catch the attention of Theresa, a girl he has liked from afar for many months. The author, Gary Soto, provides text that allows readers to conclude Victor is of Latino heritage and lives in a community made up primarily of Latinos. One example is Victor explaining he is surrounded by brown people, and would like to travel to a place where there are fair-skinned people. The discussion leader disagreed with the author’s word choices here, and believed the author was being racist. Many students concurred with the leader’s opinion. I asked students if, at the start of the story, they imagined Victor to have brown skin. The general response was no, they visualized him to be white. I pointed out that we often assume characters to be white, unless directly told otherwise, because that is what we are used to seeing in everyday life, and that being white might be considered the norm. When we do that, we are bringing our own bias to the story (a student quickly reminded the group that this was talked about during a previous discussion of the short story “The Three-Century Woman”). I told the students that the author most likely thought it was necessary to establish that Victor is a brown-skinned person in a community of brown-skinned people to create a specific setting; otherwise, general readers would make assumptions similar to what they had. The students caught hold of this idea and wouldn’t let go; the rest of the discussion centered on studying previous selections for evidence on the background of characters.

Using my reflective journal, I was able to draw some conclusions from my observations of lessons. Despite the success of the Think-Aloud discussions, several things concerned me. Most of the stories in our anthology did not provide adequate material for the purposes of our discussions, which was first to discuss race and racism, followed by the discussion of diversity issues in general. The examples I’ve provided in this paper were the exception and not the rule when it came to the fruitfulness of our discussions. Many times, discussion leaders led students in making inferences or drawing conclusions that were not about the socio-cultural issues buried in the selections. Discussions were still important and meaningful, engaging students in the text in helpful ways, but they did not consistently meet the needs of this project. I felt frustrated that I was not given the autonomy to select texts that I believed met my students’ needs.

Following many weeks of discussion on socio-cultural issues, and after identifying instances of them in our story, I felt students were prepared to discuss openly how these issues are evident in our school. My gathering of anonymous responses to a question about racial discrimination in the school, described earlier, had indicated that at the beginning of the study most students were not seeing racial problems, and that some of the ones who were had a limited understanding of racism. However, after completing a variety of lessons and activities centered on these topics, many students were able to identify specific, daily acts of discrimination in their surroundings, with little direction from me, demonstrating that the project may in fact have increased their understanding of socio-cultural issues. In
addition, I asked students to further analyze these incidents and decide who was most hurt by them, how they affected our learning community, and why these actions might be taking place. The following are paraphrased excerpts of our conversation, taken from my field notes, with student responses in italics:

Now that we have a clearer picture of discrimination and prejudice and what that might include I want you to think about where discrimination and prejudice are happening at school, and what form it is taking.

“When people tell jokes, jokes that have a black guy, and a white guy, and a Jewish guy.”
“Or jokes about girls against boys!”
“Blonde jokes.”

... Jokes are absolutely one way that prejudice and discrimination manifests itself. What else?

“Cliques. Like, all the same people sit together at breakfast or in the bleachers before school.”

... “What about when people say “girls can’t play sports” or boys can’t do things that are girly, or they’ll be called...gay.”

People often have specific ideas of what boys are allowed to do and what girls are allowed to do. They are referred to as gender roles, and if a person goes outside of their gender role, people may think unkindly of them.

“Well, that can make boys do things they don’t want to do and girls too. So then they are unhappy because they are doing what other people want them to do.”
“I’ve heard about teenagers killing themselves for that.”

“I would want people to just be themselves and try to stand up for them if people want to make fun of them.”

Reviewing the examples from our discussion in my reflective journal, it appears that at least some students made gains in their ability to identify and articulate socio-cultural issues within the walls of their own school, and that these discussions were certainly an improvement over the strained discussions about discrimination that the class had experienced prior to the study. Following the discussion outlined above, I asked students to get into their reading groups and brainstorm how problems of discrimination could be resolved in our school. I encouraged them to not only think of how they themselves could be a part of the solution, but to think about how they might involve the larger student body. The students tackled this wholeheartedly, telling each other what they expected to see from one another in the days to come (greeting a different person every day, teaming up with the person who is always excluded, refusing to laugh at or participate in racist jokes).
Many groups generated lists of changes they would make in their behavior to become more tolerant and gracious toward others and signed it as a pledge. Ideas for spreading the message to other students outside our classroom included handing out flyers or pamphlets, hanging posters in high traffic areas, and distributing paper “buttons” which students could staple to their ID lanyards, each containing anti-racist or anti-discrimination messages. The group that came up with the button idea was particularly thoughtful, in that they planned to design a variety of buttons so students might feel compelled to initiate conversation with other students in the form of “button sharing” (coined by the group), or talking about the messages on their buttons. They proposed getting special permission from the principal and dean of students to create and distribute their posters, flyers, pamphlets, and buttons. While I had not planned for this, I fully supported it. As a result, students sat down and collaborated with the administrators in the building, as they pitched their ideas, presented a draft of their design, and defended their reasons for doing it. Finally, they graphically designed their product, and plans were put in place for distribution. This was, in my mind, the perfect ending to our project as my sample of students became active agents in their school community, an important goal of multicultural or pluralistic education.

While the other activities were certainly important to the students’ learning process, equipping them with a renewed or enriched knowledge base for socio-cultural issues, this final activity helped satisfied my need to observe that we had, as a community of learners, effectively used literature as a forum for this learning. My students displayed a new awareness of diversity in their school, had realized some implications of it (who it hurt and how), and eagerly addressed it in a collaborative way, not just with each other but with adults in high positions in the school. However, despite the successes of this project, there were definite limitations. Within the boundaries of our own room the students had created a community different from one they left in the hallways, the lunchroom, and other classrooms. When we came together, it was with a mindfulness of “others” that was not apparent from where I stood at my door, supervising the hallway as students transitioned from one class to the next. The students in my class still self-segregated at breakfast and at the end of the day as they headed home, because it is what others expected them to do. My white students still tend to believe that everyone is equal and have equal opportunities; my black students know otherwise (evident from raised eyebrows to another student of color when a female white student stated “my mom is a cop and I know black people and white people are treated fairly. Skin color doesn’t matter.”) But at least they are more aware than they were to begin with. Perhaps they laugh at the joke, but share a sheepish look with a peer from class listening in. Maybe they will make an effort to pick the last student first in a scrimmage ball game, or offer to partner with someone who is always left out in their science class.

CONCLUSION
I discovered through this project that the fictional literature provided by my district’s Language Arts program can provide a forum for discussion and learning of socio-cultural misconceptions and issues in the classroom. However, a teacher cognizant of those themes or willing to extend those themes is a necessity, otherwise they will be overlooked in the
selections. I also discovered that the inclusion of this focus in daily instruction does not detract from the district- and state-mandated curriculum goals; if anything, it made it easier to attain those goals. My students practiced all components of Language Arts (research, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and visualizing) throughout the implementation of the project, and experienced high-level thinking through synthesis, analysis, critiques, and evaluations as called for by different phases of the project. In addition, the Think-Alouds impacted their ideas of socio-cultural conflicts, and empowered them to be agents of change. I too feel empowered, knowing that I can positively facilitate learning experiences on such issues. I know that I have not reached the full potential of a pluralistic classroom, nor have I perfected the art of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but I am closer.

REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

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