

Healing and Restoring Ourselves Through Literature by Selected Multicultural Writers

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INTRODUCTION

As a teacher from a foreign country, I was excited about the prospect of teaching in Houston. My homeland, the Philippines, had been colonized by Spain for more than three hundred years, and I was eager to compare notes on similarities and differences in culture with my Hispanic students. I had imagined my classes to be alive with discussions about language, traditions, and many other topics. But I was to discover early on that my students were either too shy or embarrassed to talk about their heritage. They were eager to learn more about where I come from, but they were reluctant to share their own experiences. In their opinion, the past was irrelevant; they were more concerned about the present; and as for the future, they had a “who-knows-who-cares” attitude.

The student population in my school is composed of 73% Hispanics, 15% African Americans, and 11% whites; 40% of these students are considered “at-risk” and 82% take free/reduced lunch. The formidable task is to change the negative attitudes of adolescents who are already disillusioned by a world that they have barely discovered and a world in which they believe they have no part.

After the events of September 11, 2001, it became more crucial than ever for the curriculum to teach not only about American culture, but also about the histories of other lands and people. The hate and bigotry that was quickly spreading through the students stemmed from them not knowing what was beyond their communities. I knew I had to act quickly, so I decided to take one step to change this situation by bringing into my reading classes culturally diverse texts. Literature allows readers to experience life vicariously through characters who battle with the ups and downs of life. It remains my hope that through the reading of literature students will not only rediscover and appreciate their heritage, but also discover other people’s heritage.

ABOUT THE UNIT

This unit is inspired by and designed for sixth- and seventh-grade students in my Reading classes at Hamilton Middle School. I have observed in my students a hidden desire to express their aspirations, but this has been long silenced by a fear of mockery. But, there is a need to “break the silence” (Espin 5), and this six-week study (one grading cycle) is a step in that direction. This will be the opening unit for the year, and it will set the tone for later readings. As they listen and read the narratives, students will hear and recognize the familiar voices that speak of experiences similar to their own. Furthermore, they will

realize that they are not alone in their marginalized experience. Collins cites Robert Probst's idea that "the process of reading literature . . . can have the result of changing the reader. This reading of the text can be for the reader a process of self-creation, where, in searching for a response to the text . . . the reader gains a greater sense of self" (Collins 5).

This study will enable students to practice their communication skills through journal writing, book talks/retellings and literature circles. Writing and sharing are essential rituals of healing because the pain that the reader experiences, including repressed memories, is transferred into language form. This act of breaking the silence is a form of "talking cure," where the person recollects portions of his/her life which she/he has repressed, now reconstructed as a more complete narrative that interprets and makes sense of the disturbance causing the person to suffer (Eagleton 162). Moreover, Hooks affirms that this sharing and talking "enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing. Healing occurs through testimony, through gathering together everything available and reconciling" (Hooks 17). William Major describes a similar type of healing in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (Major 18). Major cites Couser: "Published illness narratives may be in some significant sense healing. . . People who narrate their illness or disability may be said to share their bodies with others in a kind of secular healing ritual" (21).

In their journal writing, students will focus on strengthening "voice." Voice has lately been the focus of discussions in certain writing classes in Texas. Students in middle school have to be aware of voice in their writing because of the newly designed state test. As a reading teacher, I believe that the writing process and the reading experience go together. Through this unit, students will find many models for their own writing. The powerful and engaging narratives are booming with so much voice that students will be inspired to write in the same way after being shown how. Furthermore, students will realize that in order to give their voice a personality, they have to take risks in their writing.

The third purpose of this unit is perhaps a little ambitious, but if the saying "You become the stories that you tell" holds true, then the students have everything to gain. For as long as the literature they read leaves a seed in their mind, they will see themselves and their future in a new light. As Professor John Danford said in his opening lecture to teachers during the first day of our Houston Teachers Institute seminar: they will "aspire for the honorable life through the reading of literature."

The stories chosen for the unit fall under three categories—Hispanic American, African American, and Asian American. I decided to teach them in two parts: on the one hand, stories illustrating the loss of identity and the yearning to belong; on the other, stories about quests for self-discovery and healing the community. I believe that a thematic arrangement best illustrates the marginalized experience shared by minority cultures in the United States.

The first group of stories shows the young characters, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, experiencing alienation in mainstream American culture. The stories to be taught here are Lensey Namioka's "The All American Slurp," Francisco Jimenez' "The Circuit," and Mildred Taylor's "The Gold Cadillac." In Namioka's story, the theme of alienation is personified by a young girl who experiences humiliation because of her Chinese ways. In another story, Francisco Jimenez' "The Circuit," Panchito experiences a similar feeling of humiliation among the other sixth-graders in Mr. Lima's class because of his limited knowledge of English. The third story, Mildred Taylor's "The Gold Cadillac" is about a young black girl who likewise experiences this sense of alienation when she and her family are harassed by the police because of their skin color.

I will begin Part Two with Ernest Gaines' "The Sky Is Gray." The main character in this story is a young boy named James who experiences identity crisis and poverty. The story focuses on his journey towards self-discovery and healing. While reading this story, the class will compare James to Wilson, 'lois' father in "The Gold Cadillac," and analyze the journey of self-discovery that these two characters have taken.

I have also included in this segment selected chapters from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza is the main character in *The House on Mango Street* who finds the strength to survive the harsh realities of her urban neighborhood. She experiences both the displacement and recovery of her identity and, in the end, gives hope to the other members of the community. Thus, Esperanza and James both represent the "healer/healed" and, as such, bridge the gap between the minority and mainstream cultures.

As a culminating activity for the unit, I will discuss with the class the "healing" aspects of all stories we read. We will discuss which characters rose above their pains and losses to fully restore and heal themselves.

I. DISPLACEMENT AND THE LOSS OF IDENTITIES IN LENSEY NAMIOKA'S "THE ALL AMERICAN SLURP," FRANCISCO JIMENEZ' "THE CIRCUIT," AND MILDRED TAYLOR'S "THE GOLD CADILLAC"

In Namioka's "The All American Slurp," the Lin family find themselves gradually learning customs in the United States. The narrator, the young daughter, is horrified to find out at a party that no one, other than her family, zips strings out of a celery stalk while eating their salad. Moreover, at a fancy restaurant, they alone slurp their soup! The young girl is more hurt than embarrassed, for everyone's eyes are on her family, intensifying her experience of alienation. The stares of people at the restaurant and at the neighbor's party are symbolic of mainstream culture's critical eye, making her feel ashamed of her Chinese ways.

The young girl's experience in the story parallels the true-to-life experience of Asian American writer Amy Tan. The latter grew up in California "trying to be American" (Chiu 8). Tan recalls "choosing the American things—hot dogs and apple pie—and ignoring the Chinese offerings" (Chiu 8). Moreover, she only answered to her American name, Amy, disregarding her Chinese name, An Mei, in the process. Today Tan attributes this "self-hate" to the shameful experience of being called "Chink" after moving into white neighborhoods (8). The result was a fervent wish for the "Chineseness" to disappear. And, because it didn't, she blamed it all on her mother who was "so Chinese." Frank Chin and Jeffrey Chan observe this attitude of growing "self-contempt" and distancing from the country of origin as "nothing more than the subject's acceptance of white standards of objectivity, beauty, behavior, and achievement as being morally absolute." (Mylan 141) The Lin daughter in Namioka's story demonstrates this behavior by working on her metamorphosis, beginning with wearing the right clothes. Wishing to be more like her friend Meg, she wants to trade her white blouse and navy blue skirt for jeans and T-shirt. She believes that the new clothes would almost let her "pass for an American—from the back, anyway" (520).

No one knows if the Lins will eventually have a happy life in America, but the story closes on a hopeful note as they host their official dinner for Chinese and American friends. In the story, hosting or attending a dinner party is a metaphor for adventure—you never know what to expect. The Lins experience this at the Gleasons and at the fancy French restaurant. The Gleasons experience this, too, at the Lins. In these various instances, people from different backgrounds come together, hoping for the best. The consequences may be rewarding, or disastrous. But as the young Lin girl learns from her friend Meg, there's no need to be embarrassed because even Americans "slurp." However, this is not to say that the practice of etiquette is unnecessary. It simply shows that assimilating into a mainstream culture is not something that happens overnight. One might miss a step now and then, but it is important to keep trying.

We can also look at Namioka's story from another perspective and see the Lins as "wannabe Americans" who appear ridiculous as they pretend to be what they're not, as they exchange their Chinese ways for practices of mainstream culture. Either way, this story signifies the sense of displacement felt by an immigrant and the ensuing need to be accepted. Eva Hoffmann appropriately describes this "need to be accepted" in her autobiography, *Lost in Translation*. After arriving in Canada from Poland, she is transformed by well-meaning family friends into an "elaborate" package that makes her feel "stiff" (Hoffman 110). But she "smiles" through her discomfort—a gesture, she observes, "of a marginal, off-centered person who wants to be taken in" (110).

In Francisco Jimenez' "The Circuit," the narrator is a young boy named Panchito who experiences displacement physically and psychologically. Born to a family of migrant farm workers, he is torn between his desire to work in order to help his family and his aspiration for a good education. Attending school regularly is not possible because he must work in the fields at certain times. Working in the field under the hot sun is hard

and backbreaking for a young boy, but Panchito does not complain. On the other hand, his father and older brother Roberto are used to this kind of life. But Panchito can never get used to moving. This latest move to Fresno keeps him awake. The reader soon learns why, for on the first day of school, Panchito feels nervous and lost among “boys and girls carrying books under their arms. I felt empty” (Jimenez 102). Later, when the teacher asks him to read, he freezes: “My mouth was dry. My eyes began to water. I could not begin” (103). After this incident, Panchito becomes angry at himself, but only for a moment. He is so determined to learn that he asks Mr. Lima, the English teacher, to tutor him. Before long, Panchito regains his self-confidence. But before he can pick up the trumpet for his music lessons, it is time for him and the rest of the family to move again.

The reader can only infer what will eventually happen to Panchito. It is valid to assume that the displacement and its consequences will leave emotional scars on him. This is because he suffers a “lack” as he discovers that his situation is different from that of children in non-migratory communities. He is also aware that because he and his brother are not in school, they are accomplices to their parents in breaking the law. However, Panchito believes that some laws need to be overlooked to ensure the survival of his family. Antonieta Oliver Rotger observes that characters who have little or no control of their lives make them “contradictory beings subject to their emotions and of an unpredictable fate” (Rotger 59). They are trapped between the need for a “sense of place . . . the desire for a sense of rootedness . . .” and the challenges caused by the experiences of movement (58). Based on this argument, one can predict Panchito’s bleak future. On the other hand, a study done by Espin explains that “a strong ego, even at a young age, is able to withstand extreme stresses without necessarily being warped by pathology” (10). Panchito’s story suggests that strong family ties will help a person overcome challenges.

The importance of family is also a vital force in “The Gold Cadillac,” by Mildred Taylor. The story is about a young girl who experiences, first-hand, racial prejudice in the South, particularly in Mississippi in the 1950s. Our narrator is ‘lois. It all begins when she and her sister get a pleasant surprise: Their father brings home a brand new 1950 Coupe de Ville Cadillac. It is gold inside and out. All their friends on their side of Detroit come to admire the car and congratulate the family on their good fortune—everyone but ‘lois’ mother. She refuses to ride in the brand new car. However, she changes her mind when ‘lois’ father decides to visit the grandparents in the South. All the relatives warn him against it, but ‘lois’ father, Wilbert, is determined to go: “All my life I’ve had to be heedful of what white folks thought. Well, I’m tired of that. I worked hard for everything I got. Got it honest too . . . It’s my car, I paid for it, and I’m driving it south” (Taylor 521).

Finally, everyone decides to make the trip—the mother, the children and the relatives—because they believe they should watch out for each other. However, ‘lois and her sister Wilma can’t understand why there is so much tension, especially when they are admonished beforehand not to utter “one word” in the presence of white people. Soon enough the family is on its way. Suddenly, the children notice signs that read “WHITE

ONLY” in restaurants, at water fountains, in hotels, and above the restroom doors of filling stations. This is ‘lois’ first encounter with racial prejudice, and she is troubled: “I didn’t like the signs. I felt as if I were in a foreign land” (Taylor 522). Later on, a police car stops them, and ‘lois’ father is questioned for three hours before he is released. ‘lois finds it confusing that the police call her father a liar and accuse him of stealing the Cadillac. In the evening, they pull off the road under the shade of trees and sleep in the car because, as ‘lois later realizes, they are not welcome in motels. It also dawns on her that the reason her mother and aunts prepared a lot of food is because they would not be allowed in restaurants. The trip does not turn out to be a “grand picnic” as she and her sister had hoped (522). When she asks for answers, her father tells her “it had to do with stupidity and ignorance . . . and the fact that black people had once been slaves” (525). This does not help to put ‘lois’ mind at rest. For the rest of the trip, the family drives in a cousin’s old car, and when they get back to Detroit, ‘lois’ father sells the Cadillac. The story ends with the narrator’s poignant thoughts on the injustice she has experienced. However, she seeks comfort in her father’s belief that a home and family are more important than material things.

The young girl in Taylor’s story shares in the experiences of displacement experienced by immigrants Panchito and the Lin girl because she experiences alienation during her trip to the South. She herself expresses this: “I felt as if I were in a foreign land” (Taylor 522). Of the three characters being studied in this section, her pain is most intense because she is marginalized on two levels—regionally and racially. ‘lois and her family are marginalized regionally. This describes the idea of the “stranger” as a “Northern phenomenon,” explained by Griffin as “a potential wanderer . . . emancipated, but enlightened . . . to a certain degree cosmopolitan . . .” (Griffin 427). This is a fitting description of ‘lois’ father, who originated from the South, but lives in the North. “He learns to look upon the world in which he was born and bred with something of the detachment of a stranger” (427). That he is “cosmopolitan” shows in his taste for expensive and modern cars. Furthermore, he doesn’t think twice about driving it south. However, when confronted by the police, he offers no resistance. Throughout the remaining part of the story, the reader sees only a poignant picture of the father. ‘lois sadly watches the change in her father. There is a meaningful silence as we hear only the thoughts and observations of the young girl. When the girl’s father sells the car later in the story, the community construes the family as having “fallen on hard times” (Taylor 525). But, the reader can interpret this as the healing experience that the father undergoes, seen through his daughter’s eyes. The experience hurts him, but he is enough of an “intellectual” to get past it. He gives up the car, symbolic of a man’s pride and masculinity, in favor of a new home for his family. Without him nor ‘lois realizing it, the father gains enlightenment.

The father’s decision in “The Gold Cadillac” is a model of Bell Hook’s “black imagination” abandoning “black bourgeoisie” values (Hook 258). Hooks argues that “black self-determination” cannot be achieved if a large majority of African Americans are “socialized by television to identify with the values and attitudes of the bourgeois and

ruling classes (255). The father in the story shows that although self-sufficiency is important, it is not the “primary goal” (260). Hook proposes that it is more important “to be literate, to read and study . . .” and in order “to be truly effective, contemporary black liberation struggle must envision a place for spirituality” (258-9).

There is no doubt that Taylor would like to point out another issue: racial discrimination. ‘lois herself is a “stranger” to the experience of segregation, having come from the North, but discrimination does not escape her. She feels it when she is dislodged from the safety net of her family, as her father is taken in for questioning; she feels it strongly when she is snatched by the danger of the unknown from the safety of her childhood; she feels it when she reads the signs outside the restaurants. It is clear that ‘lois emerges more mature from this experience. Nevertheless, it is the beginning of a long journey of discovering her roots in the South, a journey that she will take with the enlightened perspective and wisdom of her father.

Teaching Strategies

As part of teaching “The All American Slurp,” students will research the eating habits of different cultures. Books, videos, pictures, and individuals may be used as sources of information. Students will work in groups, and each group will be assigned to study a particular culture’s cuisine and etiquette. Groups may report using videos, by inviting speakers used as resources to come and speak, or using regalia, such as chopsticks. As a summary and reflection, students will write about their impressions of Asian culture or complete a three-column chart (KWL): what I *know*, what I *want* to know, what I *learned*. Another strategy that I could use is the comparison matrix, a four-column grid that students can use to compare the traditions in three cultures, including their own. In the fourth column, students will write a brief summary of similarities and differences.

I will use *Voices From The Fields*, a photo essay book by S. Beth Atkin, to introduce Jimenez’ “The Circuit.” Students will read the narratives and analyze pictures of migrant children in Salinas, California. After reading the story, students will construct T-charts or Venn diagrams, where they can show the similarities and differences between themselves and the migrant child. Students will also write their reflections on the following prompt: If you were Panchito or another migrant child, what would be your thoughts and feelings about your situation?

I will first teach the background for “The Gold Cadillac” by playing a trivia or bingo game about the 1950s-1960s. The game will be followed by reading an article on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to give students an idea about segregation. After that, we will read the story. Next, I will direct the class to divide into work groups where they will prepare for oral presentations. Each group will be assigned various tasks. One group will describe what it would be like if schools were segregated today; another group will do a “then and now” comparison; still another group will attempt to prove whether segregation has been totally eradicated or not (the students must support their claim).

After listening to the reports, students will write their reflections in their journals using these prompts: “I believe that discrimination today is . . .” and “I can help stop racial discrimination by . . .” Students will then regroup for “sharing time.” They will discuss one item in their journals and brainstorm ideas for posters that will illustrate their messages of goodwill. These will be posted on the “Wall of Peace and Understanding” in the hallway of the school.

II. HEALING THE SELF AND HEALING THE COMMUNITY IN ERNEST GAINES’ “THE SKY IS GRAY” AND SANDRA CISNEROS’ *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

“The Sky Is Gray,” by Ernest Gaines, is the story of James, a young boy whose family struggles to survive poverty in a rural town. Through James’ eyes, the reader sees how his mother, Octavia, is bringing up her boys: “[A]nd I want to put my arms around her. . . . But I’m not supposed to do that. She say that weakness and that’s crybaby stuff. She don’t want no crybaby ‘round her. She don’t want you to be scared, either” (Gaines 293). James’ mother works hard and is equally tough on her son. In part four of the story, the reader gets a full account of how she taught James to kill the redbirds. When he refused, he got a beating. But James never takes anything against his mother. Always there is the love, respect and concern for her in his voice. He understands that his mother is teaching him to survive the harsh realities of life even when he is only a young boy who “ain’t no more than eight” (296).

Still, there is a void or “lack” in James. It is suggested by the sense of “longing” in his tone, its presence as constant as the toothache that bothers him. It is also present in the way he sees the river and sky as “gray” (Gaines 297). Moreover, this is suggested by the repeated mention of his “Daddy” and what life was like when he was still around (298). It is also suggested by his need for approval from the adults—Auntie, Monsieur Bayonne, and Mama. He does not question the authority of the adults because he believes he is being trained to “be a man” to take care of Mama and the young ones.

He proves himself during the trip to Bayonne with his mother. The event and setting are symbolic of a rite of passage. Throughout the long walk up and down the town, there are hardly any words exchanged between the boy and his mother. However, they do not have to talk much because there is a quiet understanding that bonds them. This strong connection of mind, heart, and spirit keeps them strong as they come across the different personalities in the town.

The argument that erupts in the clinic’s waiting room becomes heated, but the boy and his mother hold their ground. The college student does make an impression on James, and this may serve as a foreshadowing of his (James’) future. However, the trip to Bayonne is significant because it not only promises to cure the boy’s toothache, but also opens up a world of possibilities for him. The girl in the bus suggests that James experiences young love despite the hardships brought about by poverty. The preacher

affirms James' strong faith in God, while the college student echoes the voice of new ideas brought about by changing times and education. The grocery store owners, Alnest and Elena, also show that there are sectors of society in the South who treat African Americans as part of the community (Folks 4). In the end, it doesn't matter anymore whether the extraction of his tooth hurt or not: James emerges from the whole experience "a man" and is healed temporarily until his character is tested again in the future (4).

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* is the story of Esperanza, a young girl growing up in a harsh, impoverished, but loving environment. In the chapter "My Name," Esperanza says that her name does not reflect her true self. Though she acknowledges that the name is precious because it was her grandmother's name, she does not feel a connection to its Spanish meaning ("hope"). This sense of alienation is echoed by Esperanza's thoughts in the opening chapter *The House on Mango Street*: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it" (Cisneros 5).

The story moves along, introducing the rest of Esperanza's family and the rest of the community. Through Esperanza's poignant observations, the lives of the people unfold. Nothing escapes her keen eye and sensitive spirit. She is never critical, but always understanding and forgiving of her family members' or her friends' faults.

Then, there are the other members of Esperanza's family: Mama "Smart Cookie," who tells her daughter to "study hard" and learn to "take care all your own" (Cisneros 90); Papa, who likes to listen to Mexican records and who "wakes up tired in the dark" (Cisneros 56). Esperanza is also fully aware of her family's economic circumstances. In the chapter "Bums In the Attic," she talks about their family outing on Sundays: "I used to go . . . I don't anymore . . . I don't tell them I am ashamed—all of us staring out the window like the hungry. I am tired of looking at what we can't have" (Cisneros 86). Later in the chapter, she decides that she will not be like the people who are nestled in their pedestals, "close to the stars" (Cisneros 86). She declares that if she ever moves to her own house, she will always acknowledge her past (Cisneros 87). Esperanza's strong ties to her family are evident throughout the novel, but they do not keep her from aspiring for a better life, away from the homeplace: "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper . . . They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the one who cannot out" (Cisneros 110).

Yet Esperanza feels alone and displaced amidst all these familiar faces, for no one understands her, except "four skinny trees," a metaphor for her situation: "Four who do not belong here but are here . . . Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach" (Cisneros 74). She alone aspires to be more than what her situation can offer. Situations like this give the reader a clue to Esperanza's feelings of "otherness." There is a part of her that belongs with the community, and there is an "other" who retreats to an inner sanctuary where she can revive her spirit. She may be

unable to control the problems besieging her family and friends, but she is determined to take control of her own destiny.

Esperanza shows a “capacity for self-determination,” a theory discussed by Espin in her article, “Spiritual Power and the Mundane World.” Espin explains that along with the development of her power, a healer “develop[s] the skills and attitudes which enhance a woman’s ability to exercise maximum control over her own life” (163). The article further explains that this sense of “empowerment” is a “felt state of being . . . defined as the sense of having or being able to attain control over one’s life” (Espin 163). Thus, Esperanza clearly manifests the role of the “special” one whom “The Three Sisters” predict will “go very far” (Cisneros 103). As estranged as she feels from her heritage, she is the bearer of her people’s hope and dreams, her destiny already implied in her name. Yes, she certainly must leave, but her search for a “house” of her own will always end in Mango Street, her “home in the heart” (Cisneros 64).

It must be also be noted here that, through Esperanza, Cisneros supports the idea that the traditional roles of the Chicana, once rooted in the images of La Malinche, La Virgen, and La Llorona, should be redefined and challenged (Gonzales 169). Cisneros, like other Mexican American female writers, is expressing in her texts “experiences that have been traditionally muted or ignored” (Gonzales 169). Thus, Esperanza’s desire to leave is motivated by the quest for a new role, something she never found in her homeplace. But the irony is that Esperanza believes she must still keep her home, Mango Street, in her heart if she is to succeed in the outside world . . . She and James, in “The Sky Is Gray,” both have strong family ties, but must move on in the world away from the homeplace. They must do this in order to restore themselves and, consequently, bridge the gap between their marginalized communities and mainstream culture.

Teaching Strategies

I will teach “The Sky Is Gray” after “The Gold Cadillac.” After reading Gaines’ story, the class will compare the theme and conflict in both stories. Students will analyze the similarities and differences between the main characters’ experiences and organize their ideas using a comparison matrix grid (a three-column grid) or a frame organizer (a rectangular box designed like a picture frame). Students can work in pairs or groups of three and present summaries of their discussions to the class. For an enrichment activity, students can design questing shields to guide and empower the different characters in the unit. The shields will be drawn inside a template provided. Students will artistically inscribe the names of the characters in the center; they may also choose to use particular colors that they believe reflect the character’s personality. They will also draw objects or animals that symbolize the virtues which their characters need: an eagle to symbolize courage, a rose to symbolize love, the sun for strength. Lastly, students will think of an abstract word or idea that sums up the character’s goal.

I will use literary circles to teach *The House on Mango Street*. Students will be grouped several ways: according to reading scores or according to their interests. Each group will be assigned a chapter from *The House on Mango Street*. I may choose to focus only on a few chapters, the ones that give the class a picture of Esperanza's world: her hopes, her family and friends. Next, I will require the students to keep a journal. At the end of every reading period, the students will write impressions using journal prompts such as "I feel that my given name . . ." These written responses will be shared with a partner at the end of the week. Students are free to choose what and with whom they will share.

It is vital for students to know the importance of sharing or talking. The teacher can ask whether there was ever a time when the students' pain or problem was eased by simply talking to someone. The students will share personal connections that they have written as responses to the chapters "My Name" (what have they found out about their names from their parents and whether they are proud of the history attached to their name), "A House of My Own" (what would their own house in the future look like) and "The House on Mango Street" (a portrait, in words, of their homes, neighborhood and community).

In order for sharing to be successful, it is important to have a protocol for listening already in place. Students have to agree that each one has a right to be heard. Reactions should not be judgmental, and turns can be decided by "talking chips" or by rolling a cube. There should be a scribe and a speaker in each cluster. The latter will summarize the group discussion for the class.

My role as a teacher is to scribe general ideas and connect common points or discuss unique insights. When there is a stall in the discussion, I can do a think-aloud by directing the class to a particular passage focusing the discussions on the obstacles that the different characters experience and the choices that they make. For example, Esperanza and her family experience poverty, and they cannot get out of it because the parents have limited skills. Other people in Mango Street are trapped by similar circumstances. I can ask students if they see anything familiar in the story, whether they feel that the people and their problems are realistic. I can also ask them to put themselves in the shoes of one of these characters: Mama, Papa, Esperanza, Marin, Nenny, Esperanza's brothers, or others, and let them decide what they think they could do to change their circumstances. The class can once again move to their clusters and brainstorm ideas. Then, groups will come back with a scenario for every character, written in the character's voice. For instance, the group will compose a scenario for Mama as if she herself had written it down. A mini-lesson on "voice" will be given before this exercise.

Additional lessons may be used here to incorporate writing. I will teach the Six Traits (Spandel 2001), and students can give their favorite examples from the novel. Another lesson that can be introduced is the use of sensory language in the way the narrator

describes her family, friends, and neighbors using her senses. For example, the mother has a certain smell and her footsteps sound a certain way; the father, on the other hand, is associated with Mexican songs. For their own writing practice, students will first experience “sensory words” by listening to music; feeling different textures; and imagining the sights and smells of things, feelings, places and members of their families. Then they can write on a “star-shaped” organizer the words or phrases that describe their experience, each point assigned to a particular sense. This can later be expanded into a longer piece for their journals.

For closure, students can write to the character to whom they want to reach out because of similarities in their experiences. They can create a questing shield similar to the one already mentioned earlier, for a character in the novel that they want to heal, inspire or empower. They may also write an additional letter to a friend or a relative whom they want to appreciate, cheer up, forgive, and/or comfort.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: Imagining A Segregated Society

This lesson will be taught for the story “The Gold Cadillac.”

Objectives: ELAR 6.7 a. The student compares text events with his/her own experiences.
b. The student determines distinctive and common characteristics of cultures.

Materials :

Ten Scenario cards (index cards)

Overhead projector

News Article

KWL chart (What I Know-What I Want to Know-What I Learned)

The lesson will begin with a pre-reading/warm-up activity that I will call “scenarios.” Each group of two or three students will be given a card with a situation written on it. They will then brainstorm in groups their opinion about the situation and write an open letter to the person responsible. For example, one card will read: “Imagine that it is your first day in Hamilton and you are informed by the assistant principal that there are specific areas that you may stay in school because the school practices segregation—you are to stay at red tables only for lunch, and if the seats run out you may stand or eat outside; you are assigned to a particular restroom, and if it is on the second floor and you happen to be outside at gym, you can’t go to the first floor restroom; you will be in segregated classes as well.” In groups, students will brainstorm opinions about this situation. They have to describe what they feel about this arrangement. They will express how a segregated environment differs from a “normal” school and what are its consequences. After three minutes of brainstorming, representatives from each group will read the scenario assigned to them and the responses of the members of the group.

After everyone has shared his/her responses, I will ask the class if anyone now understands what segregation means. Teacher can scribe answers on a KWL chart, under K; I will then ask if anyone has an idea what the Civil Rights movement was all about, or the bus boycott. I will continue to scribe on the overhead students' responses; I will write under W (What I want to know) if there is no correct response. I will then show an article on the overhead projector about the bus boycott. Using a Who-What-Where-When-How –Why organizer, students will summarize what they've read. Some students can be called on to write one sentence each about the article under the L (What I have learned) column.

I will now introduce "The Gold Cadillac," by Mildred Taylor. I will tell students to remember how they felt about segregation in our school. I'll ask them "How would you feel if someone judged you because of your color, appearance, and race, and decided you're not good enough to be driving around in a new car, even if you owned it, worked, and paid for it?" I'll tell students to turn to their seatmate and talk about their reaction. I'll summarize the reaction and tell the class to begin reading. I will pause and reflect meaningfully at designated points. I will lead the class in "think-alouds," especially when we get to the part where the mother refuses to ride in the new car. The class will discuss whether they think the father or the mother is right. When the class finishes reading, students will "speak and write" in groups on two points: "What do they think about the father's decision to sell the car?" and "Compare the father's reaction to the police harassment with Rosa Park's reaction in the bus in Tuskegee, Alabama. Discuss how different people handle crisis situations in different ways. How would you have reacted? Then the groups will come together to brainstorm the points they would like to discuss during the oral presentation. As groups summarize, I will scribe points on the board. The class will reflect by thinking-aloud together about the issue of discrimination in schools and communities, whether it is still happening, what is being done, and what we can do as students.

Lesson Plan II : Questing Shields and Characters

Objectives: (TAKS Objective 2) The student analyzes characters including traits, motivations, conflicts, relationships and other changes they undergo. The student will recognize, interpret, and use symbols.

Materials Needed:

Template for shields or students can create their own based on what they find in the encyclopedia or on the Internet

Crayons and washable markers

List of symbols generated by the class or the teacher (animals, objects, colors their traditional representations)

Worksheet/Draft

Dictionary or Thesaurus

This lesson/activity will be taught after reading all the short stories and part of the novel. The first thing students will do is to choose a character that they like to give or dedicate the questing shield. They will write this character's name on top of the worksheet/draft. Under the name, they will list the traits pertaining to the character. They may use a Thesaurus or dictionary to generate their list. Next, students need to think about the character's goal or an obstacle that he/she is trying to overcome. On the next line, they will write a quality that the character will need to face the challenge. Lastly, they need to think of an animal or object that is symbolic of the character's goal, virtue, or guiding principle.

The next step is to design the shield. Using the draft they just completed, students will draw the shield. They may divide it in two, three or four fields (areas). They can write words in some fields and draw objects in another. Other areas may be covered in specific colors. When the shield is done, students can talk about their work in their work groups. At the end of the period, the teacher can put up the shields all over the room. The teacher can assign an additional shield to be done at home. Students will choose a peer whom they believe needs to be inspired, motivated, or thanked, and create a shield for that student.

Their work will be sent through the class mailbox.

Lesson Plan III: Making Connections

Objective: (TAKS Objective 4) The student will apply critical thinking skills to analyze a culturally diverse text; the student supports responses by referring to relevant aspects of the text and his/her own experiences.

Materials:

Template for Comparison Grid (four-column grid)

This lesson will be taught while reading Part One of the unit. I will tell the students that "connecting" with the text is an important reading strategy for readers. When a reader connects with the text, he or she is able to visualize and infer what the characters are going through.

The students will use one grid/organizer for two stories. They will write the names of the main characters from each story in the first two columns. In the third column, they will write their own names. The last column will be a summary of similarities and differences between the two characters and themselves.

The students need to decide what aspect of the characters' experience they will write About. They can choose the characters' problems and compare it with their own; they may choose to compare cultural heritage, values, social environment; they may compare

character traits with their own personal qualities. In the last column, students will write a summary about the commonality or difference of their experiences with those of the characters named. After they complete their grids, they can share in groups. Then speakers for the groups summarize to the class on the following point: How did it feel to compare yourself to fictional characters? Was it easy or difficult to choose a character? How do you think this will help you in your reading?

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