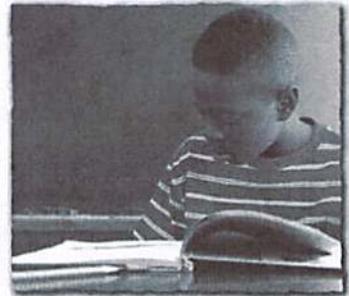


Multicultural and Multilingual Literacy and Language



CONTEXTS AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Fenice B. Boyd
Cynthia H. Brock
with Mary S. Rozendal

Foreword by Lisa Delpit

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Multicultural and Multilingual Literacy and Language

"This book raises awareness of issues related to literacy learning both in and out of school. College literacy instructors seeking to infuse their courses with knowledge about literacy learning in diverse settings will find it an essential text. Teachers will also benefit from reading this book."

—Flora V. Rodriguez-Brown, PhD, University of Illinois—Chicago

"I can't recall the last time I read an edited volume with so much fresh, new, and important material! I found myself marking chapters to cite as references, to recommend to colleagues, and to assign for graduate courses in literacy and diversity....Boyd, Brock, and Rozendal are to be congratulated for a book that is thoroughly ambitious in scope, truly multicultural in flavor, and successful in providing much-needed insights about challenging issues."

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"The voices of classroom teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers provide a broad perspective on how to better address the needs of English-language learners through teacher preparation, teaching, and research....A useful resource for language and literacy educators."

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WITHIN A CLEAR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, THIS BOOK EXPLORES WAYS THAT TEACHERS, READING specialists, administrators, and teacher educators can provide more effective literacy instruction to K-9 students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Cutting-edge theory and research is interwoven with detailed case studies that bring to life the complexities of teaching in today's multicultural and multilingual classroom. Topics covered include:

- How and why culture matters in literacy instruction
- Drawing on students' multiple literacies in the classroom
- Motivating and engaging English-language learners
- Steps that teachers can take to heighten their cultural awareness and skills
- Tapping into family and community resources for literacy learning

Fenice B. Boyd, PhD, is Associate Professor of Literacy Education in the Department of Learning and Instruction at the University at Buffalo—State University of New York.

Cynthia H. Brock, PhD, is Associate Professor of Literacy Studies in the Department of Educational Specialties at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Mary S. Rozendal, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Literacy Education in the Department of Learning and Instruction at the University at Buffalo—State University of New York.

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Reader Response, Culturally Familiar Literature, and Reading Comprehension *The Case of Four Latina(o) Students*

LEILA FLORES-DUEÑAS

When I was a child, I loved school. I tried to please nearly all of my teachers, did all of my homework, made good grades, scored well on standardized tests, and spoke up in class. My father was an officer in the army, and my mother was a teacher at the same elementary school my siblings and I attended. Of my public schoolteachers, all but one of my elementary teachers and two of my secondary teachers were of northern European American ancestry and probably held middle-class values. Most of my classmates, daughters and sons of military officers, were from similar ethnic backgrounds as my teachers, with the exception of maybe one or two African Americans, Japanese Americans, newly arrived German immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Korean Americans, who went to school with me in our rather large classrooms.

The literacy curriculum, as we moved from state to state during my elementary school years in the 1970s, seemed to be fairly similar, which made it easy to adjust to the next school. There was a focus on spelling and grammar, as well as on decoding and answering questions at the end of stories. Reading instruction consisted of whole-class read-alouds from the *Dick and Jane Stories* (Gray, Artley, & Arbuthnot, 1940-1970) in

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round-robin fashion. Then, the class broke up into high, medium, and low groups to practice decoding and reading comprehension skills from basal readers. Next, we went to centers to answer questions written on color-coded, leveled cards in the Standardized Reading Assessment (SRA) program box. Once a week, we read and discussed events and stories from the *Weekly Reader* and *Highlights* magazines, and after recess, the teacher held story time and read books by Dr. Seuss, as well as titles such as *Curious George* (Rey, 1941), *The Real Mother Goose* (Wright, 1994), *Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1983), and *Paul Bunyan* (Kellogg, 1994). All stories that I recall reading in elementary school sounded like and dealt with issues that I imagined were part of my classmates' daily lives. They weren't the kinds of stories that my dad and my *tío* Noé used to tell about *La Llorona* or *Las Malinchitas* at our ranch in Mexico, but they were the kinds of books that we had on our shelves at home.

In the secondary grades, the same was true. Most of the books and literature I read were written from the same European American perspective. Even though I enjoyed reading in general, the older I got, the more I wondered why I was not thrilled by the books that I had to read, like most of my school counterparts seemed to be. I suspect that as time went on, I must have internalized my disinterest as something wrong with me. For example, when we would return to school in early fall and the teacher would ask the titles of books we had read over the summer, I seemed always to be ashamed that I had not read more. This feeling of inadequacy was further exacerbated in high school, when my teachers continued to introduce more and more of what I now see as culturally and linguistically distant texts, such as works by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Dickens. Of course, I realize that some of my other classmates probably felt the same way.

What was wrong with me? I wondered why I was so disinterested in reading books such as *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1965), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1952), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1972). Although I was able to read all those stories and even test well on their content, why was I so disengaged when I read them? Why did I grow to like them less and less? For years, I pondered these questions and never came up with any acceptable answers for myself. I just accepted that maybe I was not as smart as I thought or was often told. I knew that this insecurity had to be affecting my comprehension of even "good" literature in a negative way, and would later show up on my college entrance exams, when my mathematics scores exceeded my seemingly high verbal scores.

Looking back, there were just a few books that I really sunk my teeth into during my junior high school years. They included *Anne*

Chapter 10

Reader Response, Culturally Familiar Literature, and Reading Comprehension

The Case of Four Latina(o) Students

LEILA FLORES-DUEÑAS

When I was a child, I loved school. I tried to please nearly all of my teachers, did all of my homework, made good grades, scored well on standardized tests, and spoke up in class. My father was an officer in the army, and my mother was a teacher at the same elementary school as my siblings and I attended. Of my public schoolteachers, all but one of my elementary teachers and two of my secondary teachers were of northern European American ancestry and probably held middle-class values. Most of my classmates, daughters and sons of military officers, were from similar ethnic backgrounds as my teachers, with the exception of maybe one or two African Americans, Japanese Americans, newly arrived German immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Korean Americans who went to school with me in our rather large classrooms.

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Frank: *Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank, 1952), *Summer of My German Soldier* (Greene, 1973), and *A Separate Peace* (Knowles, 1985). These stories sounded natural to me, unlike so many of the other novels we had to read, which were contrived, with an overabundance of description. In addition, perhaps the recurring themes of adversity and difference in these "interesting" texts also attracted me.

As time went on, I went to college and did well in my studies. During those years, some of the books that I read for pleasure included *Jaws* (Benchley, 1974) and *Sophie's Choice* (Stryon, 1979), both of which I read after seeing the movies. Even though I was absorbed in those books and others, I still had no faith in reading for my beginning College English classes. I was constantly tested and would have to have the "right answer." As expected, all my English literature classes, again, required the class to interact with the same kinds of texts I had to read in high school. Running through my head were the same old questions: "Why was I so detached from these stories?" "Why did 'they' always have to use the same kind of literature that came mostly from England?" "What made that kind of literature so much better than our own from the United States?" These questions continued throughout most of my university studies and even into my children's literature classes in teacher education.

Once I graduated from college, I became a bilingual education teacher in an inner-city school district. During that time, I read mostly the newspaper and young adult literature to plan for my fifth-grade curriculum—none of which, was multicultural. Nevertheless, as time went on, most of my reading took place during my classroom's sustained silent reading period, because my school required that I read silently with my students. I began reading novels such as Maya Angelou's (1969) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and James Baldwin's (1985) *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. I don't know how those multiethnic books got into my hands, but they did, and they made a big difference in my self-confidence as a reader again. With those two volumes, something wonderful had begun. The struggles of identity, justice, and equality were all topics I was required to know at my family's dinner table. I could relate to those books, finally.

Those two books renewed my faith in myself as a reader. They gave me a taste of what was good or "quality" literature for me. The following year, I moved to another state and district, and started off the school year reading the newspaper, while my first graders were adjusting to sustained silent reading. During the 2 years I spent teaching in that district, I began reading mysteries by and about feminist women. I thought that they were interesting, but not as great as books by Maya Angelou.

Another great book I recall reading from that time was Dosto-

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yevsky's (1958) *Crime and Punishment*. Although the character's names were hard to remember, the text was a healthy challenge, and I loved it. It was the type of book that I could live through, and feel all the fears and hopes of the characters. However, once I finished it, I did not pick up another novel; instead, I only read academic articles that my astute principal slipped into the faculty's mailboxes, addressing education of English language learners (ELLs). Once again, I loved academic reading. Why I floundered so much in my feelings about certain genres of text became an interesting question for me, and for my teaching.

The following year, I went to graduate school. Back to my comfortable academic reading, I still did not embrace reading novels in my spare time. Every now and then, I read a short mystery, but reading novels for sheer enjoyment was basically still on the back burner. During my second year of graduate school, my partner wanted to share literature discussions with me and suggested that I read a book written by a Chicano writer, Rudolfo Anaya, titled *Bless Me, Última* (1972). I had never heard of any Chicana(o) writers and was doubtful that I even wanted to read the book, but I said that I would try.

Wow! Once I got into Chapter 2 of that book, I had to finish it! I had never read anything like it! I was amazed at how I read, never thinking about my comprehension, my speed (it was going so fast), or whether I was bored. In other words, not using my metalinguistic awareness was uplifting! The text sounded like people in my extended family. It had code switching in Spanish and English, which is always great fun when you know two languages and can put your thoughts together so cleverly. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was amazing! I could hear the sounds of the characters and see the landscape. I understood at such a profound level that I had to read more stories like this or about *mi gente*.

The next book I read, Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna* (1995), reflected a Latina's passion for life and love. Next, I read Allende's *House of the Spirits* (1984), replete with magical realism that mirrored stories told by old-timers in my family's village in Mexico. I also read Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1992), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), and Villaseñor's *Rain of Gold* (1991), all of which helped me to see how these writers used forms of oppression as a gateway to honest and provocative material for their books.

The list of books I began reading, and continue to read, help me to understand what my family talked about, and that how we communicated was of value and useful in the development of my voice as a teacher. If culturally relevant literature had been a motivator for me to read more, and if I had gained a healthier literate identity (Langer, 1987) about my reading abilities, then what might happen to younger readers

who read about things they knew? That was the question that guided the following study.

CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS AND READING

So there I was some 20 years later, sitting on grade-level committees, planning the same curriculum that I had experienced as a child for my own students. As I planned with other nonbilingual teachers, I often questioned how my Latina(o) and African American students would be able to understand books that I was not interested in as a child, such as some of those found on the Newbery Award book list. Even though I had an inner conflict about what was seemingly "quality" literature for "all" children, I stayed quiet and acted as though the core literature that my well-intentioned colleagues had selected was suitable for all students. Of course, as most bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers are taught, I would be the one teacher on my grade level who would go out of my way to make the "connections" for my students. I was also worried about the other students who had exited from bilingual and ESL programs, and were now attending all-English classrooms, where those connections most likely did not take place on a regular basis.

With these Latina(o) students in mind, I have focused this chapter on the personal stories and narratives that four fifth-grade Mexican American bilingual learners can contribute to our understanding of their experiences with reading in English. It is my hope that by listening to their voices and responses, educators can learn how better to serve these children.

In the remainder of this chapter, I tell you about a study in which four Mexican American students responded to literature that was part of their regular classroom curriculum (written by non-Mexican American authors), and selected literature by Mexican American writers who were not part of their classroom libraries. My goal in this study was to understand how the students responded to these different texts and the role that cultural familiarity played in their text comprehension.

READER RESPONSE AND CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS

During my years in graduate school and more recently, through my university teaching and research experiences, I have searched for studies

and theories in literacy education that explain what might be going on when minority children respond to reading culturally unfamiliar texts in the classroom. I have found that reader response theory can partially explain what might be going on with these readers.

One of the most famous names associated with reader response theory is Louise Rosenblatt. In her book, *Literature as Exploration* (1983), she centers her thoughts on the idea that personal experiences shape readers' literary experiences and must therefore be taken into account as teachers interpret how readers' understand literary text. In other words, Rosenblatt encouraged us to look more deeply into students' reading responses to consider the idea that not all readers understand stories in the same way. Rosenblatt explains that the meaning of the text does not exist exclusively within the text, nor is the text's meaning solely in the reader's mind; rather, it is where the text and the person's personal and literary experiences come together to make sense in a particular context. Thus, it is within this "transaction" that reading (comprehension/meaning) occurs. Therefore, it follows that the more a reader's personal experiences match the experiences reflected in the text, the greater the comprehension for the reader.

So what does all this theory mean for culturally and linguistically diverse students, who often have very different personal experiences from those characters portrayed in the literature they read in our schools? This mismatch can mean that they may respond or interpret the story differently from what the author or teacher expects of the reader. Or worse, there may be a breakdown in comprehension that causes the reader to focus more attention on simple tasks, such as decoding, performance, or pronunciation of individual words, rather than on the meaning the text evokes. According to Rosenblatt, such conflicting responses can also be examined to help us understand more deeply the reader's comprehension of the text. Rosenblatt (1978) began to distinguish between the ways that readers interpreted text, indicating that readers often take two different stances toward the text.

According to Rosenblatt (1978), within these stances, readers focus their attention on understanding a text in an *efferent way* (reading for information) or in an *aesthetic way* (experiencing a text as primary). Or they may take on the characteristics of both, while still favoring one stance over the other. The *efferent* stance is taken when the reader focuses on seeking and retaining information from the text itself (to answer consequent questions on worksheets or at the end of chapters, or on tests, etc.). It is the *efferent* stance that educators have traditionally modeled for students to adopt during reading activities in the classroom. This approach inherently implies that there is one interpretation of the text, which can only be found within the text. Encouraging students to

find one meaning for each text reflects an only-one-answer approach (based most often on the teachers' manual or "basic" interpretation) to teaching reading. Although knowing the "facts" of a story is a necessary part of reading comprehension, it is limiting to teach from this single approach, because it may prohibit students from fully engaging with the texts they read. In addition, efferent reading also maintains educators' ignorance of the many creative interpretations and personal experiences these students can bring to a text.

Unlike the efferent stance of responding to literature, the *aesthetic* stance is taken by readers who focus attention on not only the concepts that the words of the text represent but also what they experience as they bring personal experiences to their understanding of the text during the reading. In the aesthetic stance, readers' ideas and feelings are prompted by the text, so that readers experience a new text. Rosenblatt (1978) suggested that using a more aesthetic approach to teaching literature may be more beneficial to students, because it may provide better opportunities for them to bring forth their personal experiences while reading the text, thus allowing the full transactional nature of reading comprehension to take place. To this, I add that text choice matters, and that these transactions can perhaps be better understood by examining the role of cultural and experiential familiarity, and its relationship to text comprehension.

Analyzing Latina(o) students' stances toward literature can perhaps help us to understand the role of literature selection in text comprehension. In the following sections, I analyze the writings of four Mexican American bilingual students as they respond to a classroom curriculum of reading literature by European American authors and supplemental stories by Mexican American authors.

THE SCHOOL AND THE STUDENTS

The school I selected was in an inner-city, low-socioeconomic-level elementary school (early childhood through fifth grade) located in a large city in central Texas. It was a "typical" Mexican American *barrio*, or neighborhood, school located in a segregated urban area of the larger city. The school housed a total of 531 students: 73.4% Hispanic (predominantly of Mexican descent), 16.9% African American, and 9.6% other (European American, Asian American, and Native American). It also served 247 limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in bilingual education and ESL programs.

Four students, Sonia, José, Rosalinda, and Alfredo were selected to participate in the study. All of these students were exited from bilingual

programs and were completing all academic work in English in the fifth grade. At the time of the study, the students had passed the standardized Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in the fourth grade and were considered to be "average" or "above average" by their teachers. These students were interviewed, and after much questioning, seemed to have similar views of themselves as readers and writers. They said that they liked reading but "weren't really good at it," so they did not read for enjoyment. They each confirmed the desire to become better readers in English and expressed interest in learning more about their own reading problems. In addition, all four students worried about how they sounded while reading, and about their understanding of what "they [the text] want you to know."

Sonia, a tall girl who often wore overalls, had long black hair with stringy bangs, and red glasses. Her classmates referred to her as "smart, tomboy-like." She was often the one student who raised her hand first in class and had many of the "right" answers. Her Latina teacher described her as being "smart, funny, and a good student" who was always prepared for class. Often outspoken in her class and in our afterschool study meetings, Sonia had much to say about what she read. She was angered by texts and would argue about the texts' content and how they were written. At the time of the study, she did not read for enjoyment, only for a "reading record" that earned her class points for a schoolwide book reading competition.

José was also in Sonia's class. In his teacher's interactions with him and me, it was clear that she did not always appreciate José. She often mentioned that he was "lazy, a street kid with baggy pants and slicked hair, who rarely gets his work done." On several occasions, I observed José keeping to himself and asking no questions of his teacher or his classmates. He rarely read for pleasure, because he did not "like the kinds of books they have at school." He read out loud with Standard English pronunciation when it was his turn, and when he had to answer questions, he was often correct. He was quiet in class, used few words to express himself, and did his work at a minimal level, but, again, it was nearly always correct. Although José did not interact much with others in his classroom, he was very interactive in our study sessions.

Rosalinda and Alfredo were in another fifth-grade classroom, just down the hall from Sonia and José. Rosalinda, a newer immigrant from Mexico, was considered "shy and quiet, always giggling and boy crazy" by her Latina teacher. On various occasions, Rosalinda expressed that she was a "poor reader," because she thought that she did not "sound right" when she read aloud in class (most reading was done aloud in both classes). In other words, her perceived pronunciation problems affected how she saw herself as a reader and communicator. Au and

Kawakami (1991) refer to these kinds of perceptions of oneself in literacy activities as having an influence on one's ownership of literacy. Rosalinda also worried about "not having the right answer" after reading in class, or when turning in homework. This fear, or not meeting these school expectations, greatly affected how Rosalinda saw herself as a reader. At the time of the study, Rosalinda said that she loved reading picture books to the children on the stairs of her inner-city, neglected apartment complex. Other than those books, she did not read chapter books for pleasure.

Alfredo, the most recently arrived immigrant of all of the students, had been working in all-English classrooms for only 1 school year and was making A's and B's in all subjects. Often labeled the "class clown," he was always smiling and trying to make others laugh. In terms of his literacy learning, he always did exactly as he was told: "Read the passage below and answer the questions" (TAAS practice played a major role in students' reading in class); however, he did not participate in the fifth-grade reading competition. In fact, he did very little, if any, outside reading for pleasure. According to his mother, that year he did read one or two books he had gotten from a school book fair, as well as lots of advertisements that came in the mail. These he read to his toddler sister.

STUDYING STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO LITERATURE

This analysis is part of a larger, yearlong study that took place with the students, their parents, and teachers (see Flores-Dueñas, 1997). For the purposes of this chapter, I analyze the types of stances the students took as they responded to their classroom literature (written by non-Mexican American and Mexican American authors) during 20 afterschool focus group sessions. Each session consisted of the following procedures: (1) Students read a story silently, then (2) retold the story in writing, and (3) discussed the story in a focus group interview. For each procedure, students read the story silently and at their own pace, returned the copy of the story to me, then began retelling the story in writing. Once they finished these written retellings, they joined the group to engage in conversation about the story and about their own reading comprehension of the text for that day. I used the written retellings as a catalyst to promote rich discussions about the literature, because this procedure provided the students with an opportunity to formulate their thoughts, so that they could participate in authentic exchanges (Martínez & Roser, 1995). I took field notes, audiotaped the focus group interviews, and transcribed the content of the audiotapes. I analyzed the data collected according to Rosenblatt's (1978b) notions of the efferent and aesthetic stances she be-

lieved readers took as they respond to particular texts. In the next section, I share what I found within these students' written and oral responses to selected stories.

TAKING AN EFFERENT STANCE TO CLASSROOM LITERATURE

Analyzing the students' responses to stories that were part of the classroom curriculum provided a context for my understanding how the students might interact with such texts on a regular basis. In this section, I analyze and reveal how the students' responses to their classroom literature were essentially efferent in nature. In the case of the four participants, the state-adopted and grade-level approved classroom curriculum, as well as books in the classroom library, were almost exclusively written by non-Mexican American authors. Although the majority of these authors seemed to have values that reflected the dominant culture, there were a few stories and plays by African American authors on the shelves, as well as a few library picture books by Mexican American authors in the children's desks.

In analyzing the students' written retellings and their conversations in response to their classroom literature, I focused on the content of their contributions rather than on the structure of language and/or spelling, because I was interested in the constructs that the students grasped from the text. Although I do mention form in some of the examples, my primary intent is to understand why students took a particular stance to retell their stories.

Using Textbound Details

As I analyzed the students' written retellings of the non-Mexican American literature, one of the themes that emerged was the students' recall of small bits of information to retell the entire story. These small bits of information, or details of the story, were nearly always events that came directly from the text, and were reflective of students' comprehension of only a few events of the story. For example, as indicated in Figure 10.1, José responded to "With a Way, Hey, Mr. Stormalong" (Cohn & Schmidt, 1993), a tall tale about a giant sailor and his extraordinary experiences on a ship at sea. This tall tale inherently required the reader to have an abundance of cultural and linguistic knowledge related to the context and the topics of the text. In this case, to understand the meaning of the text, the reader had to have background knowledge of nautical, geographical, and historical life in New England.

With a Way, Hey, Mister Stormalong
Retold by Amy J. Cohn and Garry Schmidt

There was a man named stormalong but they ~~the~~ called him stormy for short. ~~He was~~ not old but he was tall. He picked up a octopus from the sea

FIGURE 10.1. José retells "With a Way, Hey, Mr. Stormalong" (Cohn & Schmidt, 1993).

As José responded to the text, he wrote only a few sentences about simple details that seemed directly related to the text. Rosalinda and Alfredo responded similarly. Sonia, on the other hand, used details but also took one event (a fight the main character had with an octopus) she remembered and cleverly used it as the main idea in retelling the whole story. For example, she states, "He [Stormy] was so tierd [*sic*: tired] that they had to replaes [*sic*: replace] him with another person on the ship." Making a new story out of one event in the story was perhaps used to mask her lack of understanding of the text. Figure 10.2 shows how Sonia recalled details to make up a new story.

In the group's discussion about "With a Way, Hey, Mr. Stormalong," similar patterns revealed that the students took an efferent stance in response to this text. For example, I asked, "What do you think about this text?" There was little response until the students started talking about the problems they had with the text. Again, the comments were text-bound. In the following transcription, the students describe many of the diversions they made in their minds as they read and tried to make sense of unknown vocabulary. They shared their thoughts about various misunderstood words and what they did to redirect their thinking to stop themselves from concentrating on the unknown vocabulary.

LEILA: What do you think about this text?

JOSÉ: . . . when it says, "The captain looked at the ledger and said, 'You're able-bodied, all right.'"

SONIA: I was gonna say that.

ALFREDO: I didn't understand *ledger*.

JOSÉ: You are able to be a body? (*laughter*)

LEILA: You didn't understand *ledger* or *able-bodied*? OK, so what did that do to you when you kept reading?

ALFREDO: We kept on reading, and while we were reading, we kept on thinking about that word.

ROSALINDA: It just makes me think about something else.

ALFREDO: I thought the story was about a storm.

SONIA: Like the word *fathoms*—it makes me feel like the Phantom of the Opera.

LEILA: Phantom of the Opera?

JOSÉ: I saw *fathom*, and then it reminded me of *The Phantom of the Opera*; that's when I went into that book.

If one were to use such a text to evaluate José's or the other students' retellings of this text, some teachers might view the reading level as "below grade level" or as "at risk," since the children had such low comprehension. I submit that each of the four students experienced low comprehension with this text because they did not understand the cul-

with a way, Hey, Mister
RETOLD By Amy L. COHN & Stormalong
SUZY SCHMIDT

The story is about a ~~seaman~~ man
name stormalong and this ship
he ~~built~~ built. He name the ship
lady of the sea. They ~~call~~ called him
stormy for son. stormy was very
tall. stormy set out to the ~~sea~~
sea and fouth an octopus he finish
fighting him when he tided
to light of his arm. ~~he~~ he
was so tired that they ~~to~~ had
to replace him with another
of a person on the ship.

FIGURE 10.2. Sonia retells "With a Way, Hey, Mr. Stormalong" (Cohn & Schmidt, 1993).

tural context or have the vocabulary they needed to fully understand the comical nature of this tall tale. Out of all of the stories we read from the students' classroom curriculum, this text seemed to be the most difficult and the furthest away from readers' background knowledge.

Using Textbound Recounting

One classroom text that the students seemed to enjoy was *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961). Their satisfaction with this book was revealed in their discussions once they had finished their written retelling. Upon examination of their retellings, all four students had responded similarly, recounting in a step-by-step manner the events of the story. Their reconstructions also seemed to demonstrate that they were able to retell the story with ease.

Although the students' reconstructions seemed to be recountings of small pieces of information, this was for them an accomplishment, because they had expected this text to be "boring, like most other American chapter books," and expressed that they rarely felt that they understood novels the teacher assigned. In Figure 10.3, Alfredo's recounting in his lengthy retelling is very much like the text. He tells the reader what happened first, next, next, next, and so on, by using the word *then* over and over again. Although this may seem like a long listing, with this text (unlike the student's responses to "With a Way, Hey, Mr. Stormalong"), Alfredo and the other students were able to make sense of the text in a coherent manner. For these ESL learners, being able to recount in order was a very positive sign that they were indeed comprehending and remembering large ideas from the text.

Although each student interpreted the story in a different way, this notion of recounting seems to be a salient pattern that runs through each student's responses. Notice how often the transition word *then* is used in this text. In analyzing the students' writings and discussions, the number of students' recalled details and events appeared to be related to how much they understood and recalled details of the text. With this story, the students had prior knowledge about the language and/or events of the text and were able to understand the major themes of the story. On the other hand, when the students appeared to be limited in their knowledge of language (vocabulary, phrases, word structure) or experiences expressed in the text, they were not as successful in interpreting the content or the characters' emotions. Nonetheless, in most cases, the students appeared to recall specific events or details from the text to retell the story, which mirror an efferent response to literature.

Of all of the non-Mexican American texts that the students read, *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961) seemed to capture their interest.

When the Red
Fern rose

This story was about a man that was walking home when he was walking he heard a noise the noise was like some dogs were fighting because you can hear barking. Then the noise grew closer and closer. Then the man was barking of because the dogs were coming close. There were like twenty-five dogs and one hound dog the hound dog was bleeding. Then the man gave a big and loud bark then all the other dogs ran and left the hound dog. Then the man got on his knees and got close to the dog but the dog barked of because he thought the man will hurt him. Then the man said Hear boy I want hear you I'm your friend. Then the dog got close and put his head on the man's head. Then the man took the dog home and gave him hot milk and the dog finished the

(continued)

FIGURE 10.3. Alfredo retells Chapter 1 of *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961).

milk. Then the man gave him meat and the ~~rest~~ dog finished all the meat in the house. Then the man went to the store to buy more meat for the dog. The man told the dog that he could leave ~~at~~ night so that night the man opened the door so the hound dog could leave. Then the dog left and then he looked back. Then the man waved goodbye. Then the dog kept walking through the rain, storm, snow. But the dog was thirsty and hungry. Then the man said that he would leave the gate open in case if the dog comes back from his trip. But the man grabbed logs put it in the chimney ~~and~~ with the lights turned off he got matches and turned it on so he can turn on the fire. When the dog got to his house he liked his master's hand and his master gave him food and something to drink then the dog was happy to be home with his master.

FIGURE 10.3. (continued)

because they understood it. The students claimed to understand it the most and to like it best. They stated that they liked it because it was interesting. In the following dialogue, I asked them why they found this story interesting. In response to my question, Sonia did not tell me why the book was interesting; instead, she told me what the story was about. After this, the other students also contributed the events that they recalled from the story. The conversation reflects Rosenblatt's notion of an efferent response to this story, because it was mostly completely story-bound.

LEILA: So what do you think about the story?

SONIA: I thought it was interesting.

LEILA: How come? Interesting, why?

SONIA: It talks about a dog like . . . It's about this man that he, he's at this place and he finds this dog, then when he, he, when the dog leaves, the man said that it reminds him of when he was in his boyhood, then, then he said that when he was going in the house he saw, he found some wood. He started a fire and then, and the man said that he saw these two, two, two dogs. I think that reminds him of his childhood.

LEILA: OK, did you like the story?

SONIA: Yes.

LEILA: How come? 'Cause, just because it was about a dog?

SONIA: No. It's interesting. I just like it.

LEILA: OK, tell me about how you felt about the story, everyone.

ALFREDO: I hated when like four or five dogs were fighting the dog.

LEILA: How come, Alfredo?

ROSALINDA: 'Cause he didn't belong there.

ALFREDO: He was from another uh . . . town.

LEILA: He was an outsider?

ALFREDO: Then there was this man that was walking. He heard all these noises and he knew that there were dogs fighting, but he didn't pay much attention. Then the noise came closer and closer. Then he saw this dog.

LEILA: Okay, stop there. José . . .

JOSÉ: He saw several dogs fighting and . . . he, he, he got the dog before the . . . I forgot what they're called. They're gonna pick him up, like

they're gonna' pick up a dead dog if he didn't do nothing, if didn't do something about it.

In this discussion, all of the students are involved in telling what the story was about. They appear to be very interested in participating in the discussion, because they all have something to contribute to the conversation. The story started out with a dog fight that was very exciting. Most of the students understood this part. This was the only story in the non-Mexican American literature to which the students reacted in this way.

TAKING AN AESTHETIC STANCE TOWARD MEXICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

In this section, I use the term "Mexican American literature" to describe culturally authentic (Bishop, 1993) literature written by Mexican American authors. It reflects the daily nuances, language, and experiences of living in a Mexican American community, as portrayed by the author. Some of the authors I used in this study wrote about their experiences in these communities with a mostly English text, then substituted a few words in Spanish. For example, in the story "El Sapo" (Rice, 1994), the author does this in sentences such as the following: "Let's go look for some more *sapos!*" The Spanish word *sapos* means "toads" in English. According to Barrera, Ligouri, and Salas (1993), writing *sapos* instead of "toads" would most likely "provide important cultural grounding" and be representative of how language is used in the author's community.

When responding to the Mexican American stories, the students seemed to interact with the content and the characters in the texts rather than just recall text-direct information about them. In other words, the students seemed to bring their own knowledge and experiences to their discussions about these texts. Rosenblatt (1978) identifies these types of interactions with texts as *aesthetic* responses to literature. In my analysis of most of the students' writing samples and discussions, it appears that they were able to retell the story in writing as if they understood what the main characters were experiencing through the course of events in the text. Although these ESL learners did not use conventional punctuation, grammar, or spell correctly, it was evident that they had made personal connections to the meaning of the texts. These personal connections turned into personal, aesthetic responses, because they were able to express their ideas in their own ways.

As the students retold the Mexican American stories in writing, they occasionally grappled with new vocabulary and information, just as they

did with any other stories; however, with this literature, no information was so foreign that they did not understand the main ideas and the depth of the characters in each story. In fact, the students consistently demonstrated that they were able to use their prior knowledge of language, ideas, and writing, as well as their own living experiences, to understand, express, and support the main themes of the stories.

The students also demonstrated that they were able to retell the stories at a fairly high level, which might be a consideration for educators and parents, who have historically been taught that the only "quality" literature is that deemed canonical literature. For example, most of the writing samples illustrated that the students were able to retell coherent stories that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. They recalled main ideas of the story and supported them with details, while sequencing events. Incidentally, they had much more intelligible and profound responses to this literature than to the classroom stories.

Drawing on Personal Knowledge for Comprehension

Throughout nearly all of the retellings of the Mexican American literature selections, the students seemed to understand the main themes and events of the story. As they retold some of these stories in writing, however, they appeared to focus on certain aspects of the texts, while still telling what happened in the story. These foci often became visible in the form of details that students provided about particular aspects of the text. In the next section, I describe the various ways that the students seemed to connect with particular parts of the stories.

On some occasions, the students appeared to relate to particular characters in the stories. For example, in Rosalinda's retelling of "El Sapo," she appears to relate to the character Berta. In Figure 10.4, Rosalinda elaborates and demonstrates that she understands Berta's role in dealing with the two younger boys. For example, midway in her writing sample, Rosalinda begins to discuss the story, with many details about Cousin Berta. She recalls how Cousin Berta let the boys stay up until midnight, and that it was she who gave the boys permission to go out in the rain. Rosalinda also recalled the smell of the tamales that Cousin Berta made to calm David and Roger down, so she could tell them a story that would scare them.

Incidentally, in Rosalinda's personal life, she was the oldest of four children and had many responsibilities with her younger siblings. In an interview, her father informed me that she was the one who helped her mother cook, clean the house, babysit, and read to her younger brothers and sister. In our discussions, Rosalinda also stated that she was interested in reading books from the "Babysitters Club" series, because she

El Sapo

The story is about a boy named David. And that boy likes to catch sapos and his friends do too. ~~The boy said that he is the best~~ The boy said that he is the best thrower than all of his. The first thing they do is catch the sapos and then throw them up a tree and then all is going all right. But then David's and Roger's parents leave. And they go visit their Aunt and Uncle. And Aunt Berta comes and take care of them. They say they like it. ~~she was fine with them because~~ she was fine with them because she was nice to them and she let them stay up all night on a Friday ~~at night~~ because it was raining outside.

the next day their cousin Berta let them go outside with all of their friends. The first thing they did is play football and then they stopped playing football and start catching frogs of course. ~~all of their friend had to catch~~ one because it had rained. But the only thing they didn't know is that their cousin Berta was watching the of course David was the first to throw since he was the naivest thrower but all of sudden their cousin Berta came screaming out of the house and went hey you have just kill a pore frog just for nothing. Then cousin Berta told them a lot of things. Then she made them go inside. And she had made some tamales they smelled so good that they could hardly wait to eat them. Cousin Berta didn't seem to be angry. ~~No more~~ No more ~~she~~ sat back and ate tamales. Then the boy told Berta that he had come the frogs were crawling to much. Then she said because maybe they are going to want to eat wall raw. Then she went on with a story and when he scared and not want to go to sleep.

FIGURE 10.4. Rosalinda retells "El Sapo" (Rice, 1996).

liked taking care of children. She also liked playing "teacher" with younger children in her apartment complex.

Rosalinda's response to this text focused on the role of the older female caretaker; such was not the case, however, in the boys' retellings of this text. In the following example, José tells his own story by centering on the main character, David. In fact, he demonstrated his ability to tell creatively his reconstruction of "El Sapo." In Figure 10.5, he illustrated how his interest in this story enabled him to use his knowledge of writing and storytelling. For example, he used particular skills to make the story interesting, such as punctuation, expressive language, and dialogue, and to walk the reader through the events of the story and make the characters seem genuine. Throughout this retelling, he used this approach over and over again by recalling and using dialogue that the characters used. In addition, José was able to draw on his knowledge of storytelling, which is evident in the way he sequenced the events of the story and described the characters' reactions. For example, José enables the reader to visualize how frightened David and Roger feel at the end of the story, when he tells how the boys look at each other.

Deconstructing Social Issues

Another way that the students used their personal knowledge to comprehend the literature they read was to focus primarily on particular events the authors described in the stories. For example, after reading "Tito, Age 14" (Bode, 1989), Alfredo recalls various events in the story that he later reveals as his own concerns about living in his own community. In Figure 10.6, Alfredo recalls how Tito's parents talked with him about ignoring drugs and not "hang[ing] out with gangs," how Tito's father had lost his bakery, how "other people saying [say] that Mexicans can't do anything," and that "Tito said that he would show thoes [those] people that they were [w]rong." I attribute Alfredo's focus on these events as part of his true interest in the issues that Tito discusses in the story.

On several occasions, Alfredo mentioned the importance of making choices about drugs and student gang membership. His interest in these topics became very apparent in our focus group discussion about this story. During this conversation, Alfredo revealed his own use of alcohol and cigarettes, and, by doing so, convinced the other students to confess their experiences with these substances. In addition, Alfredo's family had also endured many economic hardships in both Mexico and in the United States. This became apparent to me in the interview I had with his mother, when she told me about losing her job and the family problems that resulted from that event. Finally, Alfredo wrote about how Tito was going to show Americans that they were wrong

El Sapo

There's a boy who uses to catch sapos a lot. His name was David. Nobody could throw a sapo as far as him. He would ~~use~~ get a sapo that was the size of his palm. He would let the frog's legs stick out between his fingers then he would throw it every body would say EEEEE! aaaa-oo! They would use sapos to play catch. They would ~~shoot~~ shoot 'em with their BB guns. The ~~sapos~~ sapos would get ~~in~~ between the two yellow lines in the high way 107. The sapos' neck would pop out and they shot 'em. They used sapos for many things. There dad and mom went to San Antonio. They stayed with their prima. They caught a sapo and it landed. I didn't make a noise because it was dead. Cousin Berta came out and told them why they ~~killed~~ ^{killed} that sapo. They said it was just a sapo. She told them to put the sapos back in the ~~box~~ ^{chance}. David said, "Even the ones in the box!" Berta said what box she looked in the box and they were the small sapos. She told them to put those, too. They put them back because she looked pretty when she was ~~happy~~ ^{lonely}. They went in the house she said when they were asleep the sapos were going to kill them. ~~They~~ They laughed. They told them about that time the sapos killed a baby. Then they looked at each other and they were scared. But when they went to sleep they closed the windows and there was still a whole under the door. ~~but~~ They went to sleep. They slept well.

FIGURE 10.5. José retells "El Sapo" (Rice, 1996).

about Mexicans. This is not surprising, because these students appear to be aware of their cultural differences, and their parents often discuss how to get ahead in this country, as Alfredo's mother had expressed to me.

Other stories provoked similar discussions about social issues that the students endured on a regular basis. For example, in retelling *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), Sonia inferred that the main character, Esperanza, "wants to live in a(n) elegant (elegant) house so she won't be asame (ashamed) to show the house to her friend." In no part of Cisneros's text, is the notion of shame mentioned; however, Sonia believes that Esperanza must feel this way. When Sonia had completed the retelling in writing, she wrote a separate, personal reaction to the story. She stated:

Tito Age 14 Mexican

This story was about a boy named Tito. Tito is a boy that likes to climb trees. He The things he does on a trees is play. In front of his apartments there was a orange tree one day he went to the tree and climb it then the other thing is that he likes to lay down, swing and eat the fruits. Then one day the boy want to climb the tree because some gang members cut it down. Then his parents will the boy not to ignore drugs. And that he shouldn't hang out with gangs or do drugs. Then the boy Tito said that his dad ~~lost~~ lost his battery business. And that Tito was in the ninth grade that the school is from seventh-ninth. It also talked about other people saying that mexicans can't do any thing. Then Tito said that he would show those people that they ~~are~~ are wrong. Then after that it talked that his family went to a restaurant and that he saw a woman so he went in there a lot of times so that's when the woman liked the and got married. Then they went to a place but the woman said that that place wasn't the place to have the babies. So they went to Santiago and that's where they were born. Then they went to Los Angeles to live there.

FIGURE 10.6. Alfredo retells "Tito, Age 14" (Bode, 1989).

"Why I like this story is because it('s) about a familly [sic] and I like story(ies) about familly [sic]. Also because it talks about a family that moves and when I was in the thirde [sic] grade I moved to three diffren't [sic] schools and I still stayed in thirde [sic] grade. I went with Mis(s) Etone, Mrs. Cantu, and Mrs. Celedon."

Sonia was able to relate this story to her personal life experiences. In our focus group session, Sonia told our group about these events, and about having one teacher after another in one school year. She contributed many thoughts about being poor and expressed what appeared to be anger and frustration about how society viewed poor people.

Another story, *Eleven*, by Sandra Cisneros (1991) provoked similar responses by the students. For example, they seemed to understand Esperanza's powerlessness to speak up when the teacher put the unclaimed red sweater on her desk. Although they did not describe "powerlessness" in their response, the students still seemed to understand why the main character responded the way she did.

In some of the students' retellings of the Mexican American stories, they appeared to take complete ownership of the texts they read by reconstructing the stories as a storyteller would do for an audience. On these occasions, the students appear to use all that they know about writing, stories, and characters' feelings. In these writing samples, the students walk the reader through the events of the tale by using expressive language, transitioning words, and precise timing to make the story come alive for the reader. For example, Rosalinda demonstrates her storytelling ability in her retelling of *Eleven* (Cisneros, 1991).

In reading Rosalinda's reconstruction, it is clear that she ties the major themes of the story to feelings of the main character in the story. She does this by telling what the character is thinking as she interacts with her teacher. Rosalinda is careful to use details, such as the following:

"When she wanted to say something the teacher turns around and goes to give the Math page. The girl just said in a Low voice it's Not mine. Then when the other children are working in math she is over there in her desk thinking how is she going to get rid of the sweater. At last she move's [sic] the sweater at (to) the eadge (edge) of her desk. . . ."

In addition, Rosalinda appears to invite the reader into a particular context, such as a regular school day "in science" and "math." Using these details, she places the reader squarely in the middle of the classroom and makes the events realistic.

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In responding to *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), by relating their personal experiences of feeling inadequate to the group, the students inferred that they knew what the main character was feeling. For example, in the following lengthy yet telling dialogue, Sonia expresses how she relates to the character by telling her own story of moving from school to school when she was in the third grade. The other students chime in with their own stories, and the conversation seems to take off, revealing extreme sensitivity on the part of the students. This conversation took place immediately after the students had written their retellings of the story:

LEILA: How did you like *The House on Mango Street*?

SONIA: I liked it because it talks about a family that moves a lot. 'Cause when I was in third grade, I moved a lot and I moved to three schools and I was still in third grade.

LEILA: What was so hard about moving a lot?

SONIA: That I'd leave my friends behind. So my mom, in one year I was in one school, she told me not to make friends because then we had to move.

LEILA: Wow, yeah, I moved a lot too when I was a kid. So tell me, how do you feel about the story?

ALFREDO: Good, but I hated the last part, because they went to Mango Street and the girl said to someone where they lived and they said "over there," and the girl didn't want to live there.

ROSALINDA: They made her feel like she was nothing.

Later in the conversation:

LEILA: Do you think is good to read stuff like this?

JOSÉ: Yes.

LEILA: That talks about being poor?

SONIA: I can relate to it.

ROSALINDA: It makes you remember things that you think about—your life.

JOSÉ: Maybe we think about what he's thinking.

This discussion continued, illustrating the vast range of students' awareness and emotions about their socioeconomic status, and about living in their particular communities. In this narrative, the students appear to be

very conscientious and caring individuals, who can express themselves well. This literature selection sparked so many thoughtful personal insights and responses to difficult issues that were important in these students' lives.

DISCUSSION

In general, the students interacted with the Mexican American texts by bringing their own personal experiences to the discussions about the stories. These personal responses clearly indicate that the students took an aesthetic stance to nearly all parts of these stories. They also seemed to be able to infer information from the texts, because they understood the main themes, events, and feelings of the characters.

From the retellings and subsequent discussions about these texts, it was obvious that the students identified with the Mexican American texts in many ways. For example, they consistently mentioned characters' names that sounded Mexican or Spanish. The students expressed that it would be good to find books with names that sounded Spanish, because they would be more interested in reading them. They respectfully identified with the author, as if he or she were the same gender as the student reading the texts. They tried to recall the names of authors of Mexican American texts, because they seemed to identify with the story content in some way and because they wanted to find other books by the author.

In addition, during the discussions, the students interacted with the texts in rich and insightful ways. They consistently demonstrated that they understood the experiences of the characters by sharing similar stories in their own lives. The students also brought their personal experiences of living in their communities and homes to the discussions about the Mexican American texts. They revealed their understanding of living in communities similar to those of the characters portrayed in the texts.

Finally, their retellings of the Mexican American literature revealed that they understood what was happening in these stories; they appeared to have adequate social, cultural, and linguistic background knowledge to construct meaning from the texts. In their retellings, the students demonstrated that they were able to recall and support the main idea of the story with a significant amount of written details. Their writing samples were significantly longer and contained more depth than those that they wrote about the non-Mexican American literature. In these retellings, the students connected with particular characters, depending on their personal experiences. For example, Rosalinda provided the reader with a perspective of the character, Cousin Berta, who cooked and took care of her younger cousins—similar to Rosalinda's experiences with her

younger siblings. We also saw how José utilized what he knew about good writing to retell *El Sapo* as a storyteller would. Using his own creative writing skills, he was able to reconstruct a vivid story to make the characters seem realistic. Sonia was able to use inference skills to reconstruct meaning from the *The House on Mango Street*. She understood what the story was about and was able to relay her personal feelings about this story during the focus group discussion. Alfredo demonstrated that he understood the stories and was able to employ what he knew about good writing.

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