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Nudging Young Adults' Readings of Gendered and Cultured Texts: What is the Role of the Adult in a Reader Centered Space?

Marie LeJeune

What is a teacher's role in navigating problematic issues of sexism, gender bias, or abuse of children and marginalized people within a society as they are discussed in a text for children? How might teachers or adults facilitate critical and thoughtful discussions of damaging practices while not reducing a culture, country, or group of people? Although critical literacy and other culturally responsive pedagogies call for opening up classroom spaces to examinations of different ways of being in the world, often this necessitates a delicate juggling act for readers and teachers (Simpson, 1996; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Short, 2009).

These were the professional tensions I struggled to resolve when I spent two weeks reading Patricia McCormick's book [Sold](#) (2008) with a small group of high school girls (ages 14-17) in an after school girls' book group. I was a former teacher at the high school and completing my dissertation research at the school site. The impetus for a girls' book group stemmed from my interest in adolescent girls' literacy practices and requests from former students for a 'girls only' reading group. The thematic thread that united the titles was embodiment, or issues related to the body,

issues group participants had indicated as being of great importance. *Sold* was the third book we read together. *Sold* is set in India and Nepal, and chronicles the struggles of 13-year-old Lakshmi who is sold into prostitution in an Indian brothel.

The book group was situated within a reader response tradition that guided literature circles and literature based instruction, encouraging participants within the space of book group to voice their personal responses to the reading of literature as it related to issues of the body (Rosenblatt, 1938). The six books we read were selected by the girls, although I initially “book talked” over 20 titles with the group. I continually searched for ways to encourage students to take a critical stance on what they read and in their responses to literature (Franzak, 2006; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin, 2004). Inspired by the work of Mellor and Patterson (2000, 2004), I wanted to explore ways in which critical practices offer opportunities to deconstruct racist, sexist, and other limiting or oppressive readings of texts and social discourses. At the same time, I was committed to offering this after-school, optional book group as a girl-centered space where adolescent girls held the power within the circle of the book discussion, rather than the presumed knowledgeable other (me, their teacher) guiding the content of the talk (O’Neill, 1993).

Grappling with Gender Issues: Book Group Discussions

The girls had powerful discussions about society’s conflicting messages to young women about sexuality while reading the novel. In the following excerpt, the girls discuss a scene in the novel where one of the young women, already a prostitute, finally earns enough money to return to her home village to see her family and daughter, something the character has dreamed of for years. The girls pondered what would happen if other girls in the brothel were ever able to escape. (Note: all names of participants are pseudonyms.)

Desiree: Even if she did make it back home, I doubt they’d accept her.

Sydney: Yeah, ‘cause there’s the one girl, she’s so excited because she gets to go home. And she’s paid enough to earn her way back home. And then she gets home and no one will, they turn her away; no one in town will talk to her. They turn her away because she’s shamed, even though she didn’t choose that life. Her father sold her and then he won’t take her back because she’s shamed.

Desiree: Yeah, and she like buys things for them and makes sure her dad gets his surgery when he’s in pain, and he still just throws her out like she’s nothing.

Carolina: Yeah and that was so sad and then they told her daughter that she was dead. All she wanted was to see her daughter and her family.

Tammy: They act like she chose this rather than them choosing it for her.

The girls were shocked and dismayed when the character is turned away from her family because of the stigma she bears for her sexual activity and prostitution. The character being discussed was forced into prostitution to keep her family from starving and uses the money she earns to help pay for a life-saving operation for her father. The young woman's family would rather her daughter and the rest of the village think she is dead than know that she has been a prostitute, even though the family pushed her into the brothel.

When Sydney said the word "shamed" she said it scornfully, offering tone and body language to indicate a critique of the girl's family. The girls went on to discuss how the character, who they believed should have been seen as a victim, is instead viewed as a pariah. The group was clearly disturbed by these events and critiqued the notion of a woman's social standing in the community being tied to her sexual activities, especially those she had no control over herself. As 15-year-old Bethany commented, "So what? The men used her and now it's her fault? Why does she have to take all of the blame?"

Nudging Critical Conversations within the Book Group

After this discussion I reflected on ways I might ask nudging, problem-posing questions that would encourage the girls to place situations of gendered shaming and the victimization of women into a larger context—as an adult I knew that the abuse of women and children is not localized to 'other places,' but is a problem across societies. In our next conversation, this issue of gendered relationships arises again, this time around the issue of marriage as presented to Lakshmi by her mother. Lakshmi's father dies and her mother re-marries a man who is an alcoholic and emotionally abusive to the family. The girls discussed in detail how the stepfather contributes little to the family, yet is expected by the cultural values of the setting to be treated with great respect and deference.

Desiree: I know how her mom thinks that they're the best thing you can have and it's better to have a drunk gambler than no man at all, but I figure if she thinks that her daughter is going to be sold into prostitution, I don't know, she may be against what she's been taught to save her daughter.

Carolina: She would want to, but she would be afraid. She thinks she needs him. That happens here too...women choose their husbands over their kids. They're afraid to stand up to them.

Ms. L: I think that's a good point. I mean, we keep saying in this culture...but I think you're right, here, could that happen as well? Could there be situations where women say it's better to have a drunk or a gambler than no man at all? Is this a problem that crosses our experiences?

Desiree: Well, I think some women are like that, but I think the majority...if he's a horrible man and he beats you and he drinks and he gambles your money, then like you're supposed to get rid of him. But the other society they say he's a man, keep him...

Carolina: Another thing you have to think about is that they're from a very poor family. That happens here, too, and in other countries. If a woman is very poor, she doesn't feel like she can leave her husband and especially if they have kids. Like some of my relatives...they have a lot of kids and their husbands might not be great, but what are they going to do? They feel like they need a husband and a dad, even if he's not so great? They feel like they can't leave. How will bills get paid?

Bethany: It's easy to say, "Why don't you leave?" I guess. I never thought of it that way, but that's like blaming them instead of realizing that they are trapped there and wish they could leave.

Ms. L: This is a really interesting 'aha' moment I think we're having. It's making me think about a lot of things we've been talking about. We're talking about the problems being about the society but also might the problems that we're upset about be about bigger things? Carolina mentioned poverty, for example.

Sydney: Maybe. I still think maybe things would be different here. But we do have different laws and we're just a different culture. But it is true that things are messed up in lots of places, even here. And it's true that being poor is not going to make you feel like you have all the choices.

Here the girls began to bridge text-to-world connections as well as draw upon larger discourses and problems such as poverty and its effect on perceptions of power. I entered the discussion in an attempt to repeat girls' statements that highlight some of these cross-cultural connections and discussions of larger themes. I also asked follow up questions by using think-alouds and discussing things I noticed being discussed in the book group. I found such tools offer no guarantee in transitioning conversations to a more critical stance, but they often introduce new ways of interrogating a topic, which can lead students to consider alternative viewpoints.

Throughout their reading of *Sold*, the girls struggled with Lakshmi's role as a woman in society. The girls kept coming back to how it didn't "make sense" that the culture would be this way, and were not themselves able to make sense of cultural values that they saw as inequitable and unfair. They carried on a conversation beyond the transcript about why cultural values privileging men were nonsensical; within the context of the novel the women are the "strength of the family," and daughters are the ones who "actually do something" such as "take care of you when you get older." Men in contrast simply "get pampered by the women."

While the girls expressed their inability to connect to what they saw as “foreign values,” there were occasional references to other systems of inequity around gender that exist in societies, including their own. I did notice the girls seemed to find it much easier to identify and critique inequities in the textual and cultural world of *Lakshmi* than in their lived experiences. The details and storyline of *Sold* are difficult for any reader; it is a beautiful yet painful story of the exploitation of a young girl. Its issues of embodied power (or rather absence of power) are weightier than many of the other young adult novels we read in book group. Still, I hoped the girls would continue to pick up the social discourse that ran through all of the books that we read together indicating that adolescent girls and their bodies are inscribed by issues of culture and power (McWilliam, 2000; Pillow, 2002; Tolman, 2006). At the time, I was still struggling with the balance between my beliefs about critical literature conversations and my ability to support and scaffold such conversations fully with adolescent readers (Short, 2009).

Possible Strategies for Nudging a Critical Stance

Some time has passed since I facilitated this book group and I continue to work with young adult readers, their teachers, and secondary school faculty. Just as the girls in this book group had many ‘aha’ moments about their readings of texts, many of my own ‘aha’ moments have evolved as I have learned to manage the tricky balance of encouraging authentic, student/reader led pedagogies while using my voice to nudge and problem pose within group discussions. Below, I highlight some lessons I learned and ways I approach my role within book groups and literature discussions from the powerful voices of adolescent readers.

Encouraging Critical Stances about Social Issues within Reader-Centered Book Groups and Literature Circles (While Still Encouraging Students to do Most of the Talking):

- When I hear a powerful statement that begins to demonstrate a critical stance on a tough topic, I attempt to repeat it, comment on it, or restate it to the group. When powerful thoughts are shared, they often bear repeating. Ex: “Wow, that’s a really powerful point that Bethany just shared; it’s really making me think about this entire issue in a new way.” I find that drawing out these examples of critical stance brings the group back to a problem posing viewpoint and also emphasizes the importance of such a lens for examining issues of diversity.
- I attempt to encourage summaries of group points by using the pronoun, “we.” Ex: “Something I’ve been thinking about that **we** have been discussing is...” This is important to identify that I am a member of the group, not the leader of the group.
- When students struggle to see issues of discrimination or power as being about larger social discourses rather than the way a particular culture or country is organized, I often try to encourage students to make connections to prior conversations, readings, or experiences. Ex:

“We’re really talking so much about how this frustrates us to see this happening to these characters; where else do we see issues like this that frustrate us?” These are difficult issues for many readers to tackle; scaffolding literary conversations with purposeful questions is one way to support critical conversations with readers.

- Strategically use think alouds to encourage critical stance and problem posing techniques. Ex: “When you shared your opinion, it really made me think about how this might be about a bigger issue or problem. I’m really going to need to continue to think about that some more as I read.”
- In classroom spaces, I often use class time *outside of the book group talk time* to revisit important issues of culture, power, and difference. Mini lessons, writing prompts, and larger class discussions can extend and deepen issues that come up within book group spaces without taking away the student-centered locus of control that is so important within a literature circle or book group.

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A Mirror and a Window: Read Aloud Multicultural Books for Adult EFL Learners

Yang Wang with Yuebo Zheng

The first time I learned about multicultural literature was in a seminar during my doctoral program. Reflecting on my past teaching experiences, I realized that many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Mainland China did not have access to authentic literature, narrative and expository texts that are written in the original, natural language of the authors. Instead, they read textbooks and completed worksheets to learn the English language. Seldom did students have opportunities to take an aesthetic stance to what they read and share their initial responses to literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). Since my early teaching experiences in China I have come to believe readers create meaning through participating in the text (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982). Each individual reads literary work for himself/herself, which is to say, he/she draws on past experiences and molds new experiences through transaction with the text.

Similarly, I believe that learning a language is learning a culture. This concern, coupled with my desire to incorporate authentic literature into the teaching English as a foreign language to Chinese students, led me to work with Mrs. Zheng in introducing multicultural books to a group of college EFL learners. We selected many picture books that provided information through text and visual representations (Sipe, 1998). Our work together was built on the premise that reading multicultural literature could provide readers with a mirror that reflects their culture and a window into learning about other cultures (Glazier & Seo, 2005). Our inquiry question was: How do adult EFL learners on the mainland of China respond to the read-aloud of multicultural books in the English language class? How does reading aloud multicultural literature affect their learning?