Many Rivers to Cross: A Review of the Research on the Effects of Multicultural Literature on Students' Attitudes toward Unfamiliar Cultures

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Abstract

The studies under review in this article operate from the basic assertion that Multicultural Literature can be a powerful tool in changing reader attitudes toward unfamiliar cultures. In analyzing these studies, the review attempts to highlight a growth in the sophistication of approaches to Multicultural Literature instruction demonstrated by researchers and educators in the field. Significant discussion is devoted to current theories of best practice, as well as the history and current state of Multicultural Literature as a tool for democratizing reader attitudes. Particular attention is paid to studies conducted in the past decade because they more often explore not simply issues of text and text selection, but also engage with issues of racism, social and economic inequity, and power relationships, all of which underpin the larger Multicultural Education project. The conclusion charts the progress that has been made and makes recommendations for further research in this important field of inquiry.

Introduction

Literature Study has historically been dominated by the study of White male authors who dealt largely with Western culture, values, and histories. As such, English Language Arts curricula routinely exposed students to the voices, insights, values and politics of the dominant culture alone. It was not until the 1960's, and the social and political changes championed by the Feminist and Civil Rights movements among others, that this previously unchallenged hegemony has had to contend with the emergence of an increasing number of women writers and writers of color. In recent decades, syllabi, curricula, anthologies and scholarship have changed to reflect this emergence and now include a far more diverse array of writers, texts, voices, and experiences than has ever been seen in the American education system (Edelstein 2005). Many view this expansion of the canon as a disservice to the students of America. They argue that canonical texts have withstood the test of time, and have been chosen specifically because they represent the greatest writings of our civilization. Still others feel that the changes made have not done enough to democratize the nature of Literature study, and call for still greater diversity of texts and voices in the classroom. Despite vehement protest and heated debate,

Multicultural Literature, in that it more accurately reflects the diverse views and experiences of the American population itself, is here to stay. This fact has been validated by the inclusion of specific criteria for "diversity" in the standards set by both the National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) programs.

Modern life in America is increasingly characterized by a global connectivity, integration and interdependence that involves, not only economic, but also social, political, and ecological concerns. The overwhelming presence of the Internet has created a situation where information and cultural exchange across oceans occurs swiftly and effortlessly. Thus, as educators our responsibility to prepare our students for active participation and success in this modern world, must include preparation for an inevitable interaction with the global community and its many diverse inhabitants. I agree with many leading researchers and educators that multicultural literature has a key role to play in this larger pursuit.

In an influential exploration of why we read multicultural literature, Reed Way Dasenbrock identifies another important element of this issue. He argues that reading multicultural literature does more than allow us to learn about another culture, it offers us an opportunity to engage and evaluate the ways in which that culture is different from our own, what he refers to as "a reflective assessment of the value of different anthropological cultures" (p. 698). In this pursuit, there is a moment where we may place our own values and beliefs under examination. What emerges from this can be a "new practice…comprised of the best elements of both" our own culture and that culture which we encounter in literature (p. 698). This seems to be a central benefit of the multicultural literature experience, an opportunity for a healthy reexamination of our own beliefs, something many of us are rarely afforded in our daily lives. Ultimately, Dasenbrock argues, one of two things must occur once we come face to face with our own belief system. This confrontation, "will either cause those values to change or cause us to become more aware of them and more reflective about their value" (700). This simple but important realization is critical in many ways to our understanding of the studies under review in this article.

Literature has long been regarded as the documentation and expression of the human condition. Our most beloved authors are cited for their ability to drive to the heart of what makes the human soul, our fears and desires, our joys and sorrows. Successful and

acclaimed literature is typically measured by its ability to speak to and inform its readers about the world they inhabit and the complex interactions between human beings, and between human beings and their environment. As such, to limit this experience to the perspectives and vision of a select few members of society seems a disservice to the very name of literature. In its capacity to reflect and educate us about the human condition, literature must come from and speak to all of the various cultures in our society. Though we can never hope to address each and every diverse cultural experience in our classrooms, and no work of fiction can truly appeal to every socioeconomic, ethnic, and social group in America, as an educator I regard the *pursuit* of a multicultural literature as an ethical imperative.

Background Information

To address the significance of multicultural literature in developing and shaping student attitudes, it is first necessary to define the term "multicultural" for our purposes. The word "multicultural" can be used in many different contexts. It is sometimes used to describe a person who identifies with or belongs to more than one culture. It can refer to a group of organization that is composed of multiple cultures, or it can denote the coexistence of different cultures within a wider society. For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to identify the term "multicultural" as existing in direct response and opposition to the cultural homogeneity that has long defined the history of education in this country. In this light, "multicultural" represents an *alternative* to the status quo, the persistence of a multicultural society that necessarily replaces the false image of the mono-culture or homogenous culture, which has long been reflected in the academic world. By using the term in this way, we are saying that many different voices, texts and authors exist along side one another, informing, complementing and conflicting with each other.

Secondly, it is important to identify the role of multicultural literature as it pertains to our larger concerns. As I have already stated, the studies under review strive to assess the usefulness of multicultural literature as a tool for altering reader attitudes, and in turn affecting greater social awareness, empathy and respect. Often theorists look to the notion of inclusion or acceptance. Here we are interested in exploring texts as a way to evaluate and interrogate discourses of power associated with race, gender, and sexual orientation within our society. We are interested in texts as vehicles for self-examination, and awareness. In 1996, Newfield and

Gordon published an important work entitled *Mapping Multiculturalism*, which identified two different types of multiculturalism. They identify "soft" multiculturalism as that which stems from an ideology of "assimilationist pluralism," acknowledging various groups while still seeking to assimilate that difference into a "single whole" (p. 81). They refer to the alternative as "strong" multiculturalism, which "relies on a strong version of pluralism…as an *alternative* to assimilation" (p. 81, my italics). Again, we return to the notion of providing an alternative. "Strong" multiculturalism, which will be the focus of this review, is based on the idea that multicultural literature must exist outside of and often in opposition to the dominant culture and literature in order to be effective and valuable. It must be recognized for its individual and unique voice, rather than as a complement to a traditionally homogenous whole, if it is to have meaningful social impact.

An Evolution of Theory in Practice

Childhood Attitudes and Early Attempts at Modification

Researchers and educators who are interested in changing students' social attitudes toward others have devoted much attention to how children first develop racial awareness and preferences (Clark, 1963; Katz, 1976; Milner, 1983; Phinney and Rotheram, 1987). As such, it would be prudent to spend some time discussing the nature of children's cultural attitude formation and identification, before addressing relevant theories and studies regarding the modification of those attitudes. In *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* renowned theorist and scholar in the field, James A. Banks, describes how over a nearly 50 year period of study, researchers have established that young children are aware of racial differences by the age of three (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987; Ramsey 1987). Furthermore, by this age most children have internalized the attitudes toward African Americans and Whites that are established in the wider society (13). These children will tend to prefer white or pinkish-colored stimulus objects to black or brown ones, and describe these more positively. In fact, several early studies in attitude modification (Lichter and Johnson, 1969; Lichter, Johnson and Ryan, 1973; Trager and Yarrow, 1952) were directed at young children and used *images alone* to condition changes in child attitudes toward blacks and other minority groups.

Since these findings indicate that child attitudes toward "the Other" are established at a very young age and typically derived from the wider societal views, there is clearly much work to be done in the area of attitude modification. Research into attitude modification through literature and reading was conducted as early as the 1940's (Agnes, 1947; Jackson, 1944), but Banks admits that many of these early studies "have serious methodological problems" (14). In addition, studies conducted during the 1960's examined the potential importance of follow-up discussion in addition to isolated reading (Fisher, 1965), while others involved no discussion of the texts whatsoever (Lichter and Johnson, 1969). In addition to class discussion, these early studies often neglect to use other tools, such as small group discussions, and an opportunity to reflect on the literature through writing assignments. Each of these basic pedagogical strategies are now understood to be critical elements of a successful multicultural literature unit. From a research perspective, the best studies must also involve the collection of data in multiple forms, and from multiple perspectives. By collecting several kinds of data that often overlap, the researcher is able to triangulate their findings and be more confident in their conclusions. Many of the early studies I encountered relied solely on pre and post survey results of reader attitudes and were not able to triangulate in this way.

Shifts Away from "Race" to a More Comprehensive View of Culture

In recent decades, researchers have increasingly identified definitions of culture and accompanying issues of attitude modification in terms that go beyond racial boundaries (Athanases, 1996; Edelstein, 2005; Thomson, 1997). We seek to view multicultural literature as encompassing all the various races, genders, ethnicities, social and sexual groupings and cultures that our diverse society may produce. As new authors and voices emerge so too will newly visible cultures be established, such as "deaf culture" or "transgender culture."

Contact Zones in Society and the Classroom

An essay published in 1991 by Mary Louise Pratt discusses the concept of the "contact zone" to explore issues of borders and boundaries as they relate to our understanding of our society and many of the multicultural texts that we read. She describes these

contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths" (p. 34). These clashes and exchanges are often dramatized in the postcolonial writings of authors like Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Arundhati Roy, and Sherman Alexie.

Marilyn Edelstein (2005) wisely points out how a "contact perspective" can influence the way we understand and negotiate not only texts like the ones mentioned above, but also contact "between readers and texts, and between different readers" (p. 22). Our discovery as educators of ways to successfully negotiate these contact zones in the classroom, while both encouraging open dialogue and protecting student rights is something that emerges in the studies under review.

Emphasizing Both Domination and Agency

Since "strong" multiculturalism necessarily involves an exploration and interrogation of the gross inequities that dominate the lives of many Americans even today, issues of hegemony, oppression, and violence are evils that must be dealt with honestly. However, it is equally important to portray stories of resistance and agency, of marginalized peoples living their everyday lives and confronting universal issues of love and loss. Though these texts might not be examples of "strong" multiculturalism as it is defined by Newfield and Gordon, I believe that they help foster feelings of empathy and identification that are essential to the larger goal of changing reader attitudes. Kay Bishop (2003) identifies these competing discourses as the two basic categories of multicultural literature in general. She argues that both "culturally neutral books and culturally specific books" should be included in our work toward a multicultural curriculum (p. 27). We want students to recognize the impact of power differentials and histories of oppression on the lives, values, and thought processes of marginalized cultural groups without conditioning them to expect violence and other serious and depressing issues every time they open a multicultural text. Edelstein similarly cautions that "focusing in the classroom on hegemony, domination, oppression, and violence without providing any countervailing narratives of agency, creativity, and resistance may produce numb acknowledgement rather than activism in our students" (p. 25). If we view changing reader attitudes as the first step toward affecting wider *social* change, than we must carefully consider this potentiality. We want our students to become educated and proactive members of society, who are interested in social justice and peace. We do not want our multicultural studies to produce disillusionment and cynicism.

The Role of Sound Pedagogy

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the importance of various practices that are widely considered best practice in establishing the proper conditions for multicultural literature to have its greatest possible effect. As we will see when we examine the empirical evidence, issues of self-selected texts and writing exercises, group discussion, and student-centered pedagogy, and the notion of creating an environment of trust and mutual respect in the classroom surface repeatedly as significant to the quality of the educational experiences described. While a true discussion of these issues is the subject of another review altogether, I want to stress the fact that we must bring all of our understandings and abilities as educators to bear if we are to give a multicultural unit or curricula its best chance to change reader attitudes toward the other. Only when we are at our best, when students are engaged and feel ownership over the work they are doing, is this possible.

Method

Selecting Studies for Review

Because this area of research and inquiry dates back to at least the 1940's and is still actively pursued today, there are a wide number of studies that may have been useful to examine. One guiding principle was the use of some form of text as the primary student interaction with the other culture. I wanted to keep the emphasis in this review on the significance of the printed "story" in articulating the cultural situation of the characters involved. As such early studies that used picture associations with young children (Lichter and Johnson, 1969; Lichter, Johnson, and Ryan, 1973) were not used. Furthermore, I was able to eliminate some of the oldest studies because they did not demonstrate sound methodology (Agnes, 1947; Jackson, 1944). In addition to these considerations, there is significant research and discussion on the topic of assessing, understanding and modifying *teacher* attitudes toward the other, as a necessary first step in the process of affecting students through literature(Fisher, 2001; Meixner, 2006; Vavrus, 2002; Wilkinson and Kido, 1997). Though this is an important issue and worthy of research and review, I chose to limit the present review and discussion to the studies involving student reader attitudes. I also avoided studies that were not peer reviewed. Because of the wide availability

of relevant studies, I otherwise tried to make my selections representative of as many demographic, geographic, and temporal contexts as possible, as well as diverse in their methodological approaches.

The Empirical Research: Results and Discussion

As shown in Appendix A, I chose to focus on eight empirical studies that engaged specifically with the question of whether multicultural literature study can positively influence reader attitudes toward unfamiliar cultures. Though the wording of various surveys differs, this common thread of inquiry is clearly evident. The studies are listed chronologically in Appendix A. I will *discuss* them chronologically in this section as well, except where areas of convergence readily invite direct comparison.

Early Studies

The first, and by far the oldest, study under review comes from an unpublished dissertation out of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1965. Frank L. Fisher studied 437 fifth grade students across three general socio-economic backgrounds. The first, identified as high income, was predominantly White, the second, identified as low income, was predominantly Black. A third grouping was a mixture of the two "representing a blending of the two extremes."

The treatment involved six, pre-selected texts from "children's literature about American Indians." Each demographic was split into three additional demarcations: a control group, a group that read the treatment work, and a group read the material and had ample opportunity for teacher-led discussion. Fisher explains in great detail the methods of quantifying the results of a pre and post survey which served as the only basis of assessing reader attitudes toward "American Indians" in the study.

Fisher's results favorably reflected his hypothesis. The group that showed the greatest change in attitudes toward "American Indians" was the group enjoyed reading the texts and discussing the material with their teacher and peers. The group subjected to only a reading of the texts without discussion showed more modest attitude change. And the control group, showed little or no change in attitudes toward "American Indians." In addition, his results were interesting because they found that the "middle demographic" with regard to socioeconomics showed the most positive change, and also indicated that Blacks changed more than Whites. The idea of comparative White resistance to multicultural texts is something we will return to later. This study is also significant because Fisher chose to feature a Native American text during an era when the Black/White issue dominated the popular imagination, a very progressive inclusion.

Thomas Yawkey conducted a similar study in 1973, this time choosing to examine the differences between students from diverse urban environments with their more homogenized rural counterparts. His study involved 104 white 7-yr-olds. In his study, Yawkey's pursued the null hypothesis that reading and discussing texts that "concentrated on Black feelings, situations, and ideas, and the contributions that black Americans have made to" society would *not* positively affect the attitudes of white students toward Blacks and gauging this change in attitude by pre and post surveys. His results indicated the reverse. Again, students were positively impacted by the unit and in general positively changed their attitudes toward the unfamiliar culture, in this case African American culture. Furthemore, Yawkey concluded that rural students tended to show higher degree of positive change thsn their urban counterparts, something the author speculated may have been a result of the fact that the urban Whites had far more interactions with Blacks, and thus had more ingrained and developed attitudes. Although, there is an element of logic to that possibility, it strikes this writer as something of a racist conjecture. One limitation of this survey, is that Yawkey does not anywhere mention how long the treatment group spent with the "multiethnic readers."

The 1990's

Two important studies under review here were published during 1996. The first from Wham, Barnhart and Cook, involved 128, mostly white, kindergarteners, 2nd and 4th graders. This study is distinct in two ways. First, the researchers chose to have the multicultural literature reading and discussion take place both in the home and in the classroom. For the study, hundreds of parents agreed to a schedule of daily reading and discussion time with their son or daughter in their home. This home reading coincided with

a multicultural literature unit at the school. The other interesting issue in this study is the finding that the control group, showed a *negative* change in attitudes toward the unfamiliar culture. In other words, instead of the attitudes of the students in the control group remaining static, these students actually indicated more hostile attitudes toward the other over the course of the study. The authors described this finding as "alarming because it suggests that without a diversity program children's appreciation of diversity may actually decrease across the school year" (p. 6). The authors indicated this finding as another potential benefit of teaching multicultural literature, because without it student attitudes toward unfamiliar cultures may get worse. Furthermore, the *treatment* group showed that, "across the school year, attitudes became more positive *or* remained steady in the Storybook Reading Groups" (p. 5, my italics).

These findings are also interesting because the Wham et al study involved younger students, arguably the more impressionable. It also involved significant time to learn about and discuss the texts both in and out of school, over the span of the entire school year, seven months. And despite these significant factors, many students in the treatment groups did not show positive change in their attitudes toward unfamiliar cultures. This is the beginning of a trend which indicates that more sophisticated and comprehensive methods of instruction cannot necessarily ensure success with regard to changing reader attitudes.

In 1996, Steven Z. Athanases also published a study that interestingly garnered decidedly more positive results than any other study under review here. This author chose to address the topic of homosexuality through a *two-day* discussion of an eloquent and effective essay defending gay rights entitled, *Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual* (McNaught 1988). This discussion was framed by pre and post questionnaires of student attitudes toward homosexuals, as well as a follow up questionnaire that was administered two years later, when the students were seniors. In addition to this data, Athanases also selected 8 representative students for an in-depth interview, and analyzed a writing assignment and a quiz administered in conjunction with the unit. The sample was a diverse population of 21 students in a 10^{th} grade ELA classroom. This qualitative study did not feature a control group. Each student enjoyed the same reading, and discussed that reading with each other. Much discussion in the article is devoted to pointing out the skillful way the participating teacher handled the discussion, by acting as clarifier and moderator rather than inserting her thoughts and opinions into the student-centered discussion.

The teacher, whom Athanases refers to as, Reiko, is said to have "asked questions but rarely evaluated student responses" (p. 241). Throughout the year, she made a point to create in her classroom, a student-centered and nurturing environment, where they all practiced "various strategies of openly exploring diversity" (p. 251). The result, in the author's eyes, was a classroom where students "could ask candid questions, without embarrassment or criticism" (p. 251). This is born out by the detailed explanation of the class discussion that ensued. Students openly spoke their minds, actively challenging and learning from the opinions of their peers.

The results of Athanases study were overwhelmingly positive especially given the climate in the school regarding homosexuality. The author describes many concrete examples of the general antipathy toward homosexuality, including LGBT meeting posters being torn down by a member of the *faculty*. Though the school was racially and ethnically diverse, students largely kept within their familiar ethnic circles and race related violence and controversy was not uncommon. Despite all these factors, Athanases reports that "across data strands, students reported having myths of homosexuality dispelled, an emerging empathy for gays, and a clear sense of the rights of gays and lesbians to be who they are without fearing the loss of their jobs, or harm" (p. 252). One student actually came out as gay, while still a junior at the school due in large part to a sense of empowerment generated during these discussions. Three others expressed guilt about the prejudices they had once felt toward gays. Remarkably, this author returned to the school two years later to interview the students and again gauge their attitudes toward homosexuality. Several students remembered the discussion, and counted it among the best they have had while in school. Only two of the 21 students remained unmoved by the reading and discussion, citing the belief that homosexuality is "sinful and, therefore, wrong" (p. 247). This study is likely the most resoundingly successful with regard to attitude change of all those I encountered during my research.

The reasons for this success are difficult to isolate although I would suggest that the work done by the participating teacher in creating a supportive classroom environment, modeling appropriate behaviors, and continuously challenging the status quo greatly affected the students' ability to democratize their attitudes toward gays so swiftly and completely. In many schools, sexual orientation and gay rights are still the most hotly debated, and most frequently avoided topics; for it to be the area that showed the most improvement within this review is truly remarkable. One limitation in this study is the short treatment time (only 2 days), though the overwhelming results (including continued empathy toward gays two years later!!!), indicates that the children were nonetheless moved to completely change their attitudes toward "the Other" in most cases. Again, we have to understand that change occurred "in most cases." The tentative conclusion being that even great success in this field of inquiry is not complete success.

In Recent Years

The past few years have seen the publication of several excellent studies into the ability of multicultural literature to positively affect reader attitudes toward unfamiliar cultures. The first under review here was published in 2002 by Fenice B. Boyd. Her comprehensive study involved an in depth case study of four ninth grade students: one white female, one black female, one white male, and one American-born, Trinidadian male. These students were selected from the larger class for their diversity of backgrounds and ability levels. The treatment in this case was a 5 to 6 week unit in which students read discussed and wrote about a novel of their choosing. The class was allowede to choose from 6 novels altogether. The four students involved in the study, ended up choosing two books between them. Two read, *Taste of Salt: A Story of Modern Haiti* (Temple 1994) and the other two read, *Chain of Fire* (Naidoo 1989). The study involved the analysis if wide stream of relevant data: literature response logs, student questionnaires, answers to self-assessment questions, essay exam responses, post-interviews, e-mail correspondence between researchers etc.

Boyd's findings are complicated, but the general result was that three of the students (both girls, and the Trinidadian boy) showed some degree of empathetic response and identification with the other culture characters in the story. Of these, the two minority students, showed the most positive change in attitude. The white girl, also the best student in the group, was characterized as a good student who worked for the grade and did not seem to become personally involved with the texts. Therefore, her responses though appropriate were not deemed authentic by the researcher. The fourth student, the white male, began the unit by resisting the idea of learning about or empathizing with the members of another culture. This attitude did not change and the young man seemed reluctant to move outside of the discourses that he was familiar with. Boyd addresses the obvious critique that her study indicates the fact that multicultural texts do not appeal to white students, are not universal, and thus are not "significant to the learning of all students" (p. 21). She argues that nonetheless, these white students, indeed all white students, should read multicultural literature "often and widely" precisely because of their preconceived attitudes. This kind of argument is common to many of the researchers involved in this line of inquiry. Their fundamental and theoretically-based attitudes toward multicultural literature are not discouraged by results that are inconsistent with their ideas. This leads us to an interesting and ironic situation that we will discuss in greater detail in the conclusion.

Interestingly, the results of Boyd's study indicated that the students with the lowest reading and writing levels exhibited the highest level of personal involvement with the texts. This suggests the potential importance of multicultural literature in reaching and engaging reluctant or non-standard learners. One significant limitation of the study is that the participating teacher did not allow student-led discussion of the books at any point in the process, fearing that if left to their own devices student would quickly go off topic. This was the case, despite the fact that both teacher and researcher discussed the importance of peer discussion in advance. This may have played a role in the reluctance of some students to engage with the material, and thus to change their culturally biased attitudes.

The use of in-depth studies of a limited sample is an approach that has gained popularity in recent years. This indicates a recognition on the part of researchers that matters of social attitudes are complex and require serious, long-term examination. One study, published in 2003, which brings an impressive level of critical attention to this issue was conducted by the team of Beach, Parks, Thein, and Lensmire. Their study followed the work of 14 multicultural literature students over the course of an entire school year. It involved analysis of over 30 audiotaped discussion sessions, two 45 minute pre and post interviews, journal entries, and various other writing assignments. This study also involved a detail-laden description of the ethnographic makeup of the school district and larger community involved, as well as a detailed account of the cultural and social dynamics of the school itself. No study that I encountered devoted more energy to uncovering the nature of the community which raised the students, and in which they lived. This is a very important issue, but one that is rarely studied. Thus, a thorough examination of the community was in this case a welcome surprise for me.

The list of multicultural novels used during the year included: *The House on Mango Street, Bless me Ultima, Kindred, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Obason, Woman Warrior, Love Medicine, Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. And the discussions were student-centered and supportive. One of the researchers was the participating teacher so every effort was made to create the ideal environment for attitudinal change.

The results indicated that many students did indeed "begin to examine the constructed nature of their own value stances" (Beach et al 21). However, many students "had difficulty interrogating the institutional discourses" that may affect a character's decision making process. Many students appeared to judge character actions as simple products of personal choice, without being able to comprehend or engage the societal pressures that may have affected the quality of those choices. The results also emphasized the importance of creating a "safe-space", the central role of the teacher in the process, and the significance of combining multicultural literature, discussion with diverse peers, and free response to challenges by the teacher or peers. Beach et al argue that all three of these areas must work together if a unit is to be successful and useful.

Another study that offered mixed success was conducted by Janice Hartwick Dressel in 2005. Her study involved 123 mostly White 8th graders. The study emphasized the importance of interrogating the dominant power structure while supporting diverse viewpoints. The lessons and assignments were imaginative. The date collected involved not only pre and post interviews, but also Book Club Organizers and Dialogue Journals. These Dialogue journals prompted to carry on a pen-pal style relationship with another student in the class where they inhabited the voice and perspective of a character in their story in order to further emphasize empathetic response. Despite all of these factors, and a competent and experienced participating teacher who was committed to the project, the results were somewhat disappointing. In general, Dressel found a significant disparity between the level of empathy and insight demonstrated in the Dialogue Journals and other writings and the attitudes portrayed on the post survey. In the Dialogue Journals and other writing assignments many students demonstrated their ability to see the world from an unfamiliar perspective, and empathize with the characters in the story. However, in the surveys these same students did not identify this learned empathy toward fictional characters with a greater empathy and understanding of the that unfamiliar culture in general. This realization prompted her to conclude that students were not able to apply the things they learned from the text to the real world of their own lives. She emphasized many implications in her conclusion that centered around the challenges she faced in the study.

Finally, I would like to examine a study published by researcher and educator Belinda Louie in 2005. Her study involved 25 high school seniors (23 White, 2 Hispanic) that were "gender balanced with heterogeneous ability levels" (p. 569). The six-week unit involved reading and discussion of a translation of the Chinese novella, *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom* (Feng 1996). This literature unit was preceded by an in-depth discussion of the historical, political and cultural setting of the novella. The inclusion of significant background information was something that Louie hypothesized was critical to the pursuit of multicultural study. She also collected a

wide range of data, including videotaped class discussions, interviews, field notes about student behavior and engagement and a wide range of writing assignments. This study was primarily concerned with the issue of empathy acquisition, and thus gave a detailed account of the various levels and qualities of the empathetic responses offered by the students. The main study results, which were discussed in more general terms, were again characterized by mixed success. Louie concludes her study optimistically by stating that the unit was "a small step in developing empathy for characters who lived in a different world. But it was a step" (p. 577). This spirit of optimism is something that Louie shares with most of the researchers under review.

Thoughts on the Process

Several important elements of the process of learning through multicultural literature emerge from this review. The nature of the classroom environment, for example, was critical to the relative success or failure of a study in several instances (Athanases, 1996; Boyd, 2002; Beach et al, 2003; Louie, 2005). In general, whether the researcher was successful in changing reader attitudes or not, emphasis was placed on creating a classroom as a safe-space, on encouraging divergent opinions, and on allowing students the opportunity to freely speak their minds. The best teachers were praised for their ability to create this kind of environment

In addition, as with many things in life, whether or not students had experience with examining and interrogating their own value stances before the unit seems to be important (Athanases, 1996; Dressel, 2005). For example, Athanases makes a point to identify participating teacher Reiko's classroom history of exposing "students to a range of ethnicities, and sociali[zing] students into discussions of diversity with a care that is her hallmark" (p. 235). This idea of socializing students to discussions of diversity, of giving them some solid ground from which to begin to examine and change their attitudes, is very important.

Dressel's study because of it's well-researched and careful attention to detail, and because of the disappointingly low level of genuine attitude change, is perhaps the most disconcerting of all of the results reviewed here. She refers to creating more opportunities for students "to gain experience with alternative views of the world," and the need for teachers to help students to "recognize their assumptions and examine how systems operate to position people and groups of people" (p. 759). These are important ideals but they

are not the kinds of things that can necessarily be accomplished in the course of 5-week multicultural literature unit. If these ideas and values are emphasized from day one in the classroom and students acquire experience with various modes of thinking about many kinds of texts, it is much more likely that students will demonstrate positive attitude change toward unfamiliar cultures.

One issue that relates to each of these studies is the power of one's own ingrained values and beliefs. Each researcher in this field of inquiry is in a sense attempting to replace students' practiced and reinforced attitudes about the world, with a new set of values that emerges from reading and discussion. This is a remarkably ambitious task. Thus, when Dressel concludes her study by reluctantly admitting that "when left to our own initiative we read what we are," many of us are not surprised. Perhaps because of the especially critical and reflective tone that Dressel's conclusion takes, we are also exposed to an even more interesting realization. During the discussion of her "bittersweet" results, Dressel cautions teachers "to refrain from being dogmatic or favoring a particular set of ideals, instead discussing a wide range of possible value positions" (p. 763). This is an important point and one that Dressel's host teacher brings into sharp focus in one of her reflections. "Ann" writes that "If changing student thinking to be more like yours is more important to you than challenging and expanding their thinking, you should not teach multicultural literature" (p. 763). This comment has quite a blunt edge to it, and the fact that Dressel chose to highlight it in her analysis reinforces its central importance. In the end, the teacher is there to challenge students' ways of thinking, allow space for all opinions, and model sound critical thinking and judgment in the classroom. To do these things honestly, one must be resigned to the idea that every student is not going to adopt their personal value position.

Conclusion

Everyone has experience with the difficulties of change. It is something that most, if not all people, are initially resistant to. Furthermore, the idea that oppression and inequity is handed down arbitrarily from a dominant culture, is often a bitter pill to swallow for members of that dominant culture. I am a white Anglo-Saxon male that has long ago rejected my Protestant upbringing. I am just now at 26, and after years of internal struggle, of reading and learning about the world, of discussion and argument, beginning to come to terms with the idea that white men have been unfairly wielding power and control throughout history and causing suffering for many outside of that power structure. I am just recently embracing this realization. While it is empowering to develop a philosophy

about the world that strikes ones own soul as more just and realistic, it is certainly a bittersweet empowerment. I must still reject, and reinterpret almost daily, the advantages I enjoy and contrast those with the struggles that so many others face. This new understanding fosters a sense of "white guilt" that is not easy to cope with for many. Many people struggle their whole lives with such things. We cannot expect our dominant culture students to fully embrace a set of values that may undermine their own sense of self in the short time we have allotted for a multicultural unit.

The most meaningful way to understand each of these studies, I believe, is to recognize that each demonstrates a varying degree of *success*. Not one of these studies showed no change at all in student attitudes, and half demonstrated a great degree of change. If we begin to operate from the standpoint that not everyone will be ready for change when they come to our classroom or when they participate in a study, than we can begin to see each of these studies for what they really are: success stories. If even a single student is driven to change their attitudes about the world and live a more just and socially engaged life, than the multicultural unit was successful. Teaching is always a process of minor victories, and we should not expect anything different from studies in which teachers seek to democratize reader attitudes with multicultural literature.

Furthermore, several researchers in this review, who enjoyed mixed successes, immediately reinforced the idea that their own attitudes about the value of teaching multicultural literature have not changed. This is a bit ironic considering the fact that attitude change in the face of contrary evidence is the defining principle of each study under review. However, this situation is not difficult to understand. The theoretical benefits of using multicultural literature are, to my eyes, irrefutable. No teacher committed to social justice is going to abandon multicultural texts simply because the research indicates they are not always successful in changing reader attitudes. Everyone involved knows that reader attitudes take time to truly change. The fact that so many students in these studies seemed to radically change their perspectives almost overnight seems to me to be an amazing testament to the power of engaged educators and engaging multicultural texts. In short, multicultural literature is not going away. We must all be able to embrace it on a theoretical level and believe in the process from a cognitive perspective before we can hope to successfully work with such literature in our classrooms.

Recommendations for Further Research

In light of the arguments put forth here, I would like to see an end to this pursuit of definitive and irrefutable evidence that multicultural literature has value *because* it can change reader attitudes toward "the Other." Multicultural literature has value for many other reasons, of which attitude change toward Blacks or Gays is only a small part. Is it true that no researcher has yet put together all of the pieces that make up best practice in this field? Yes. Is it true that there is and always will be room for improvement in terms of pedagogy and practice? Yes. Is it true that one day someone may devise a system and create an environment for teaching multicultural literature that will show irrefutable evidence of its power to democratize reader attitudes? Probably. But is this really the point? Those of us who believe in multicultural literature are going to continue to use it in our classrooms and continue to find better more effective ways to work with these demanding texts. Still others may remain resistant. But the times are always changing, and no amount of empirical evidence on this particular subject seems able to change *that*.

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Appendix B: Multicultural Texts Used in the Studies under Review

Researcher(s) **Year**	**Author** **Publication Date**	**Title**
Athanases 1996	McNaught 1988	*Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of Irish Catholic Homosexual*
Boyd 2002	Temple 1994	*Taste of Salt: A Story of Modern Haiti*
	Naidoo 1989	*Chain of Fire*
Beach et al 2003	Cisneros 1984	*The House on Mango Street*
	Anaya 1995	*Bless Me Ultima*

	Butler 1979	*Kindred*
	Hurston 1937	*Their Eyes Were Watching God*
	Kogawa 1981	*Obason*
	Kingston 1989	*Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*
	Erdrich 1984	*Love Medicine*
	Allison 1993	*Bastard Out of Carolina*
	Dorris 1987	*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*
Dressel 2005	Gordon 1987	*Waiting for the Rain: A Novel of South Africa*
	Lee 1982	*Finding My Voice*
	Staples 1989	*Daughter of the Wind*
	Buss/Cubias	*Journey of the Sparrows*

	1991	
	Myers 1993	*Scorpions*
	Garland 1993	*Shadow of the Dragon*
	Dorris 1992	*Morning Girl*
Louie 2005	Feng 1995 (Translated by Christopher Smith)	*Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom*

Year **Author(s)**	**Sample Demographic/Size**	**Texts Studied**	**Means(Duration) of Assessment**	**Relevant Methods**	**Results**
1965 Fisher	437, 5th Graders (1/3 High Socio Whites, 1/3 Low Socio Blacks, 1/3 Middle Group Mixed) -Urban	6 readings from Children's Lit about "American Indians"	Pre and Post "attitude-information test" (3 weeks)	3 groups: control, reading, and reading + discussion	POSITIVE Positive change greater in read + discuss, etc -Blacks changed more than Whites, Middle more than either extreme
1973 Yawkey	104, White 7-yr-olds, -Half Urban/Half Rural	Multiethnic Readers which focused on "Black feelings, situations, ideas" and "contributions" to society	Pre and Post-Questionnaires Only (Undisclosed # of Weeks)	Reading Aloud followed by Class Discussion, 4 times/wk	POSITIVE Urban: "statistically significant" improvement Rural: "favorable" improvement
1996 Wham, Barnhart, Cook	128 Middle-C Whites, (55f, 73m) K, 2nd and 4th graders -Small Suburb	Wide Range of ML texts used: disabled, gender, race, elderly etc	Pre and Post Survey Only (7 months)	Reading Aloud both at Home with Parents, and in the classroom	MIXED Either positive attitude change or no change in treatment, control showed *negative* change
1996 Athanases	21 10th Graders, Diverse -Urban	"Dear Anita," Teacher-Selected, eloquent defense of Homosexuality	Writing Assignment, Unit Quiz Essay, 8 Case-Study Intrvws., Class Survey After, and again *2 years later* (2 Days of Reading and Discussion)	Excellent Student-Centered Discussion, Safe-Place and Skilled Teacher	POSITIVE Major Success, several students radically changed attitudes, one came out as gay yr. later
2002 Boyd	4, 9th Graders, (WF, WM, BF, HM) -Urban	SST's, ended up with *Taste of Salt* and *Chain of Fire*	Myriad: lit response logs, questionnaires, self-assessments, interviews, essay exam etc	No small group discussions, effective teacher involvement	MIXED Two non-whites made most progress
2003 Beach, Parks, Thein, and Lensmire	14 students: 8F, 6M (3 Asian-Am, 1 Hisp, 1 Afr-Am)	ML novels: 6 familiar and widely respected texts	Journal assignments, pre/post interviews, taped discussions (Nearly a Year)	Safe Space, Teacher-Researcher, detailed descr. of community, student-centered class discussion	MIXED Some showed significant positive change, others resistant…esp. along racial lines, whites reluctant to speak out

	11th and 12th Grade -Urban				
2005 Dressel	123 8th Graders, gender balanced, 95% W -Suburbs	Carefully selected ML texts/unit for challenges posed	Pre/Post Surveys, Book Club Organizer, Dialogue Journals (4 to 5 weeks)	Inventive assignments, supportive teacher, student-centered discussion	MIXED Gains evident in written work, not evident in survey results, Disparity between Aesthetic response + Real World Connections
2005 Louie	25 12th Graders, 23 W, 2 H, gender balanced,	Chinese-transl novella, Feng *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom*	Myriad: writings, surveys, exams, interviews, Field Notes	Preceded by Significant historical, cultural background unit, Student-Centered Discussions	MIXED Some made great strides, some resistant… "small step in developing empathy"

Appendix A: Review of the Research