Drama Wor(l)ds: Explorations of Latina/o Realistic Fiction

Drama encourages critical dialogue through explorations of multiple voices and perspectives.

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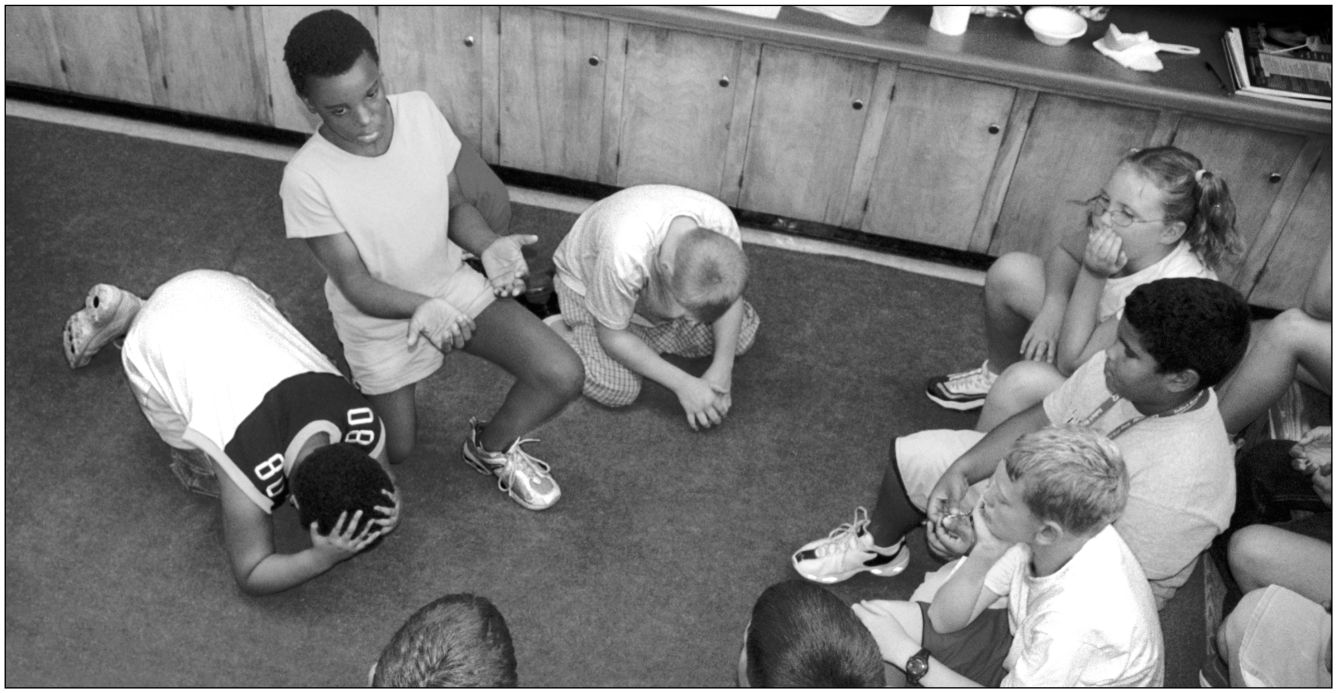

Latina/o children's literature is rarely included in the mainstream curriculum. The potential for meaningful explorations around literary, social, historical, and cultural aspects of Latino/a children's literature is denied through the marginalization of these texts. Even more problematic is the powerful ideological message sent by the invisibility and the lack of recognition of the history and experiences of Latinos/as as valid learning and meaningful information in classrooms. More specifically, the possibilities of Latino/a realistic fiction to engage students in critical dialogues and to develop awareness about aspects of the reality lived by Latinos/as in the United States are many times rendered invisible.

As the field of Latino/a children's literature evolves (Nieto, 1997; Barrera & Garza de Cortés, 1997; Medina & Enciso, 2002), it is important to examine children's engagement and interpretation of this literature and the negotiations that take place not only for Latino/a children but also for other communities. Furthermore, it is important to explore pedagogies and strategies that create reflective spaces to allow for complex negotiations between reader and text, avoiding oversimplification and stereotypical interpretations.

This article looks at fifth graders' interpretations of one piece of Latino/a realistic fiction in a Midwestern school, specifically around the theme of Mexican Americans living on the U.S./Mexico border.

The focus is on the students' responses to *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* by Chicana/Mexican American feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1993).

Drama-in-education (O'Neill, 1995) strategies were the pedagogical tools used to facilitate the students' engagements in dialogues that moved them from understanding aspects of the life and social reality of Mexican undocumented immigrants on the U.S./Mexico border to questioning issues of citizenship and justice. Through examining students' voices inside and outside of the drama, I demonstrate how drama-in-education strategies serve as a powerful set of tools to facilitate complex dialogues and interpretations of Latino/a literature and our lives in a diverse society.

Exploring Diverse Texts through Drama Wor(l)ds

The field of multicultural children's literature has been studied from many perspectives. Of particular interest is a focus on classroom practices that explore the social and cultural dynamics in the negotiation of diverse texts in diverse classroom communities (Athanases, 1998; Barrera, 1992; Enciso, 1994; Henry 2001; Tyson, 1999, Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999). Enciso (1994) argues: "As we encourage children's personal responses to literature, we must keep in mind that cultural knowledge is everywhere and always a part of how we interpret the world and our place in it" (p. 532). Aspects of readers' lives and cultural identity, the communities readers navigate through life, and even popular culture all come together in interpreting a text, particularly when reading to understand cultural diversity in society.

As a literacy practitioner and researcher, I am interested in facilitating creative experiences to respond to Latino/a literature in the classroom. Drama-in-education constitutes one creative way to respond to and interpret a text, particularly because it provides a venue to explore the multiple layers and dynamics of the mediations between text and reader when reading multicultural literature (Enciso & Edmiston, 1997). Improvisations, role playing, and images are drama structures to engage in a make-believe world and explore events from multiple perspectives (O'Neill, 1985). The potential of drama relies on the ways the participants take on explorations of the literary text from various perspectives and moments within and beyond the boundaries of the story (Booth, 1985). In interpreting and responding to literature through drama, the participants commit to becoming actively involved in the creation and representation of a dramatic event while at the same time negotiating the world of the text and that of the participant. "Although the child is in a make-believe situation in story and drama, the real world continues to exist, and the learning that occurs for that child lies in this negotiation of meanings—symbolic and actual taking place in both modes" (Booth, 1985, p. 195).

Moving beyond passive dialogues, participants actively create and perform images and discourses that, if carefully examined, allow understanding of the complex ways we live in a diverse society. By creating an open space, students and teachers begin to move into critical dialogues that allow for multiple voices and perspectives. In this particular fifth-grade classroom, the readers performed interpretations of their encounters with the life of a marginalized community through *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado,* a literary text that speaks about issues of border crossing, relationships, citizenship, and social justice. The students in this classroom engaged in a variety of dialogues to converse *as* the characters in the story, *with* the characters in the story, and *among themselves* as they devised dramatic interpretations. Words and actions became the center of powerful explorations through drama.

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Crossing Borders through *Friends from the Other Side*

Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado is a picture book that tells the story of Prietita, a girl who lives on the U.S. side of the border, and Joaquín, a young boy who recently crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. with his mother. He lives now in the border community and is teased and called *mojado*/wetback on his first encounter with a group of Mexican American boys. "*Mojado*/wetback" is a derogatory term for Mexican immigrants, referring to getting wet as they cross the border through the Rio Grande. Prietita tells the boys to stop mocking Joaquín, and they become good friends. One day, while they are playing *loteria,* a Mexican card game, *la migra*/the border patrol drives around the border community, looking for "illegals." Prietita takes Joaquín and his mother to the *curandera's*/herb woman's house to hide. When one of the men, a Chicano border patrol officer, knocks at the neighbors' doors,

Prietita and *la curandera* watch from behind a curtain as the people lie to the police, telling them that they haven't seen any "illegals" in that part of town.

Students are presented with multiple themes, images, and possible interpretations in this story including the role of Prietita and *la curandera*/the herb woman as sheroes, the conflict of power and identity inside the Mexican community, the activist role and community respect for *la curandera*/the herb woman, and the community's action towards protecting Joaquín and his mom from the border patrol. The author's life experiences of living on the U.S./Mexican border, as she points out in the introduction, are explored through this fictional representation. While the book does not represent all Mexican American communities, it does present one experience that, if it is explored critically in context, can raise important issues regarding immigration, gender, and inequalities.

The Classroom Community

The study took place in a fifth-grade classroom at a Midwest Urban Academy and Professional Development elementary school. I chose this classroom because in many ways it represents the ethnic shifts going on in this community, which are also similar to what is happening in many other places in the midwestern U.S. The community and the school population are rapidly shifting from a predominantly White European American base to a more ethnically diverse one. The neighborhood is now mostly African American and White European American with a rapidly growing Latino/a population. The fifth-grade classroom was representative of the community's diversity with an equal number of White European American and African American students, one Puerto Rican/Latina girl and one Asian American boy. Ms. Smith, the teacher, is a White European American who came to teach at the school after several years of teaching in a large urban district.

I had previously worked in the after-school program as a drama and literature teacher. Most of the girls who participated in the after-school program were part of the fifth-grade classroom where the study took place; however, although I was somewhat familiar with the school and the students, I considered myself an outsider. The values and ideologies I brought into the classroom were in some ways different from those held by Ms. Smith and the classroom students. Among those values were my identity as a Puerto Rican/Latina, my experiences as a bilingual person, and my position as an outside researcher.

> **The drama allowed the students to move beyond the limits of the story to a previous episode.**

The excerpts presented here are part of a larger study that investigated these fifth-grade students' interpretations of Latino/a culture and social realities through literature—particularly Mexican Americans living on the U.S./Mexico border. As part of the study, I conducted whole-group interviews to get a sense of the students' perceptions about the meaning of culture and, specifically, Latino/a culture. In general, the students talked about the multiple nationalities of Latinos/as, Spanish as the language of Latinos/as, and to a lesser degree, awareness of the life and labor of Latino/a migrant farm workers.

The only piece of Latino/a literature available in the classroom prior to the study was a chapter from Nicholasa Mohr's *Felita* (1979/1990) included in the basal reader. We read texts such as Carmen Lomas Garza's *Family Pictures* (1990) and *Voices from the Fields* (Atkin, 1993) to contextualize how different aspects of the life of Mexican Americans in the border community get represented through literature. By the end of the study, Ms. Smith began a bilingual reading corner in her classroom and invited a Latina mother to teach Spanish lessons to the students once a week.

Sharing the Process

I devised a series of explorations around the *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* that lasted three months, meeting once or twice a week depending on Ms. Smith's schedule (see Figure 1). The work with the students began with an engagement where we collectively defined the word "culture" and explored how each individual student defined his/her own culture. A large piece of paper was placed on the classroom floor with the word "culture" in the center. As a group, we brainstormed all the possible ways we could define "culture." Students' comments included: "Culture means where you come from, how you talk, and how you live." "Culture is backgrounds, religions. Everybody is not the same because if we were all the same life would be boring, so I am glad we are different." "Culture is something that represents your language, personality, and background." "It is our lives that we share with people."

We wrote words that described our cultural backgrounds and glued those to the large piece of paper. Words such as *English, German,*

Discuss definitions and perceptions of culture.

Read aloud and discuss author's introduction and the first episode.

- Create tableaus of Joaquín and his mom crossing the border.
- Write-in-role as Joaquín, Prietita, or Teté about the night after the boys mocked Joaquín.
- Prepare a choral reading in small groups by characters.

Read and discuss second episode.

- Devise a news show reporting on the border patrol looking for undocumented Mexican immigrants.
- Take the hot seat in the role of border patrol, the herb woman, Prietita, or an immigration officer.
- Improvise characters' dreams for the future.
- Reflect on the entire experience.

Figure 1. Engagements to respond to *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado*

African American, Spanish, and *girl* were among those the students used to describe their cultures and identities. Ms. Smith and I engaged with the students in defining and sharing aspects of our identities. We had interesting informal conversations while collectively placing the words on the piece of paper. As theories around reading multicultural literature suggest, it is important to acknowledge the identities and cultural places where readers come from. The process of defining cultural identities becomes a key in understanding the unique and multiple locations readers bring to engage or resist the reading of a text (Enciso, 1997; Beach, 1997).

The next day, *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* was read aloud. I used the author's introduction as a springboard into the book, presenting it on an overhead and reading it aloud to the students in English and Spanish. We had a dialogue about the information the author, Gloria Anzaldúa, provided to situate herself in relationship to the story. This autobiographical information facilitated the students' understanding of the story and their notion of reading Latino/a realistic fiction. It also helped us understand that authors, like readers, are culturally situated, particularly when writing narratives close to their life and community experiences (hooks, 1991).

After reading the first part of the story, where Prietita stands up for Joaquín in front of the boys, we explored a moment previous to the story through drama. The students created a tableau or frozen image (O'Neill, 1995). In a tableau, small groups devise a static image representative of an idea or moment related to the story. Each group presents the image, and the rest of the class analyzes it. For this drama exploration, the students captured the moment Joaquín and his mom crossed the border. The groups worked individually while I circulated throughout the classroom providing support on how to represent powerful images. While this border crossing moment is not directly narrated in the story, crossing the border is a major event framing the characters and the community's lives. The drama allowed the students to move beyond the limits of the story to a previous episode. The students then wrote a journal-in-role (O'Neill, 1995) as one of the book's characters reflecting on Joaquín's first encounter with the Chicano/Mexican American boys. In writing-in-role, the participants assume the identity of a given character within the drama and write a text from that perspective. For example, the students wrote a reflection from the perspective of Prietita, Joaquín, or Tete (the boy that mocked Joaquín). A choral reading for each character followed in order to listen to the multiple ideas of the students. I asked the students to get into small groups arranged by character and share what they considered the most powerful line in their writing. The choral reading was a composition of these chosen lines.

The next day we read the second part of the book, when *la migra*/the border patrol goes to the community looking for "illegals"—undocumented immigrants—and Prietita and *la curandera*/the herb woman hide Joaquín and his mom. The students devised a "news program" (O'Neill & Lambert, 1990) where they took on the role of television reporters and the characters in the book to retell the event from both an insider (characters) and outsider (reporters) perspective (Medina, 2001). I supported the groups in the negotiation of what ideas to present in the news show. This part of the drama was followed by a "hot seat" strategy (Swartz, 1995) where the students took the roles of different characters involved in the story, such as the border patrol, *la curandera*/the herb woman, Prietita, and an immigration officer. The students were encouraged to voluntarily take on those roles and to give their opinion about whether Joaquín and his mom should be sent back to Mexico. The role of the immigration officer as a representative of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) was added to explore

the idea that there are institutions outside of the story that influence the lives of the characters/immigrants. I set up four empty chairs labeled with the characters' names and posed the question, "Do you think that Joaquín and his mother should be sent back to Mexico?" The students took turns taking a role and expressing what they thought the character believed about the issue. Because of the students' high level of engagement, my role was to step back and listen to the multiplicity of voices embedded in their responses.

The concluding day involved an improvisation about the characters' dreams and aspirations for the future (O'Neill, 1995). The students improvised those aspects, moving the book events to the future and exploring the different possibilities they saw with each character in the story.

Critical Dialogues around Latino/a Literature in the Classroom

After a close examination of the whole experience, I found three overarching themes that extended through the dialogues and the drama. I used these themes as the framework to interpret the narratives constructed around the students' explorations of *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (see Table 1). The first, *Making sense of the issues,* shows how the students began to make sense of social issues presented in the text, such as citizenship, representation, and language. *Friendship and compassion* reflects their discussion of these two themes as the first level of their responses to the text. *Becoming critical: Understanding multiple perspectives* focuses on students' movement outside of the theme of friendship with an eye to understanding the story's multiple points of view and the circumstances framing each one. This theme also reflects on the actions taken by the characters in relationship to the oppressed characters—undocumented immigrants. The students showed an understanding of the complexity of some of the issues around immigration, citizenship, and justice.

Making Sense of the Issues

Reading multicultural literature opens up the possibility of developing a point of entry to engage students in critical dialogues around social issues and inequalities (Athanases, 1998). As a result of the perspectives presented in the text, the students and I raised questions and established dialogues around issues of immigration and citizenship. This was particularly interesting throughout the read-aloud, where at different points we discussed the events in the book and how those relate to larger social, political, and cultural dynamics such as representation, class, language, spirituality, and citizenship.

The following is a representative excerpt of our dialogues. The students sat on a rug while I read the text to them. Occasionally, we stopped reading to ask questions or have a discussion. The dialogue described in this excerpt occurred after a read-aloud of the first part in which Teté and the other Mexican American boys mock Joaquín:

Kathy: *I don't know why the boys make fun of Joaquín hmm . . . because they are the same Mexican hmm they are both Mexicans.*

Themes	Descriptions	Engagements
Making sense of the issues	Students begin to make sense of the social issues presented in the text such as citizenship, representation, and language.	Dialogues with the students after reading aloud the first section of the book when the boys mock Joaquín
Friendship and compassion	Students' responses to the text show a first level of thinking, mostly around the theme of friendship and compassion.	Students *writing-in-role* as one of the characters in the book after the boys mocked Joaquín
Becoming critical: Understanding multiple perspectives	Students begin to move outside of the theme of friendship to understand that there are multiple points of view in the story and specific circumstances framing each one. Students begin to reflect on the actions taken by the characters in relationship to the oppressed characters—undocumented immigrants.	Drama strategy *hot seat*

Table 1. Themes and suggested related engagements

Carmen: *That is a very important point because they are all Mexicans. That does not mean that in this story they get along. There are differences within a group. Sometimes we feel that we are better people than other people who are in a situation that is not as fortunate as ours.*

George: *Does Mexicans that come across the border . . . isn't that being an immigrant?*

Carmen: *Yes, they are immigrants.*

George: *My mom is an immigrant.*

Robert: *There are people hmm they came in a boat and they had to go straight to hmm . . .*

[Another student tells him]: Ellis Island.

Robert: *They were checked up . . . [ ]*

Carmen: *The difference here is that Mexico and the United States are one next to the other, and they don't have to take a boat or, like Puerto Ricans, have to take a plane. They come through the border.*

Charles: *Some people like Mexicans, some of them are like bandits and steal and do drugs and stuff.*

Carmen: *I think there are drugs that come across the border, but I think that happens from anywhere and not only from Mexico. There are bad people like that in any group but sometimes, and this is my opinion and we can discuss it in the group, for certain groups, TV has a tendency to only mention the bad things and what we have done wrong. They don't mention the good things that we have done. I think that Mexicans have done a lot of work for the United States. They do a lot of work in order to help us every day, but I think that the media and TV only highlight the bad things that we do. That is a very interesting conversation. [transcript 3–25]*

The dialogue began with Kathy, a Puerto Rican/Latina student, asking a question about why the boys make fun of Joaquín when they are from the same ethnic background (Mexican). Kathy is raising the issue of multiple layers of power and oppression within groups, a key issue in understanding the complex nature of culture and identity and how ethnic communities are not homogenous uncontested spaces. The text facilitated our understanding that in human relationships there are multiple hierarchies of oppression and power such as race, class, and gender both within and outside communities that are in constant negotiation, including Latino/a culture (Anzaldúa, 1987). This picture book challenged Kathy's perception and stereotype that "we should all get along" with a complex representation of the dynamics within a cultural group. As opposed to the stereotypical representation often found in children's literature that suggests that people from the same ethnic background are the same and all get along, the book portrays Mexicans as complex human beings. In my comments, I elaborated on the differences within groups and the dynamics of power that come to play when some people feel superior to others.

George, who described himself as an African American boy born in California, moved the conversation in another direction when he realized that Mexicans who cross the border are immigrants, too, and related it to his mom who is an immigrant. George found a connection between his life and the characters in the book. Robert shifted the conversation to provide a historical perspective relating immigration to Ellis Island. It is interesting that the present move of Mexicans to the U.S. does not represent the mainstream perspective on immigration represented by Ellis Island. The core social studies curriculum presents Ellis Island as a historical event to teach students that they live in a nation of immigrants, but there seems to be a gap between the historical and the present social, cultural, and political reality of immigration (Banks, 1994). As the facilitator, I made an effort to explain the differences between the two immigration realities, particularly trying to disrupt the ideas that immigration is something from the past and that people who emigrate from Mexico are outsiders, strangers, or invisible.

I was posed with the dilemma of how to respond to his comment without silencing him.

The final statement from Charles, a White European American boy, was probably one of the biggest challenges to mediate throughout our dialogues. He openly stated that his understanding and image of Mexican immigrants were related to drug dealers and thieves. As the facilitator, I was posed with the dilemma of how to respond to his comment without silencing him. It was very important to consider the honesty and openness of Charles's statement and to understand that if a space is open for dialogue with the students, they should be allowed to voice any perspective, even if it includes stereotypical representations. He obviously did not say something I wanted to hear, but it is through

this kind of tension in our dialogues that human beings begin to understand one another's perspectives, biases, and prejudices. It was also my responsibility to respond to his statement, knowing that a presentation of my views would not necessarily result in a change in his perspective or his "stance of resistance" towards a multicultural text (Beach, 1997); I could, however, hope to raise an awareness that his views of Mexicans were constructed by images and representations that might be stereotypical and inaccurate. The notion that Mexican immigrants are "illegal aliens," "others," and "strangers" to this society is common and needs to be challenged in order to understand the reality of undocumented immigrants.

My sense at that moment was that Charles's perception of Mexican immigrants was related to media representations, and I validated that drugs are part of the border reality, but also suggested that drug-running is not the norm for Mexican immigrants. I pointed out the negative representation of different ethnic groups by the media and presented alternate positive qualities and strong economic contributions. In my mind was the often-overlooked contribution of migrant farm workers, a perfect example of how the history and reality lived by people of color are so frequently pushed to the margins of the curriculum (Banks, 1994).

However, Charles's perceptions of Mexican immigrants were not necessarily common to the whole group. Throughout the experience, students showed that the reality lived by undocumented Mexican immigrants was distant to them, but there was an openness and willingness to reflect on the reality presented even in contested moments. The contested dialogues happened throughout the read-aloud when the students asked questions or made statements negotiating the knowledge they brought to their interpretation of the book.

Teaching multicultural literature in a contested ground (Medina, 2001) is part of the process of opening up dialogues that allow for student to "'talk back' to constructions of difference found in literature, popular culture, and in the words of their classmates and teachers" (Enciso, 1997, p. 36). It is within this tension that profound reflections and exchanges of ideas take place.

Once we began to work within the context of the drama, I was forced to take a step back and assume the role of guide.

As I analyzed the dialogues, I questioned how I "talked back" to the students' responses. I knew I had to avoid the role of "teacher with the right perspective" in order to support students as they interrogated their stereotypes, but I also realized that an imposition of my views and values was almost impossible to avoid in our conversations. This is where the drama became a powerful tool.

Friendship, Protection, and Compassion: An Intimate Space to Reflect on Writing-in-role

Once we began to work within the context of the drama, I was forced to take a step back and assume the role of guide. My role was oriented to proposing a sequence of dramatic explorations and to creating another type of reflective space where I did not have the same power. It was within the framework of the drama that the most complex dialogues and explorations of the text occurred.

The following excerpt exemplifies students' writing-in-role as one of the characters in the text. After reading aloud the first part of the book, when Teté and the boys mocked Joaquín, I stopped reading and asked the students to go back to their seats to do a writing-in-role engagement. The dramatic moment was set up for the students to pretend that it was the evening after Teté and the boys mocked Joaquín. They were in their homes reflecting on what happened that afternoon. This was the only moment throughout the drama when the students were assigned a specific role—Prietita, Joaquín, or Tete—in an attempt to help them think beyond the character that they might have chosen or empathized with, thus moving them out of their comfort zones.

These journal entries from each character's perspective highlight the discourses of friendship and compassion that students brought to their responses as they moved into an intimate, reflective, and personal space.

Sue [Prietita]: I have just met a new friend, his name is Joaquín. I am Prietita. I am very sad because he is very poor and people make fun of him. He is just like any other boy. We are good friends. I would like to hear his story about America. I feel very happy that he has came to be my friend.

Rebecca [Joaquín]: I was scared when I was crossing the river. I thought there was going to be guards, but there wasn't. I was happy after crossing the river with my mom. I met this girl named Prietita. She was really nice. Prietita stood up for me when Tete was making fun of me. I

was really mad. I almost started to cry until she had told them to leave me alone. They left after that. I was glad I met someone.

Brian [Tete]: I am Tete. I feel bad for trying to hit that boy today. Next time I see him I will try to be friends with him. And I will by (buy) some wood and help him care.

Friendship is a major theme in the book and, as a result, was represented in the students' writings. However, friendship in the book is represented in a complex manner, where Prietita plays the role of a shero and protector for Joaquín. The boys' actions are contrasted with Prietita and her solidarity through her actions with Joaquín. Prietita stood up for Joaquín and was not afraid to confront the boys in her community.

The first example of student writing-in-role is from Sue, who described her cultural background with words such as *smart, a girl,* and *White*. She wrote from the role of Prietita, the girl who protected Joaquín from the boys. She reflects on how happy she is to meet a new friend. Sue, in Prietita's role, shows first her concern about Joaquín's economic situation and second about the boys' actions towards him. Sue understands that he is "just another boy," meaning that he is not different from the boys who make fun of him. She also moves the character reflection beyond the framework of the story when she writes, "I would like to hear his story about America." Sue, through Prietita's voice, is interested in listening to Joaquín's perceptions and story about coming to a new country. This insight on Joaquín's experience is not in the story plot but writing-in-role provided her with a space to reflect as herself and as the character.

Rebecca, a White European American girl, wrote in the role of Joaquín, the boy who crossed the border. Her text exemplifies the majority of the journals written from Joaquín's perspective. The reflection focused on the fear that Joaquín felt in the encounter with the boys. However, she pushed her interpretation forward by talking about his fear of getting caught while crossing the border and the lack of border patrolling at that time. She used the tableaux or frozen images they created on crossing the border to inform her writing and interpretation. She included a representation from outside the text in her written reflection from Joaquín's perspective. Rebecca then moved to reflect on Joaquín's new friend Prietita, and how she stood up for him and how meaningful that friendship is for him. The notion of friendship in this story is conveyed through a sense of protection and action, and those elements became part of the students' writing.

The last journal is Brian writing in Tete's role, one of the Chicano/Mexican American boys who mocked Joaquín and called him *mojado*/wetback. His journal is also representative of most of the journals written by the students from Tete's perspective. Brian, in the role of Tete, regretted the actions and

Children Taking Action outside the Classroom

Enhanced awareness of inequity, struggles, unfairness, marginalization, and disenfranchisement may motivate children to share their opinions and perspectives with a community beyond the classroom walls. Here are some strategies teachers may offer students:

1. Students make posters displaying their opinions on a controversial topic.
2. Students make and distribute fact sheets that list the evidence supporting their position on a particular issue.
3. Students initiate a speakers bureau to research a topic, form a position statement on that topic, and present their points of view to others. A fourth grader initiated the "Say no to Nike" campaign after learning that Nike used child labor in factories in Indonesia. See Delucio-Brock, J. (1997, November/December). Shopping with a conscience: Kids push for fair treatment for the workers who make their gear. *Children's Advocate, 25*(6), 3.
4. Students compose plays to make their "hot seat" discussions more public by presenting to other classrooms, PTA/PTO, or other groups supportive of children as reflective citizens.
5. Children write letters to editors, legislators, and various agencies and organizations to publicly express their opinions.

Caveat: Teachers may be reprimanded for supporting students as activists, particularly if the students' views are not popular. Teachers might consider locating sources of support (such as their union, ACLU, and other first amendment groups) if they are committed to student activism but feel vulnerable.

—Richard J. Meyer

decided to become friends with Joaquín. This is an unresolved tension in the book because the author never states if they become friends. Brian moved beyond the story to suggest that he would buy wood to help and care for Joaquín in an attempt to resolve the tension.

Most of the students' journals worked around the themes of friendship, protection, and compassion, but the students also suggested more critical actions. Writing-in-role from the characters' perspectives provided an intimate space for students to negotiate their interpretations of the actions taken by the characters in the book and their own sense of action. Sue, Rebecca, and Brian moved beyond the story to assume and suggest different critical reflections on the events in the text. The students had an opportunity to explore the literary text within and beyond the boundaries of the story (Booth, 1985).

Becoming Critical: Understanding Multiple Perspectives

Another significant theme in the students' interpretations of the text through drama was an understanding of the multiple perspectives involved in the book and their relationship to real-life situations—the reality faced by undocumented immigrants. These students recognized larger issues of difference, citizenship, and justice and thought about how human beings react, act, and take strong stances in making judgments about other people's lives. The students still used compassion as a framework for their responses but moved to understanding that there are multiple points of view in the story and different circumstances framing each point of view.

Among the drama engagements we explored was the "hot seat" strategy (Swartz, 1995). Students are introduced to empty chairs that are labeled to represent different roles, and then they are challenged with a situation or question. As they voluntarily take on different roles, they respond to the situation from that particular perspective. Students have the opportunity to confront difficult questions faced by people in different situations and to experience how people respond and act differently according to their positions and beliefs. The hot seat can be a dramatic space where the students see possibilities but also, as the name of the strategy suggests, sitting in the "hot seat" can be uncomfortable and challenging. As opposed to one "right" answer, students must confront their beliefs within and against those of the person whose role they are taking and examine the multiplicity of perspectives involved in the experience.

In this case, the students were introduced to four empty chairs labeled with *la curandera*/the herb woman, Prietita, *la migra*/the border patrol, and an immigration officer. The question was "Do you think Joaquín and his mom should be sent back to Mexico or should they stay?" The immigration officer, a character who was not part of the story, but who plays a key role in the destiny and future of many undocumented immigrants, was added to the hot seat. The question brought up the political, legal, and ethical issues presented in the book. The actions taken by the characters demonstrate an act of solidarity and community activism but are, nevertheless, actions that have consequences. The idea was not for the students to reflect solely on what *they* would do, but beyond that, why the characters did what they did, the context for their decisions, and the consequences of their actions. The following are Sue's and George's responses in the hot seat:

Writing-in-role from the characters' perspectives provided an intimate space for students to negotiate their interpretations of the actions taken by the characters.

Sue [immigration officer]: I think that their job is hard and they have to make very good decisions and they might have to put some emotions on it too because if they are one race and they see like their race helpless and needing help and needing food and all that. They have to make a decision to let them in so they can get work and they can get help. They have a very hard decision and is mostly in their hands all these lives to let them in or not.

Sue [border patrol]: I think that when they passed the herb woman house is something inside told them that they were there but they just didn't want to hmmm cause all the respect that the herb woman get they probably didn't want to put the herb woman in jail. It's illegal and he is Mexican American and he was probably once treated like that but somehow got a job and I think something inside him told him that they were in there but he just kind of passed and kept looking somewhere else.

George [border patrol]: I take the border patrol because I think they knew that people were inside at the herb woman's house but they passed their house because they didn't want to take those people back and they didn't want to put them in jail and stuff. So they really passed their house and didn't care about it.

Sue established an interesting relationship between the book and the immigration officer's role, and racialized the issue. In the book, the border patrol official who knocks on the people's doors looking for "illegals" is Chicano/Mexican American. Sue positions the immigration officer in the same role. According to Sue, if the immigration officer is the same race, then there is a big responsibility on the officer's shoulders. Through her interpretation of the character, emotions and careful thought are a big part of the job. It could be argued that these are not necessarily the criteria used to decide who becomes a citizen or who is deported to Mexico, but it is important to understand the way she humanized the immigration officer. Connecting to the same human perspective is the way Sue and George coincide in their interpretation of the Chicano/Mexican American border patrol's role. Sue believed that the border patrol knew Joaquín and his mom were in *la curandera's*/the herb woman's house and kept on walking because of the respected role of *la curandera*/the herb woman in the community. Furthermore, Sue believed that the border patrol officer was once undocumented and, therefore, lived the same experiences as Joaquín and his mom. George believed that the border patrol kept on walking because he did not want to put them in jail. Sue and George brought a human side to the actions these characters took. In contrast to what media and others often present, these students had the opportunity to look at a reality lived by many undocumented immigrants and had a space to reflect and reexamine or construct their beliefs around these issues.

The perspectives brought by the students helped me reflect and raise other questions. For example, what if the immigration officer or the border patrol officers were not Mexican American? Could we expect the same level of understanding and solidarity? I left the experience wondering how the students' responses might be different if the context of the story was somehow altered. Perhaps this is the beginning of another drama. Neither the students nor I left the drama with finalized answers or solutions. We all left with complex understandings and new questions related to how we live in a diverse society. As Rogers & Soter (1997) suggest, reading across culture "involves exploring who we are, participating in the lives of others, negotiating social relationships, and critiquing our cultural assumptions about difference" (p. 8). The explorations of these dimensions of reading diverse texts are what drama can add to any piece of literature.

Exploring Other Literature through Drama

One of my hopes in sharing this experience with other educators is to encourage and promote the use of Latino/a literature and drama-in-education strategies in the classroom. However, the strategies explored with *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* could be used not only to respond to Latino/a literature but other multicultural literature as well.

To engage in the process of devising drama to look at multicultural realistic fiction, I ask:

- What is this text saying? What is missing?
- Which perspectives, events, and social issues surrounding the text that are present or implied could become part of the classroom dialogue?
- How do the students and I relate to the experiences in the text? Do I need to learn and provide more information before we read the text?
- Would it be generative for students to look at the experience from an insider character or an outsider (a character that might not be present in the text)?
- What are some of the tensions and possibilities presented in the text that provide a context for a powerful drama?

These questions help me devise a drama, keeping in mind that the potential of drama relies on moving beyond literal dramatizations of the text. Drama should always provide a new lens through which we can look at the events and margins of a story.

To get a sense of how drama works, I suggest first exploring different strategies with familiar stories. O'Neill (1985, 1990, & 1995) and Booth (1985) have developed a core of knowledge about creating powerful drama worlds in classrooms.

Drama should always provide a new lens through which we can look at the events and margins of a story.

Create a tableau, write-in-role, perform a news show or a hot seat, talk about the different perspectives created through the drama, and then move into more complex texts. The strategies could range from concrete, like a tableau, to abstract, like a dream, always taking into consideration that there are no right or wrong responses in the drama, only multiple voices and actions.

Conclusions

The students in this study engaged in meaningful reflection and dialogue around different perspectives and critically examined aspects of

the reality lived by undocumented immigrants. More than merely understanding the experience presented in the text, students engaged in multiple contexts for dialogue and explored the reasons people act the way they do. They considered the content and context of their statements and pushed their comprehension forward using "real" language in a "real" setting (Booth 1991). Drama allowed students to move from interpreting a text to developing an active dialogue *as* and *with* the characters, thus exploring multiple perspectives. They mediated the events presented in the text and moved beyond the limits of the story to the larger society. My hope is that the students left the text and drama with new perspectives and questions about issues of citizenship, justice, and equity, and also with the willingness to engage in dialogues outside mainstream beliefs to better understand how other people live.

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