

## Stories from the Field

### A Multicultural Education Practice with Muchacho by LouAnne Johnson

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Many teacher educators experience challenges in bringing multicultural issues into the multicultural education courses for predominantly white preservice teachers. I have found that using *Muchacho*, published in 2009 by LouAnne Johnson who wrote *Dangerous Minds* (originally titled *My Posse Don't Do Homework*), helps my students make connections between multicultural education in theory and practice. In my Multicultural Issues in Education class, I give them an assignment for which they have to 1) choose five important multicultural issues and summarize each issue by using a primary textbook, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* by Gollnick and Chinn (2009), 2) support each issue with (con)textual information from *Muchacho*, and 3) explain how to address each issue in their own classroom or with their own students.

*Muchacho's* protagonist, Eddie Corazon, a Mexican American high school junior living in New Mexico, can teach preservice teachers about multiple perspectives, perspective consciousness, and multicultural issues in an authentic and legitimate voice: "I don't know how many times somebody told me to go back where I came from except I am where I came from . . . . We didn't cross the border, mijo. The

border crossed us. The Corazons been living here for three hundred years" (p. 17). This statement leads us to discuss Eurocentrism and how it is related to the perspectives toward Native Americans and other immigrants. In addition, my students expressed empathy, not sympathy, in understanding social justice issues. As Eddie reflects, "We don't need people feeling sorry for us. We need those hard teachers who know what it feels like to wake up hungry every day for sixteen years" (p. 15).

Many preservice teachers may never be able to understand fully what Eddie and other students experience in their everyday lives. However, the voice in young adult literature can help preservice teachers develop culturally relevant pedagogy when they empathize with characters who deal with multicultural issues every day, understand social injustices related to multicultural backgrounds of the characters, and develop pedagogical practices to help their own students succeed academically at school and culturally in the society.

#### References

- Gollnick, D., & Chinn, P. C. (2009). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society* (8th ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson.
- Johnson, L. (1995). *Dangerous minds*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
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### Junie B. Jones in a Middle School Classroom?

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A first impression of my 7th-grade reading enhancement class may indicate chaos, but taking a second glance indicates reading is being enjoyed. The class is split into book club groups of varying reading levels and interests, showing how diverse readers can come together to read and discuss young adult literature. Every element of the groups was student-chosen, including which group to join, which book to read, how much to read each class period, and who leads group discussions. The largest, a group of six girls, is reading through Junie B. Jones books by taking turns reading out loud to each other. The fluency that comes from even the struggling readers is amazing. Every student is using emotion and voice fluctuations to fit the character and the situation. They are having fun, they are making connections, and most of all, they are becoming confident readers, which in my experience turns students into lifelong readers.

Other groups include boys reading through Jerry Spinelli books, a pair reading the Percy Jackson series, two girls reading Patricia McCormick's *Cut*, three other girls reading Ben Micklethwait's *Petey*, and another group of boys reading through the *Twilight* series at a pace comparable to some of my most voracious readers; even guys like vampires and romance. When I sit with each group and participate in their discussions, I am always impressed listening to what the students are thinking while they are reading, what their opinions are, what questions they have while reading, what moral implications may arise, what vocabulary terms are looked at, and what predictions are made.

I don't think that these groups would be as successful in accomplishing all of this if they weren't allowed so much autonomy. Being able to sit where they choose, allowing them to have snacks if they wish, and choosing how, what, and who to read with creates an environment of respect for all readers. As a reading teacher, there is nothing better than sitting back and watching a multifaceted class of students ingest and digest young adult literature.

## Pass the Book Around

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Teaching literature to high school seniors can sometimes be as painful as getting teeth pulled. When I mentioned to my students the requirements for their Independent Reading, I received moans and groans. These moans and groans were from reluctant students who didn't want to read on their own in addition to the already-mandated texts in the curriculum. I assured them that they had the option of choosing which specific books they wanted to read over the course of the school year. I suggested two young adult novels that I was exposed to during my undergraduate and graduate school experiences: *Speak* and *Inexcusable*.

I sparked my students' curiosity about the novels by appealing to their interests in teen issues like identity, peer pressure, and pressures of high school. At this point, my students really began to listen. When I was done, one of my students asked for permission to borrow one of my copies of *Speak*, while another asked to borrow a copy of *Inexcusable*. Of course I said "Yes."

As time went on, I forgot about the books and began teaching the mandated texts. One day, the two students who borrowed my books were turning them in right as two other students were approaching me. The latter two students heard about *Speak* and *Inexcusable* from their classmates and were coming to me to request permission to borrow the books. The idea of my students discussing novels outside of the classroom is definitely one of the rewards of teaching.

Young adult novels are great for motivating reluctant readers and for keeping avid readers interested. They help draw connections between real-life experiences and literature. After reading *Speak*, one of my students said, "I learned that if you don't or won't speak up for yourself, who would? *Speak* seems something like a survival kit." These connections that my students are able to make are a testament to how young adult novels can inspire students to read more and to begin making these literary/real-world connections that many of them were unable to do before.

## References

Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York: Puffin.  
Lynch, C. (2007). *Inexcusable*. New York: Simon Pulse.