

## Felt Tensions:

Preservice Teachers Read Sherman Alexie's *An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

**A**s a teacher educator, I am continually reminded of the differences among my English Education students. Though predominantly White, they bring varied histories and purposes to my classes and come from diverse environments—from small towns and big cities, from poverty and wealth, and from families with post-secondary school experience and families without. I meet them at different stages in their lives—some right out of high school, some parenting children while returning to their education, and some teaching in schools and ready for more specialized training. I remind my students of the endless differences they will encounter in their classrooms: in abilities, interests, ethnicities, home lives, relationships to school, language, gender identification, religion, sexuality, literacy, self-awareness, environment, and others.

In my Young Adult Literature course, I encourage students to wonder about those future students as readers. What existing literacies, knowledges, and identities will those students bring with them to their acts of reading (Bomer, 2011)? Furthermore, I try to illuminate my belief that the practice of reading literature can teach us to develop the flexibility to revise our thinking—our interpretations of texts, yes, and even our points of view (Blau, 2003). In other words, reading literature allows us to continue to revise what we know about the world, especially when we encounter literature from different points of view, including those that contradict our own (Blau, 2003).

For this reason (among others), I teach and hope my students will teach multicultural young adult lit-

erature, broadly defined as literature that “represent[s] voices typically omitted from the traditional canon” (Glazier & Seo, 2005, p. 686). Indeed, Grobman (2007) argues that multiculturalism “acknowledge[s] . . . exclusions based on gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and other categories of differences” (p. xviii), ultimately expanding readers’ overall understanding of historical and systemic oppression. In my course, I choose young adult texts that not only highlight marginalized voices, but that give students windows into “institutional structures that have caused and continue to contribute to social inequities” (Athanasos, 1996, p. 250), my hope being that all students meet characters they recognize and characters who deeply challenge what they may believe to be true. I have found that those challenges appear through expressions of frustration, confusion, and disagreement; it is those expressions of difficulty that concern me here.

Extending Grobman’s broad recognition of multiculturalism, Trites (2003) characterizes multiculturalism as a “process,” one “that includes in different measures conflict, accommodation, isolation, and awareness” (p. 67), a list analogous to, in many ways, the various responses readers experience while reading texts that counter their perspectives, whatever those perspectives may be. It is the move from “conflict” to “awareness” that interests me most, so what I hope to emphasize in this article is the underlying importance of students’ “conflicts.”

During a recent experience teaching my university’s Young Adult Literature course, I became interested in

the ways in which readers experience and share conflicts between their own worlds and the world of the text, as well as their willingness and/or resistance to revise their own perspectives. I became most aware of my students' conflicts during our reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). My reflection on teaching this novel has been driven by an overarching question: How do we teach students to reflect on the conflicts, or emotional tensions, that emerge while reading multicultural literature?

## Background

### Perspective Taking as Intellectual Generosity

Thein, Beach, and Parks (2007) have argued that, though teachers typically want students' experiences reading multicultural literature to broaden and shift their understanding of the world, the reality is that "significant changes in beliefs and attitudes are rare and happen slowly, over the course of many years" (p. 55). In their study of a multiethnic high school class reading Dorothy Alison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (which they define as a multicultural text because of its representation of historical oppression, in this case that of a rural, working, poor, White community), they found that the text "created tensions" for many students and that negotiating these tensions produced a willingness to "consider a new perspective" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 57). Perspective taking, they explain, begins with the "tensions" readers experience "between the beliefs and perspective they bring with them from their experiences and those they meet with in text worlds" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 55). Those tensions can initiate a series of valuable and worthwhile reflections: readers become more aware of their own points of view; they may try on other points of view or at least consider why those perspectives differ from their own; and they may experience changes in outlook, changes "that are often subtle, usually transitory, and frequently contradictory," yet still "increase their understanding of *how* their beliefs and values are formed

and *why* other people think differently" (Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007, p. 55).

Perspective taking both builds and displays what Blau (2003) labels as "intellectual generosity and fallibilism," or a "willingness to change one's mind, to appreciate alternative visions," ultimately leading readers "to be changed . . . in the ways they apprehend or construct themselves" (p. 214). Blau (2003) posits intellectual generosity as a key ingredient to becoming a rich academic reader, but he acknowledges that this attribute is not nurtured by the culture of schooling, where getting it "right" supersedes achieving multiple ways of reading a text and where students, as Guillory (2012) has noted in her efforts to challenge students to identify and critique their own assumptions, "are largely unaccustomed to pedagogical spaces where dissonance is encouraged" (p. 12).

### Why Perspective Taking Matters

"This book made me feel like I was becoming racist," announced one of my students during the beginning of our discussion of Alexie's novel. Several others agreed—they didn't know alcoholism was such an issue for Native American communities, for example, and by the end of the book, they just wanted Junior to get out of the reservation and away from the tribe. I remember my worry at hearing these responses. How could my students not recognize the important role of the tribe in Junior's life despite the pain and suffering he witnesses on the reservation? And how would they ever teach challenging multicultural literature if they couldn't articulate this complexity?

As Blau indicates, there are more than academic consequences for failing to produce students who are willing to revise their stances; a "conviction of certainty" often reveals "ignorance" and an "incapacity to learn" (Blau, 2003, p. 213). Ultimately, intellectual generosity creates readers whose experiences with texts help them perceive that their version of reality is only one of many, that history and systemic oppression shape individual and group identities (Athanases, 1996; Dudek, 2011), and that between all people exist both "difference and common ground" (Athanases, 1996, p. 250). But how do we get to a place where these realizations mobilize our readings?

As I will argue through my analysis of two students' work reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, we need to prepare teachers to

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recognize and value those initial tensions between their outlooks and those of the characters in the textual world, which means teaching preservice teachers and ourselves to identify the potential usefulness in discomfort, defensiveness, or confusion. Salvatori and Donahue (2005) identify difficulty as the source of our most meaningful moves as readers—marking the moments when interpretation is most relevant, most needed, and perhaps most able to transform our experiences with texts. As I came to see through teaching Alexie’s novel, those moments of discomfort, rejection, and worry (such as my student worrying she was becoming a racist) reveal the tensions that can motivate perspective taking. They are moments to utilize and return to, if we can, even though they are moments we may want to avoid. What is critical, in other words, is how readers take advantage of those conflicts or the tensions they experience while reading. They are the “seeds” of critical readings of self and text (Cai, 2008, p. 216), readings that we ultimately want for our students.

## Methods

### Students

During a recent semester at the university where I teach (a public university in rural Pennsylvania), all nine of my Young Adult Literature students were White women (as am I). Three of the nine students were graduate students, including two practicing special education teachers and one literature student preparing to pursue doctoral study. Though the class is designed to prepare students for 7–12 teaching certification, at least one student did not plan to pursue certification.

### Course Design

Our Young Adult Literature course is offered as an English Education class with pedagogical content, but it is not designed to focus on literacy theory; rather, it serves to expose students to a wide variety of YA literature and offer them rationales and strategies for teaching this literature to middle and secondary students. Because the class serves multiple purposes, it attracts a wide range of students, which creates both interest and challenge for the students and the teacher. Given the class’s uneven knowledge of literacy (some students had not yet taken our Teaching of Reading course, for example), I designed the course

to be an inductive approach to what it means to read literature. Students kept a reading notebook, and each week, this notebook took on a different form, each designed to help students think about what it means to isolate moments of significance in the text, construct meaning, and entertain interpretive possibilities (Blau, 2003).

We began with the dialogic journal (a two-column form, one column labeled “quotations” and the other “responses”), and throughout the semester, I provided other spin-offs of this journal form—typically two- or three-column organizers that pushed readers to pay attention to their reading in different ways. For example, one form asked students to collect quotations, their own emotional responses, and their reflections on those responses. Beyond helping students develop their own abilities to isolate significance, construct meaning, and develop multiple interpretations, the forms were also meant to give students possibilities to teach their future classroom readers beyond teacher-centered, text-dependent questions (a major proponent of the Common Core State Standards). Each form put readers, not me, in charge of what was noticed; yet by assigning new forms, I had the ability to shift our lens depending on the text we were reading.

Students then began to create their own journal forms, at first designed with a focus I assigned. For our reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I asked students to first read Thein, Beach, and Parks’s article on perspective taking and then use those ideas to design a reading notebook form for Alexie’s novel that encouraged readers to take on perspectives within the textual world. Thus, students were designing a form with future students in mind, working through the journal form themselves, and then reflecting on its usefulness: where did it direct their attention, and what did it allow them to do as readers?

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nant perspectives, especially perspectives that might challenge their preconceived notions of the world. Ultimately, I hoped through our reading of multicultural young adult literature, students would acknowledge difference in viewpoint; seek to understand perspectives that differ from their own, particularly those that trouble them in some way; and imagine how they might teach students how to adopt other perspectives so that they ultimately, to quote Dudek's (2011) definition of the goals of multicultural children's literature, "emerge with a stronger understanding and respect for cultural differences and the effect they have on individual and group identities" (p. 155).

I chose Alexie's novel for a variety of reasons. I anticipated it would challenge some students with an ethnically unfamiliar perspective and also provide common ground in terms of Junior's experiences with poverty, addiction, violence, and educational change. Furthermore, based on my experience recommending this book to high school students, I know that readers (including myself) find Junior to be a compelling, believable, and likeable narrator. Junior is, in many ways, the classic YA protagonist—an outsider. He was born with hydrocephalus, a condition defined by abnormal amounts of fluid in the brain that requires early surgeries and leaves Junior with physical abnormalities. He is a small kid with a big head and too many teeth who stutters and lisps. As Junior says, he is a "zero on the rez" (Alexie, 2007, p. 16), which means he is often the target of bullies.

Yet, despite Junior's very serious worries in life (his anxiety at being bullied, his well-intentioned father's alcoholism, his incredibly intelligent sister's stagnation, and the loss he has experienced and continues to experience), he finds ways to enjoy himself. He loves to draw, read, and play with his friend, Rowdy, and he wants a life to look forward to. Within his world on the Spokane Indian Reservation, however, he struggles to imagine a desirable future. Thus, though he knows he will be stereotyped and bullied by those in the more privileged, White community, and though he is aware of how his tribe will feel betrayed, he decides to pursue his education at the nearby White community's high school.

Despite the difficulty of leaving the reservation each morning and experiencing blatant racism when he arrives, Junior gains opportunities—and hope—when he switches schools. Thus, to further his

education and imagine possibilities for adulthood he doesn't see on the reservation, he has to join the historical oppressors. As a former public school teacher and a current educator at a public university, I must ask, *How many students in America feel this way?* As Barcott (2007) says in the *New York Times*, this book deals with the "grinding plates" between American Indian and White culture: is it possible, the book asks, to leave the sadness of your home and not betray who you are? Students of all backgrounds can identify with Junior's struggles to find hope, deal with loss, and negotiate his identity. Yet, he also brings to his interactions an acute awareness of systems of power that help construct his identity as an American Indian. It was those cultural specifics I wanted students to face (Grobman, 2007).

### Data Sources and Analysis

In order to gather data, I collected each student's reading notebook at the end of the course. By this point, students' notebooks contained nine different journal responses for a variety of multicultural texts they had read. Five of these dialogic journal forms were assigned by me, and four were created by students individually. Furthermore, throughout the course, I kept an informal journal in which I noted and reflected on significant moments during class discussions. My analysis focused heavily on the class's reading of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* because this was the book that provoked the most conflicted responses from students. I wanted to return to this group's experience with the novel in order to notice how students' conflicts with the world of the text manifested in their writing and their talking, to think through how students did or did not reflect on those conflicts, and to consider what pedagogical moves might encourage more productive reflection. Thus, I began by analyzing all students' journal entries on Alexie's novel. To analyze these journal entries, I reread them with the overarching lens of perspective taking, broken down into the following questions: Did students allow for expression of conflicts in their journal forms? If so, what were these conflicts, and how were they expressed? Did students reflect on those conflicts? If so, how and what did those reflections produce? Finally, if they attempted to do so, were students able to articulate a perspective other than their own?

For several reasons, I decided to focus further analysis on the case studies of Anna and Lynn (pseudonyms), two graduate students and special education teachers taking the course as an elective for their MA in literacy. First, both made their conflicts explicit in their notebook entries (some students referred to conflict with the text in their reflections or during class discussion, for example, but then mentioned them only subtly in their notebook entries). Second, Anna and Lynn responded to their conflicts in direct contrast to each other. Lynn used her conflict to identify a perspective she struggled to understand and began to employ perspective taking as a literacy practice. Anna, on the other hand, remained rooted in her perspective as “right” and made no attempt to try on the different perspectives of the textual world. Finally, the contrast between their responses allowed me to more deeply consider what approaches and aptitudes might undergird a reader’s ability to reflect on conflicts with a textual world and, in turn, what approaches and aptitudes might deter such reflection. As I continued to analyze Anna’s and Lynn’s journal forms, I added an additional question about how they approached the act of reading literature. To think through this question, I attended to how they designed their journal form and how they described their actions as readers.

To address further pedagogical implications, I returned to my notes on our class discussion of the book, which was limited to one two-and-a-half-hour class period. Given that I did not have a recorded and transcribed discussion, this component of my analysis was limited to my written impressions and reflections at the time of teaching. In analyzing these reflections, I was most interested in identifying when students expressed their conflicts and the pedagogical moves I made that invited, highlighted, or responded to those conflicts.

## Findings

### Perspective Taking in a Complex World

#### READING NOTEBOOK ONE, LYNN: USING ANGER

Lynn used Thein, Beach, and Parks’s article to set up a three-column notebook that allowed her to focus on a single character perspective unlike her own (see Table 1). The first column included “character descriptions: thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires” and was captured both in quotations and descriptions.

The second column, titled “Response to Character,” asked for the reader’s “inferences about their perspective,” yet Lynn used it to recognize tensions between her perspective and those presented in the book, most specifically her dismay at the tribe’s reaction to Junior’s choice to go to the nearby White school. (To better capture how Lynn used this column, one possible label might be, “*Confusion and Tension: Where do I struggle to understand perspectives in the book? What bothers me and why?*”) In the third column, Lynn worked most closely with the idea of perspective taking, naming this column “How? and Why?” Here, she thinks about how her own beliefs and values are formed and accounts for differences between her world and the textual world.

Lynn identified tensions between her own world and the textual world through anger; in fact, her anger

**Table 1.** Sample entry from Lynn’s journal

<b>Character Descriptions</b> <i>Thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires . . .</i>	<b>Response to Character</b> <i>Inferences about their perspective . . .</i>	<b>How? + Why?</b> <i>How are your beliefs/values formed? Why do other people think differently?</i>
Gordy showed Junior a good book and he read a play and read, “What greater grief than the loss of one’s native land?” He read this and thought, “Well, of course, man. We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other.”	He listened to his teacher and told his parents he wanted to transfer. I thought this would be a bigger ordeal to his immediate family. I didn’t think about the other people in his tribe and how they would feel. That was a point where cultural differences were apparent. They viewed it as Junior being a traitor and that he didn’t want to be Indian. Later, after the death of his grandmother, I realized how much the tribe was connected. Even with the drinking, fighting, and gambling, they were all a group.	When I assumed that the tribe would not be affected by Junior leaving the tribe, I was wrong. I forget where I read this quote but it said, “You change the tribe and the tribe changes you.” I could be off by a few words, but it is very true in this culture. And Rowdy describes Junior as a nomad Indian. How Indians used to be. Now they are not the same. They have lost so much that they only know how to lose. I think others get their views just like I did. I think so much like my mother. I think Junior is much like his family. He receives guidance from all of them in some way. I think that is how and why we think differently. We all grow in different environments and are nurtured differently.

and surprise at the tribe’s response helped her realize what she had not anticipated and thus overlooked: “the other people in his tribe and how they would feel.” By investigating her anger, she uncovered a missing piece to her own understanding—she didn’t recognize the significance of Junior’s actions from the perspective of the tribe. To that end, she struggled to understand what it meant to be a member of the tribe living on the Spokane reservation. In her reflection, Lynn explained that she felt the form helped her “evaluate the tribe and why they viewed Junior leaving as such an act of betrayal.” She goes on: “I was angry with them in the text. I wanted all of them to be happy for Junior.”

Experienced as anger, Lynn’s inability to predict the tribe’s response indicated a gap in her understanding of Junior and his identity as an American Indian. Lynn used the form to begin building that understanding, gaining an appreciation for how the tribe functions when Junior’s grandmother dies: “Later, after the death of his grandmother, I realized how much the tribe was connected. Even with the drinking, fighting, and gambling, they were all a group.” She also connects the tribe to group loss—the loss of

land, Grandmother Spirit’s death, the tribe’s collective mourning, and the theme of loss that haunts Junior. Her increased ability to understand and connect Junior’s contexts—his home, the Spokane tribe, and the historical realities of American Indians (loss of land, for example)—illustrate Lynn’s success trying to take on another perspective.

#### READING NOTEBOOK TWO, ANNA: MOVING BEYOND A CORRECT PERSPECTIVE

Anna’s reading notebook form noticeably failed to have readers take on new perspectives (see Table 2); instead, she adapted a dialogic journal form in order “to justify why Arnold was incorrect with his views on white people.” When we shared notebooks during our class discussion, Anna was immediately aware that her notebook entry didn’t take on new perspectives the way others did, and she confessed that she was not used to reading literature from a different ethnic perspective.

Her form emphasizes the tensions she experienced while reading, though it does not move beyond them: Junior sees race as “something you can change,” whereas she sees it as “something you are born into.” She also points out that Junior believes White people have hope and success, while she believes White people also have “struggles and downfalls.” Anna sees this tension as the difficulty she feels while reading: “It is difficult to see these phrases . . . viewing us as superior and flawless.” In naming these tensions, Anna uses “us” to refer to herself and her assumed readers, which works to further separate Junior from her own White perspective. Schieble (2010) found similar “us/them” speak in her study of pre-service teachers designing questions for high school students reading *Luna*, Julie Ann Peters’s (2004) novel about a transgendered teen (p. 380). Citing Rogers and Christian’s definition of “white talk,” Schieble (2010) explains that this dichotomizing language allows speakers to ignore the ways in which they reinscribe racism (or heterosexism), and she calls attention to how teachers may mistakenly assume their students share dominant perspectives (p. 380).

In this case, Anna clings to the rightness of her dominant perspective throughout her journal—so much so that she struggles to read the novel at times. In fact, I can imagine how Pimental or Coleman (2012), writers of the ELA Common Core State

**Table 2.** Sample entry from Anna’s journal

Quotations or Illustration:	Response:
<p>“I know, I know, but some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you <i>become</i> white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful.”</p>	<p>The conversation between Gordy and Arnold makes it seem like race is something that you can change instead of something that you are born into. Gordy says it all when he says “If that were true, then wouldn’t all white people be successful?” It is difficult to see these phrases from an Indian point of view when they are talking about your own race because I see all of the struggles and downfalls that white people have, too, so it makes it tough to see how Arnold is viewing us as superior and flawless.</p>
<p>“If that were true, then wouldn’t all white people be successful?”</p>	

Standards, might read Anna's problem as a reader: "She jumps too quickly to her own reactions." Their directions to Anna might be, *Instead of thinking about what's difficult for you, focus on what's difficult for the character.* And to some extent, those directions would be helpful. Perspective taking as a literacy practice does require listening. In the quote Anna selected from *Junior*, for example, "I know, I know, but some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful," we hear Junior trying to explain the way "some Indians" think (Alexie, 2007, p. 131). He is weighing a belief he is familiar with, a belief he seems to have inherited but is not completely sure about, during a discussion with his White friend, Gordy. Anna ignores the context of this comment, though, missing the fact that Junior is thinking through his own and others' perspectives, that his beliefs are "in process." Not only does Anna miss this context, but she also then misses Junior's underlying struggle with sorting through these beliefs. We wonder along with Junior: Will he have to become White to be successful? Can he be a successful Indian in a White world?

Though Anna struggles to think in terms of Junior's personal struggle, losing her awareness of the tensions she is encountering between her own world and the textual world would make her reading far less meaningful. Those tensions are how we gain awareness of our own beliefs ("I guess I think of race as something you're born into"). They can push us to recognize that there are alternatives to the way we see the world and, with reflection, they can reveal systems of oppression and privilege that help form our and others' views, experiences, and identities. Perspective taking, then, is most rich, most meaningful, and most transformative when those tensions are front and center, when our own beliefs are part of the purpose and process of reading.

Explaining how Rosenblatt's transactional theory allows for critical perspectives, Cai (2008) names how the feelings we experience can lead to critical acts, such as unpacking assumptions and trying on different perspectives: "Critical literacy is a personal as well as political matter because it entails examining one's own aesthetic experience" (p. 214). Anna has yet to examine and reflect on her own aesthetic experience, and though I acknowledge here that closer

reading skills are one piece of that puzzle, what Anna most noticeably lacks in reading this novel is Blau's performative literacy, principally the ability to revise a perspective.

In contrast, that ability gives Lynn two different inroads: examining her own perspective and also better analyzing those of the textual world. Anna specifically struggles to acknowledge that two contradictory perspectives can be true in the world at the same time. For example, plenty of White people struggle to feel hope and to excel economically in America (this seems to be one of Anna's underlying issues with Junior's understanding of White people). At the same time—and this is where the flexibility of performative literacy comes in—the historical oppression of Native people in America defines systemic poverty and racism; Junior's struggle to believe opportunities could be his in a White world makes historical and systemic sense. How has life in America taught him otherwise? What I am suggesting, then, is that if Anna developed the ability to revise her own perspective, she would, in fact, become a closer reader. As Blau argues, performative literacy is what makes analytical reading possible (p. 211).

Interestingly, Anna ends this dialogic journal noting a change, albeit a small one, but one that has real political teeth: "After reading this book and seeing the views of Indians, I don't think it is fair that schools make their mascot an Indian. I do have to agree with Arnold there." Anna displays a reluctance to agree, and there is little explanation of why she thinks Junior is right, but somehow this book initiated a shift in her feeling about using a Native person as a mascot. We can see in Anna's brief response here the changes that Thein, Beach, and Parks describe, and we also see evidence that hearing Junior's perspective pushed Anna to acknowledge that there are other meaningful ways to read such a mascot.

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### Goals for Reading

Thein and Sloan (2012) have recently argued that the practice of perspective taking must be couched within a broader ethical goal for reading: “to construc[t] beliefs, opinions and stances that are flexibly located in relation to the beliefs and values of others” (p. 321).

Indeed, Anna’s and Lynn’s responses suggest different

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goals for reading. Anna’s responses indicate that she reads with a positivistic stance, assessing what seems right or wrong. She mentions doing research about team mascots and rates of diabetes while reading and spends much of her notebook entry explaining how Junior’s perspective doesn’t match her reality and thus must be incorrect. Lynn’s responses

suggest that she reads in order to gain insight into others’ worlds but also, and perhaps most important, to gain self-awareness. In fact, her notebook form begins with her own recognition of Junior’s thoughts on poverty:

We grew up poor and lived under the poverty line. I loved when Junior said being poor doesn’t teach you anything. It teaches you how to be poor. It’s sort of true! A lot of my co-workers complain about how little money we make. I just think in my head, I currently make more money by myself than what my mother and father made together and they had two children to take care of. I’m not going to complain!

By engaging Junior’s perspective, Lynn was able to find common ground and see her life in new ways (“It’s sort of true!”). The “sort of true” comment highlights Lynn’s willingness to recast her understanding of something personal. In other words, she is able to recognize her own life within the descriptions of a life that in many ways is radically different from her own. Blau would label this as one component of “intellectual generosity and fallibilism,” a “handful of related traits that allow readers to learn from and be influenced by texts” (2003, p. 214).

At the same time, Lynn was quick to note confrontations between her world and the textual world, which allowed her to acknowledge the limits of her perspective. Readers who can “appreciate alterna-

tive visions” can be “changed by their experience in their sympathies, in their knowledge of a represented world, and in the ways they apprehend or construct themselves” (Blau, 2003, p. 214). We see Lynn’s new understanding of the tribe in her dialogic form, which perhaps speaks to why she felt it was so important to make sure Sherman Alexie was Native American when she finished the book—something she shared during class discussion. If a reader of a novel is changing her understanding of the world based on her reading experience, then she needs to feel confident trusting that experience.

### Trying on Complex Feelings

Near the end of our class discussion, one student worried out loud about teaching this book. “I would want it to be transformative,” she said, but she was afraid it would leave students feeling hopeless. She went on to say that the end left her sad—it was unclear where Junior was going. Will he have a more hopeful life given his losses and struggles? Will he pursue an education? She was worried students would end the book without a map, without a sense that they can indeed gain power, voice, and options. I asked if others felt the same way at the end, and we realized we had a divided class. We returned to the ending scene and reread Junior’s basketball game with his best friend, Rowdy. I quote a short section here:

I would always love Rowdy. And I would always miss him, too. Just as I would always love and miss my grandmother, my big sister, and Eugene.

Just as I would always love and miss my reservation and my tribe.

I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them.

I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them.

“Aw man,” Rowdy said. “Stop crying.” (Alexie, 2007, p. 230).

I asked students to account for why this scene felt sad to them. In offering an answer to this question, one student mentioned that this scene reminds her of how she feels at family reunions. She explained that no one in her family has a college degree, and now she’s about to finish her MA and start a Ph.D. program. She recalled talking to her cousin at a recent family event and how it felt awkward and sad because they had



so little in common. We talked as a group about the reality that gaining an education, leaving home, and changing social class can be painful. We returned to Junior's case, where he is not only undergoing these changes, but also aligning himself with a different ethnicity (one that had subjugated his own); there is no way for him to avoid pain, even with the hope that leaving home provides.

What this moment emphasized was the sheer complexity of feeling at the end of this book. That complexity itself challenged students trying to take on Junior's perspective. Leaving home for a hopeful future seems as if it should be a purely happy occasion, but as Junior's and my student's experiences highlight, that is often not the case, especially when family, race, and culture are at stake.

## Significance and Implications

### The Role of Emotion and Classroom Practices

This final conversation reveals what Anna's and Lynn's notebooks also reveal—the significance of emotion in the strategy of perspective taking. First and foremost, we experience “tensions” through emotional response. Both Anna and Lynn recognized their difficulty in understanding Junior and the tribe's perspectives when they felt frustration, anger, disappointment, or confusion. These also were moments when the complexity of the text itself emerged. We have to teach students how to recognize and account for those feelings, as Lynn does, not to inhabit them as “unreflective reactions” (Wilner, 2002, p. 179), as we see in Anna's defense of her perspective. Ultimately, we need to find ways to teach students how discomfort or anger can increase understanding and meaning. To do so, we need to simultaneously teach our students how to revise perspectives and acknowledge (and live with the fact) that contradictory perspectives can exist at the same time. How can we do this?

1. Ask students questions about the text that push them to understand a character on his or her terms. *Why does this character act or respond this way? How does it make sense for that character? If I don't understand it, why not? What bothers me or confuses me about this response or action? Why does it stand out to me? What gaps in my cultural knowledge or understanding could help explain that difference?*

2. Create spaces where tensions are shared and examined, even if it is difficult to do so. To get

students back into the text during the evening we discussed Alexie's novel, I began by asking them to find moments when they felt race came up in ways that made them uncomfortable. I gave them all time to look through the book, and then I began by sharing my moment, a moment when Junior gets a ride home from Roger, a White boy at school, who has gone from bullying him to feeling sorry for him. Roger has figured out that Junior actually has no ride home and has planned to hitchhike his way home to the reservation (something he often does). Alexie (2007) writes:

And Roger, being of kind heart and generous pocket, and a little bit racist, drove me home that night.

And he drove me home plenty of other nights, too.

If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing. (p. 129)

I shared how conflicted this description made me feel, causing me to reflect on the conflicting motivations within my own and others' actions in the world. As we see in this brief description, racism can fuel pity, pity can fuel kindness, and kindness can fuel friendship—a rather disturbing, contradictory sequence. As students shared the moments they selected, other students responded, both complicating readings and adding connections.

Throughout this discussion, we realized that by making two White teachers mentors for Junior, it became easier for readers to dismiss the perspective that students struggled the most to understand—that of the tribe. It was as if those teachers, characters my students understandably admired, became the force opposing the adults from the reservation (and it seemed as if my students felt like they could understand only one of those perspectives, instead of appreciating both). One student wondered aloud why Alexie made the choice to create two White teachers as Junior's most helpful mentors. Though we didn't come up with clear answers, the discussion was a turning point for the class. Students were not only sharing their own difficulties, but they were using them to articulate

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**Ultimately, we need to find ways to teach students how discomfort or anger can increase understanding and meaning.**

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important questions about the creation and impact of the novel.

3. Find ways for students to “try on” other perspectives in writing, as recommended by Thein, Beach, and Parks. One student, in fact, did this for her journal form. For this particular form, the student chose events significant to Junior and then wrote diary entries in response. She noted in her reflection:

By writing as Junior, I found myself understanding him more, even the parts that I thought were a little troubling or hard to relate to. . . . When I tried on Junior’s perspective, I found that despite the fact I am a white woman and he is a Native American teenage boy, we actually had a lot in common. Both of us had experienced alcoholism in the family, were poor growing up, and lost family members and friends in violent ways due to our surroundings.

This student came to class able to talk about the complexity of Junior’s experience with honesty and awareness. Her own performative literacy, perhaps her life history, and perhaps also the experience of writing Junior’s diary entries as she read, enabled her to read this book with eyes open to both Junior and herself. I also recommend trying on perspectives in writing as a valuable communal activity; group members add different pieces of a complex perspective that other students might miss, helping students to flesh out a character’s point of view more deeply.

4. Give students chances to directly examine their perspectives after reading and discussing texts and acknowledge that one goal of reading literature is to expand our understandings of people and the world. Questions such as *What do I know now that I didn’t know before?* are an easy way to start, but other questions about perspective should push students: *What beliefs of your own felt challenged by this book? Have you revised your beliefs in any way? or Many different experiences of life and history exist in America, and many of those experiences oppose others. What did you learn about an experience that isn’t your own through this book? What difficulties about that experience do you understand? What difficulties do you still struggle to understand?*

5. For teacher educators in particular, give students ownership over their experiences with texts by inviting them to create dialogic forms for response. There is risk involved in ceding this control to students, as Anna’s journal form illustrates: hers is in direct contrast to the perspective-taking goals of the assignment. That said, in a classroom environment where these forms are shared, discussed, and compared, students learn to recognize the limits and possibilities of their own designs, and they gain from the designs and responses other students offer. Most important, they take ownership over the experience of reading, and they recognize their own ability to continue to revise that experience. For example, as we shared dialogic forms during our discussion of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, one student remarked that she wanted to try reading the book with another student’s form. These forms, in other words, altered the dialogue readers had with themselves as they read. With multiple possibilities in their design of the forms, students were able to try out new ways of experiencing texts, and this encouraged an overall revisionary approach to reading and perspectives.

6. It became clear throughout the semester that as a character’s situation and allegiances became more complex, students struggled to appreciate multiple, often contradictory perspectives—those that exist within a single textual world or a single character. To help students think through this complexity (both in their own lives and in the world of the text) and to try on perspectives that are complicated, multifaceted, and contradictory, culture mapping can be a useful tool. An exercise used for various community purposes, culture mapping can also help individuals identify their various identities and the tensions that exist between them. As Okrah (2012) has explained, “Since we all belong to specific cultures, we use our own cultural lenses to produce the illusion of the only possible and the only acceptable vision of the world, lifestyles and mentalities” (para. 2). When we can try on other perspectives through reading, we “realize the specifics of our own consciousness” (para. 2), a particular goal of culture mapping. Ideally, the exercise can help students identify those multiple identities and tensions for characters as well.

Understanding Junior’s complex system of belonging, for example, is an integral component of fleshing out his perspective and understanding his

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**Give students ownership over their experiences with texts by inviting them to create dialogic forms for response.**

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struggle. He's a nerd, a reader, an artist, a boy, a proud member of his family, a person who is close to people who struggle with alcoholism, a Spokane Indian, a resident of the reservation, a boy from poverty, a basketball player, a great student who wants to learn, and someone who has experienced physical disabilities. With a graphic representation of the list, we could begin picking out those identities that clash. For example, being a great student who wants to learn puts him at odds with his identity as a resident of the reservation—the overarching conflict of the novel. Leading students through their own culture-mapping exercise before attempting to map Junior can help students identify the ways they experience tensions between their own various identities. Ultimately, this exercise can help students acknowledge complexity in the perspectives of characters who may feel distant and unfamiliar (and who they are far more likely to simplify) and also help them recognize that no one's identity development is simple or painless. In the case of Junior, this exercise might have helped students appreciate Junior's final scene with Rowdy, his sadness in anticipating his eventual departure from his home, and also his hope (and ours) that this departure will give him far more options than he currently sees.

### **Pain-free Reading and Becoming a Teacher**

As a teacher of teachers, I cannot help but worry that my students will avoid *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* or other texts unfamiliar to the majority of their students because they feel “too complex, too controversial, too risky, too time-consuming, too political, too painful” (White-Kaulaity, 2006, p. 10). This becomes especially problematic when the tensions themselves are what we want readers to experience and use as steps toward trying on alternative perspectives. As White-Kaulaity (2006) puts it, “Teachers must be prepared to guide students in their awareness and understanding that there are contrasts in the American experience” (p. 12). Privileging those contrasts in acts of reading—and as teachers, in our selection of texts—is how we push all of our students to grapple with perspectives, voices, and realities that are not their own. As I've illustrated through Anna's and Lynn's responses, that grappling can be uncomfortable and difficult; helping readers mobilize that discomfort, though, ought to be our goal as teachers.

As teacher educators, we need to welcome and value the tensions our students experience when reading multicultural literature. In their research of teachers' perspectives on multicultural literature, Kuo and Alsop (2010) found that many White, middle-class teachers lack knowledge and experience with multicultural literature—one major reason why its presence in English Education programs is so vital (p. 18). It is through the recognition of clashes in perspective that readers are challenged to acknowledge the limits of their gaze, take on new perspectives, and revise their worldviews. Without those clashes, without those discomforts, we cannot push students and ourselves to see things in new ways. Again and again, I find that it is the chance to re-see that makes reading multicultural literature so powerful, so enriching, and so necessary. All readers should get this chance.

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