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Looking beyond the Classroom:

Accessing Our Students' Funds of Knowledge through Young Adult Literature

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"There is only one way to look at things until someone shows us how to look at them with different eyes." (Pablo Picasso)

This issue of *The ALAN Review* poses the question: *How can educators use young adult literature to value and celebrate the funds of knowledge of students?* As I considered this, I thought, *How can we value and celebrate something if we are not familiar with what we are valuing and celebrating?* Students do not arrive in our classrooms wearing their funds of knowledge on their sleeves, and most do not willingly share them. As an essential first step in utilizing young adult literature to value and celebrate funds of knowledge, we must develop strategies that enable us to learn more about our students so that we are best equipped to analyze and act upon how their perceptions, self-esteem, values, classroom behavior, and learning are affected. Teaching strategies that encourage students to share their funds of knowledge will make them feel more welcomed, affirmed, respected, and valued. These strategies also have the potential to create social contexts within the academic setting. As a result, academic content becomes more significant for students, allowing an easier transference and utilization of new academic information (Genzuk, 1999). Stated simply, teachers will be able to build background, which motivates students and engages them with the academic content.

Funds of Knowledge

Funds of knowledge are the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). They are created in various settings throughout an individual's life, primarily in activities outside of the classroom, and are utilized to transmit information that will enhance survival (Genzuk, 1999). These are not static traits of individuals, nor are they cultural artifacts, e.g., lists of clothing, foods, and holidays. Funds of knowledge are fluid characteristics that are manifested through participation in specific activities (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Each individual uses these "social, physical, spiritual, and economic resources to make one's way in the world" in order to establish a social context for the transfer or utilization of knowledge, because "the content of the interactions is significant or necessary" (Genzuk, 1999).

A deficit funds of knowledge model exists when a school views a student, family, or community as missing specific qualities or abilities. As a result of a focus on what is not possible, students are viewed as possessing gaps that need to be filled (Felton-Koestler, Simic-Muller, & Menendez, 2017, p. 124). For example, *Maria can't read above a second-grade level,* or *Eddie struggles with proper English grammar,* or *I wish more families would participate in school events*. Historically, non-mainstream and marginalized students

have been viewed through this deficit lens, and are often seen as being in need of saving.

Conversely, an assets model focuses on the knowledge and strengths that students, families, and communities possess (Felton-Koestler, et al., 2017, p. 124). Adopting an assets-based approach enables teachers to facilitate students' learning by asking, *How can I use this knowledge and these strengths to help students succeed?* An assets-based approach has the potential to encourage active engagement by utilizing students' funds of knowledge. In this way, teachers learn how to value broader forms of knowledge and expertise.

The Importance of Empathy

"If a doctor had 40 patients in the office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn't want to be there and were causing trouble, and they all had to be treated with professional excellence, without assistance, for nine months, then that doctor might have some conception of the classroom teacher's job." (Poster in an 8th-grade classroom)

The current public education culture in the United States poses a tremendous challenge to teachers who want to learn more about their students and incorporate this knowledge into the classroom. Standards-based curricula paint a limited picture of what it means for students with varying backgrounds and cultures to be intelligent and for families and communities to be supportive. Furthermore, the quixotic scope and sequence designs used to manage curricula across the country offer limited opportunities for teachers to learn more about their students' funds of knowledge, much less opportunities to value and celebrate them.

In order for teachers to connect in meaningful ways with their students, parents, and communities, they must possess a tremendous amount of empathy. An empathetic person possesses and, more important, *demonstrates* the capacity for understanding, awareness, and sensitivity for the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others without having those feelings, thoughts, and experiences explicitly communicated. In the classroom and in the school community, understanding, awareness, and sensitivity are critical if teachers are to effectively contribute to their students' academic and socio-emotional growth. These have become such important points of emphasis that many university teacher education programs now teach and assess professional teacher communication skills in courses and field experiences. One communication disposition rubric item used in the Secondary and Middle Grades Department of Education at Kennesaw State University states: "The teacher candidate consistently uses optimal communication techniques in a given situation to listen and respond to others in ways that enhance student learning through cultural awareness, empathy, and understanding." This is a lofty goal. The presence of 30 or more students, coupled with 30 to 60 or more parents or guardians per classroom, can make demonstrating cultural awareness, empathy, and understanding seem like an impossible task.

However, with careful listening, schools can make meaningful connections with students and the community by accessing their funds of knowledge. As a classroom teacher and academic coach at a school in a predominately Latinx community in Phoenix, I was asked to brainstorm ways that our school might increase parent/guardian and community involvement. Assuming that the lack of parent/guardian participation was due to a language barrier, my school began sending home flyers, composed in both English and Spanish, promoting important school events. Attendance at these events did not increase, so we invited parents from the community to the school and asked what we might do to increase involvement. The overwhelming response was that the flyers felt impersonal and insincere. It was suggested that someone from the school call, or that each child's teacher send a personalized invitation home whenever an event was upcoming. Once we gained this understanding of the community's funds of knowledge and acted on it, parent and student involvement at school-sponsored activities increased substantially.

Accessing Our Students' Funds of Knowledge through Young Adult Literature

The frenetic pace and structured content of standards-based curricula can create the perception that there is little class time for activities that encourage student expression in a way that increases student–teacher and student–student connectivity. Beginning as early

as first grade, students are conditioned to exercise extreme control in their class work. For example, writing standards encourage teaching strategies that require students to write for a singular audience (the teacher) and a singular, predetermined purpose (e.g., expository essay). Young adult literature offers tremendous opportunities for the creation of activities that encourage expression and connectivity—not just with the teacher, but with peers—and that serve to establish social contexts within the academic setting. These social contexts allow for easier transference and utilization of new academic information. By way of example, A. S. King's novels *Still Life with Tornado* (2016) and *I Crawl through It* (2015) provide teachers with countless opportunities to promote student expression and connection through activities and discussion.

A. S. King (www.as-king.com/about) is the author of several highly acclaimed novels; in addition to the two mentioned above, she has written *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future* (2014), *Reality Boy* (2013), *Ask the Passengers* (2012), *Everybody Sees the Ants* (2011), *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* (2010), *Me and Marvin Gardens* (2017) and *The Dust of 100 Dogs* (2017/2009). After returning from Ireland, where she spent over a decade living off the land, teaching adult literacy, and writing novels, she now lives in the Pennsylvania woods with her husband and children. Although she says that she never intended to write for teenagers, King's stories have touched both teens and adults. "What I was always doing was trying to help teenagers better understand the adults in their lives, and vice versa" (Corbett, 2013).

Still Life with Tornado (2016)

Sarah is a 16-year-old girl who abruptly gives up on high school and her dreams of going to art school after finding it impossible to complete an assignment in art class—sketching a pear. Two weeks prior, someone sabotaged Sarah's art show project. Her art club friends bullied her when she tried to find out who was behind the destruction, and her art teacher showed no interest in trying to help her. Sarah also misses her older brother, Bruce. He left years earlier, and Sarah's parents refuse to speak of him. Sarah doesn't understand why.

Each morning, Sarah's parents ask her to go to school. But Sarah has had an existential crisis, a break from reality. Instead of going to her school, she wanders the streets of Philadelphia alone, the words of her art teacher, "There is no such thing as an original idea," echoing in her mind. Sarah rides buses around the city, stalks a homeless man who creates art, and breaks into an abandoned school, where she imagines she is a student. She also meets and has conversations with her 10-year-old self as well as her future selves, ages 23 and 40. Conversations with these three alter egos help the 16-year-old Sarah begin to make sense of her life as she desperately searches to find anything that is original.

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Discussions with Sarah's 10-year-old self help 16-year-old Sarah recall sublimated memories of a vacation to Mexico six years prior. She remembers that her brother disappeared after the trip. Sarah's mother Helen, an emergency room nurse, also narrates several of the chapters, and through her, we learn that Sarah's parents have remained together solely for Sarah's sake. Their marriage is a sham, and readers may suspect that emotional and physical abuse occurred.

The tornado as a metaphor recurs frequently and is a fitting image for Sarah's life. When Sarah's friend Carmen sketches a tornado in art class, Sarah doesn't believe it is original. All she can see is dust. Carmen explains that her picture does not represent a tornado; it represents everything that the tornado contains, such as a car, a family pet, a quart of milk. Sarah is on a quest to see past the dust.

I Crawl through It (2015)

Gustav, Stanzi, China, and Lansdale are four teenagers pushed to the edge of reason as a result of their inability to cope with their own personal demons—grief, guilt, past trauma, senseless high-stakes testing, and daily bomb threats called into the school. Help is not forthcoming, and no one seems to be listening. All of these characters decide to escape the worlds they presently inhabit.

Gustav is building an invisible helicopter so that he can fly away. Each day, he refers to his blueprints and is able to explain every detail of the construction process to anyone who asks. Stanzi splits in two. One Stanzi is a biology student who wants to become a doctor. She hides her secrets behind a lab coat that she never removes. The other Stanzi plans to escape with Gustav, whom she secretly loves. Stanzi can see the invisible helicopter that Gustav is building, but only on Tuesdays. China turns herself inside out. She has swallowed herself, her digestive tract on display for everyone to see. Lansdale lies, and each time she does, her hair grows. Readers are told that all of these things are true because each character believes them to be so.

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Gustav, Stanzi, China, and Lansdale are all trying to run away from their perceived realities by creating new ones. These new realities serve as coping mechanisms, for a time at least, but the realness of the world continues to crawl through.

Surrealism and Verisimilitude: Scars, Maps, and Mirrors

Surrealism (https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism) is an artistic, intellectual, and literary movement that was guided by poet André Breton (MoMA.org). Surrealists present unrelated images and events in strange and dreamlike ways, ways that stress the subconscious, given the lack of rational significance of imagery. Surrealism is rooted in the belief that revelations found in dreams, on the street, and in everyday life can be substituted for traditional solutions of life's principal problems (theartstory.org). In his Surrealist Manifesto, (http://www.ubu.com/papers/breton_surrealism_manifesto.html), Breton describes surrealism as the expression of thought "in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (1924). As examples, ask students to view several of the world's most iconic surrealist paintings (http://all-that-is-interesting.com/most-iconic-surrealist-paintings).

In contrast, verisimilitude is defined as the semblance of truth. In fiction, verisimilitude refers to the plausibility of events to the extent that readers are able to relate those events to their real-life experiences. Verisimilitude in young adult literature is critical, as it engages readers and increases students' comprehension skills by facilitating text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections.

The concepts of surrealism and verisimilitude may seem oxymoronic. They are not. Our students, like King's characters, are attempting to connect to some semblance of truth as they simultaneously wrestle with issues of self-esteem and self-awareness. This is simply the definition of adolescence. They are processing real-life experiences through the lenses of home, school, neighborhood, and work environments, creating and supplementing their funds of knowledge.

All of this chaos can make students feel as though they are teetering between reality and fantasy. In both *Still Life with Tornado* and *I Crawl through It*, King's characters try to tap into the "superior reality" of the subconscious mind (Breton, 1924) as a way to cope with their *real* lives. Sarah's coping mechanism, her art, is squashed when her teacher tells her that there are no new ideas. Gustav, Stanzi, China, and Lansdale all retreat from a world they perceive as unwilling and unable to listen or pay attention. Viewed in this way, surrealism and verisimilitude simply define our students' typical middle and high school lives.

The following activities connect to King's two novels and are modifications and extensions of journaling strategies taught to me by one of my beloved mentors, G. Lynn Nelson. Lynn's mission throughout his teaching career was to help others learn to use writing "as a tool for intellectual, psychological, and spiritual growth" (2004, p. xi). I had the privilege of co-teaching with Lynn in his last semester at Arizona State University. Whenever I asked him if I could use one of his strategies in my own classroom, his reply was always, "Once you use it, it's yours."

Activity 1: Scar Story

Every character that readers meet in *Still Life with Tornado* and *I Crawl through It* possesses physical and emotional scars. Sarah wanders the streets of Philadel-

phia, slowly uncovering the physical and emotional abuse that has been taking place in her family for years. Gustav, Stanzi, China, and Lansdale all carry scars with them as well. Each tries to hide, deny, or run away from their scars. The scar story enables students to share events in their lives sans the typical writing assignment restrictions placed on them. Students are asked to recall their personal scars by drawing simple self-portraits and then connecting images and words to the drawings. The scar story activity can be completed over several days.

1. Students sketch a self-portrait and place an X on 3–5 spots on the head and body where they recall being hurt. *Note:* The hurt can be physical or emotional; an actual scar doesn't need to be present. Teachers should create and model their own self-portrait. I typically sketch a stick figure to deemphasize the importance of the drawing in comparison with the connection of the body parts to the scars. Teacher modeling is an effective tool for this activity because the model represents personal experiences and thus cannot be copied by students.
2. Students annotate their self-portraits by connecting each X to a brief phrase, image, diagram, etc. that represents an event or emotions associated with that event. The goal is for the connection to make sense for the creator, not necessarily for anyone else. For example, an X placed on a knee, a representation of falling off of a bicycle, might be paired with a drawing of a bicycle that has band aids for handlebars, or a few words expressing an applicable emotion or thought, like "it felt like my heart was rushing out through my knee."
3. Students partner and orally recall one or more of their scar stories. Oral descriptions create opportunities for students to recall specific details. They also increase motivation and engagement with the activity. Students then discuss with their partners which scars they wish to expand into narrative writing pieces.
4. Once the stories are completed, the class forms a large circle and students read their stories aloud. Teachers must write and share a story as well. It is critical that we share events in our own lives that helped create our funds of knowledge if we expect our students to share.

Activity 2: Map Story

Maps and travel play important roles in both *Still Life with Tornado* and *I Crawl through It*. Sarah explores the streets of Philadelphia. Stanzi, Gustav, and China embark on journeys that take them to places few have seen. In their travels, each character encounters people and situations that may or may not be real but nevertheless represent real emotions and perceptions. The map story gives students the opportunity to recall salient places in their lives and represent those places through words and images.

1. Ask students to close their eyes and picture their neighborhoods (past or present), envisioning the places where they live(d) and play(ed). The teacher should stress the importance of recalling and recording everything that comes to mind.
2. Students create a map of their envisioned neighborhood. Teachers should create and model their own maps. Again, this modeling is effective because the model is personal and cannot be replicated by students. Maps do not need to be accurate or to scale. Each map should represent the world as the student remembers it. For example, if a specific tree, apartment, house, or swimming pool was a center of activity, that object might be drawn larger or appear in a more prominent place on the map, regardless of its true location.
3. Students annotate their maps by writing short sentences or phrases that describe each place and/or why it is included on the map. For example, *I built a treehouse in this tree*, or *This is where the meanest lady in the neighborhood lived.*
4. Students partner and orally recall their maps, emphasizing the importance of each location.
5. Students create more detailed maps on poster board, using words, images, etc. to illustrate the significance of each place on their map. *Variation:* Create a detailed map of one location on the map.
6. Posters are displayed around the room and an art walk is held.

Activity 3: Self-Portrait

Windows and mirrors are two common metaphors used to represent an important goal of young adult literature. When we read a story, we are looking through a window into a specific world. When we connect with a setting, a situation, or a character in

the story, we are looking into a mirror, experiencing verisimilitude, recognizing a bit of ourselves or others in the story. The characters in both of King's novels are simultaneously trying to understand the world (window) and how they fit in (mirror). This activity gives students the opportunity to create a work of art that represents how students see themselves in juxtaposition to the world around them. Although it is called a self-portrait, a drawing or photographic representation of the creator's face and/or body is not a requirement. On a poster board or similar display format, students discover, create, compose, and arrange words, images, drawings, symbols, etc. using colors, sizes, and positioning to create a piece of art that represents who they are, what is important to them, and how they fit in the world.

Each classroom is unique, and all of the individuals in those classrooms possess unique sets of characteristics that affect how they approach learning.

1. Ask students to create an inventory of their identities. For each identity, they will list and describe what that identity means to them or what comes to mind when that identity is considered. Examples: *General*—physical, emotional, intellectual, gender; *Relationship*—son, sister, friend; *Doing*—student, athlete, writer, reader; *Ethnic*—Native American, Mexican, German; *Possessions*—house, car, computer (Nelson, 2004, p. 80–81).
2. Discuss the funds of knowledge concept with students. Place students in groups of four and ask them to identify skills they have learned at home or in their community that help them survive on a daily basis. If they have completed either the scar story or map story, ask them to review their work for inspiration.
3. Give students the opportunity to view images of surrealistic self-portraits. Many of these will contain some type of head and body representation of the artist, but the idea is not to provide student models, rather student inspiration. Ask students to note objects and images that each artist includes in the self-portraits. What might those objects and images reflect? A good place to begin is on the Frida Kahlo Foundation website (http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org/the-complete-works.html). The site contains her complete works; many of her paintings are considered examples of surreal self-portraits.
4. Self-portraits are displayed around the room and an art walk is held.

Conclusion

After 35 years in education as an elementary, middle, junior high, high school, community college, and university teacher, the most important lesson that I have learned is that possessing the skills to connect with my students is just as important as knowing and teaching the subject matter. Each classroom is unique, and all of the individuals in those classrooms possess unique sets of characteristics that affect how they approach learning. Many of those characteristics cannot and should not be changed. We must be able to teach in ways that acknowledge and incorporate our students' funds of knowledge. Integrating young adult literature is a powerful way to make these connections because quality young adult fiction creates empathy. Novels like A. S. King's *I Crawl through It* and *Still Life with Tornado* allow students to travel to places where they are able to see the world through the eyes of another person, to live another life. What a powerful tool this can be—the opportunity to be immersed in a world that resembles truth, and to connect with characters who seek solutions to their problems through revelations found in dreams, on the street, and in everyday life.

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