

Student engagement with multiethnic literary texts

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While much international research has examined students' engagement with multiethnic literary texts, little attempt has been made to develop an understanding of the implications of such research for the Australian context. To meet this end, research was conducted to examine the responses of 308 Year 7 to Year 10 students to an anthology of Australian multicultural writing. Informed by the development of a theoretical framework through which the students' work was analysed, this research identified interesting trends regarding the ways that students from dominant and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds engage with ethnically diverse literary texts. Findings of the research challenged commonly held assumptions regarding student engagement with multiethnic literary texts, leading to important implications for pedagogical practice.

Objectives

As researchers such as Athanases (1998), Desai (1997) and Moller and Allen (2000) have suggested, claims of the positive effects for students of the integration of multiethnic content in the English curriculum far outweigh documented evidence that such positive effects are actually realised. In other words, while theorists such as Dilg (1997), Hansen-Krening & Mizokawa (1997) and Miller (1997) have hypothesised about the benefits of students studying multiethnic literature, there is comparatively less research detailing the nature of such benefits. Noting the common disparities between theory and practice, researchers such as Beach (1994) and McGinley, Kamberelis, Mahoney, Madigan, Rybicki and Oliver (1997) have questioned the extent to which literary reading and study can stimulate the kinds of transformative yields promised by advocates of multicultural education. Furthermore, they have questioned the degree to which the nature of the instructional context and the mode of students' engagement influence the ways students respond to multiethnic texts.

In the context of a larger study of the use and effects of multicultural literature in English classrooms in New South Wales public schools, this research was guided by three specific research goals. First, to develop a theoretical framework through which student engagement with multiethnic texts might be examined. Second, to examine students' engagement with, and evaluations of their learning experiences with, ethnically diverse literary texts. Finally, to determine the extent to which proposed benefits of the study of multiethnic literary texts might actually be realised for students.

This research expounds an integrated consideration of theoretical perspectives and specific research findings in an effort to consolidate fragmented research concerning students' responses to multiethnic literature and identify means by which such research might inform the development of original insight into students' engagement with multiethnic literature. The aims of this research were grounded in a bifurcated desire to elucidate the bearing of US research concerning student engagement with ethnically diverse texts in the Australian context and provide an informed milieu on which to place a closer examination of individual students' engagement with such texts.

Perspectives

Analysis of numerous studies designed to examine students' responses to multiethnic texts revealed three main themes. First, students are partakers, rather than receivers of literary

experiences. Second, some students forsake their opportunities to engage with multiethnic texts. Third, engagement with multiethnic literature entails both give and take. An overview of the perspectives grounding each of these themes follows.

Students as partakers

Students can be perceived as active participants who engage in meaning-making processes when reading literature. For some time, researchers have been interested not only in the meaning that students make from their literature encounters, but the degrees to which students engage in the meaning-making process, referred to by various theorists as aesthetic engagement (Altieri, 1996; Asselin, 2000; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Ward, 2001). Research has suggested that the degrees to which students engage in literature reading might be affected by numerous factors. Researchers such as Athanases (1998) and McGinley and colleagues (1997) have identified a vast array of factors, including personal experiences, familiarity with literature and socially constructed principles, that influence not only the extent to which students engage with texts, but the meanings they made from such literary experiences. With respect to multiethnic literary texts, research has indicated that the degrees to which students engage with such texts and the meanings that ethnically diverse students derive from them are influenced by the ethnicities portrayed in the texts and the ethnicities of the student readers (Altieri, 1995; Athanases, 1998; Beach, 1997; Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999; Boyd, 2002; Cai, 1997). The ethnicities of students and those portrayed in literary texts have been purported to influence students' engagement with the texts in ways such as students' participation in classroom learning activities (Boyd, 2002; Willis & Johnson, 2000); preferences for texts (Altieri, 1995) and perceptions of racism (Beach, 1997).

Students as forsakers

Theoretical and empirical research have identified three strands of resistance to which the reasons identified by researchers for students' forsaking engagement with multiethnic literature relate. The first of these strands is *unfamiliarity*, evident when readers face cultural models that are so different from their own experiences that the students engage in what Soter entitled 'aesthetic resistance' (1998, p.274). The second strand is *challenges to views and values*, evident when students forsake their engagement with multicultural literature due to a perception of its cultural form and content contradicting the students' sense of privilege, stereotypes, beliefs and values (Athanases, 1998). The third strand, *adopting a social stance of resistance*, is evident when students forsake their opportunities to engage with multicultural texts because of their cultural memberships and various identity positions (Desai, 1997; McGinley et al., 1997; Rogers & Soter, 1997).

Students as givers and takers

The third theme considered in this research is that the process of students engaging in multicultural literary experiences involves both give and take. This refers to the notion that, from students partaking in literary experiences, giving meaning to these encounters by their engagement with the texts, students take from these experiences knowledge and understanding that has the potential to transform their lives in various ways (Beach, 1997). These transformative ways include an understanding of the role of ideological stances in literary meaning making experiences and a re-evaluation of their understandings of themselves, others and the world.

Consideration of the three themes emergent from this review of literature generated an aim to examine the extent to which Australian students from dominant ethnicity and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds demonstrate their engagement with multiethnic literary texts.

Methods, techniques and data sources

The student participants in the study were 308 Stage Four (n=185) and Stage Five (n=123) students from Country (n=165), Regional (n=85) and Metropolitan (n=58) schools in New South Wales. Nearly 30 percent (n=91) of the students indicated that they were from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, with 12 percent of students born outside Australia. Drawing on the work of McGinley and colleagues (1997) and Willis and Johnson (2000) who analysed students' work products to assess students' engagement with texts, this research examined these students' predominantly open-ended responses to ethnically diverse literary texts, featured in Mycak and Baker's (1997) *Australian Mosaic: An anthology of multicultural writing*. This anthology of poems, short stories and play excerpts, complete with pre and post reading exercises, was chosen as the focus text for the study and students completed their responses to the text in their usual English classes with their regular classroom teacher. Mycak (2000, personal communication) stated reasons for the selection of texts included in the anthology that were resonant with the principles of text selection that had been articulated by Athanases (1996). These principles include the assurance of cultural accuracy, acknowledgement of social inequalities, presentations of protagonists from non-dominant ethnic backgrounds in empowered states, and avoidance of "perpetuation of othering" (Athanases, 1996, p.247). Rather than being structured in terms of various ethnicities, the thematic structure employed by Mycak and Baker allows for recognition of both points of connection and difference among the ethnicities represented in the text.

Table 1 provides a synopsis of the thematic structure of the anthology, detailing the thematic issues with which the students engaged while participating in the study. The students' responses to the activities included in the *Australian Mosaic* text were the primary data sources for this research.

Table 1: Thematic structure of Mycak and Baker's (1997) Australian Mosaic

C H	Title	Thematic issues explored in the texts
1	Footsteps: Journeys and immigration	What sorts of journeys have Australians made? What are the psychological effects of journeys? Why do some people leave one homeland for another?
2	Great southern land: Australia	What makes Australia unique? What does it mean to be Australian? How have other countries contributed to Australia's distinct culture?
3	Do you speak my language? Communication and language	Do we need to speak the same language to understand each other? How important is it to speak English in Australia? Is there such a thing as "Australian" English?
4	Who am I? Identity	How do you see yourself? What is an Australian?

		What happens to a person's identity when he or she settles in a new country?
5	My first kiss: Love	What is love? What makes a marriage or relationship happy? Can love cross cultures?
6	The family album: Family and ancestors	Who is your family? Who are your ancestors? What are your family myths and stories?
7	Rites of passage: Ritual and ceremony	What holidays or festivals are special to you? How does your religion and culture influence your daily life? How does your family or community commemorate birth, marriage and death?
8	Pride and prejudice: Cultural respect or intolerance?	What aspects of your cultural background are you proud of? What is prejudice? Have you ever experienced prejudice?

Two main analytic techniques were used to examine the students' demonstrations of engagement with the multicultural texts. First, analysis of the students' responses to Mycak and Baker's (1997) *Australian Mosaic* was conducted to examine the extent to which the students' responses featured Altieri's (1995) aesthetic elements, a set of observable ways in which students demonstrate their engagement with literary texts. Altieri's nine elements are detailed in Table 2, amplified with examples of students' demonstrations of each element.

Table 2: Altieri's (1995) aesthetic elements

	Aesthetic elements (Altieri, 1995)	Examples of students' demonstrations of these elements
1	Visualising characters or scenes	An artistic response that illustrates the student's perception of the migrant struggling to walk against the wind, inspired by Sleinis' <i>Emigration I, II, III, IV</i> .
2	Forming associations between the text and literary or life experiences	'Tante Goldie putting all that pressure on Annalise reminds me of how my parents push me to do what they want me to do'
3	Relating emotions evoked	'I remember how nervous I was on my first day at school, just like the new kid in that poem'.
4	Putting self in character's shoes	A diary entry written from the perspective of the Ukrainian-Australian boy in Mycak's <i>A dual existence in a seemingly different country</i> .
5	Passing judgments on a	'Man, Mrs Mac is a nosey woman!'

	character's behaviour	
6	Discussing preferences	'I like <i>Breakthrough</i> much better than <i>Lover</i> '.
7	Citing metacognitive awareness of living throughout the story	'All through reading Yu's poem, I was thinking about how I've never really questioned how I am Australian'.
8	Hypothesising alternative outcomes	A dramatic performance in which students act out alternative endings to the scene in Loukakis' <i>Secrets</i> .
9	Discussing personal relevance of story experience	'I know just how Ana Vrantzis feels. I get so angry when people make a big deal about how my name doesn't have normal Aussie spelling. I feel like saying, Get over it. It's my name. You don't have to like it, but that's what it is'.

Second, analysis of six student exemplars was conducted to more closely explore the students' responses to the multicultural texts. The student exemplars were selected using a representative sampling strategy to achieve the most accurate balance of the target variables of: region (two county, two regional, two metropolitan); sex (three female, three male); ethnicity (three dominant ethnicity, three CALD); evaluation (two above average, two average and two below average evaluation scores, calculated using a post-study questionnaire); and engagement (two above average, two average and two below average engagement scores, calculated using the frequency of students' demonstrations of Altieri's aesthetic elements). This analysis allowed for examination of the ways that different students engaged with the various texts and of how their engagement might have shaped their lives. Appleman suggested that the best way to gain an understanding of the students' engagement with the texts was to study their responses to the various texts and write about them in what she described as "literary biographies" (2002, personal communication). The student exemplars' responses to the *Australian Mosaic* texts constitute their literary biographies. Appleman suggested that the literary biographies should 'obey the narrative urge' (2002, personal communication) by allowing the students' responses to tell their own stories. For this research, obeying the narrative urge translated into a synthesis of the exemplars' literary biographies, prefixed with contextual frameworks for each class, profiling descriptions of the exemplar students' communities, schools, teachers and class dynamics.

Results

The theoretical framework that guided this research provided a functional and grounded lens through which to consider the findings of the study. The results of this research revealed an interesting finding regarding student engagement with ethnically diverse literary texts. Students from both dominant and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds demonstrated engagement with the texts featured in *Australian Mosaic*. Examples of dominant ethnicity students engaging with the texts by placing themselves in character's shoes are evident by the responses of the two Country student exemplars, Caleb (c,d,m) and Carissa (c,d,f) to Mansell's poem, *Lover*, which acknowledges the difficulties that may arise when people from diverse cultural backgrounds fall in love. When asked to consider the problems that they might face if Carissa and Caleb had fallen in love with someone from a different cultural background, Carissa

noted differences in opinion, rivalry of religious beliefs and problems due to family customs. Caleb extended this list by including:

...accepting partner's morals, beliefs, customs; choosing what happens with children and accepting the religion they choose; whether to share practices with your partner; may have trouble understanding partners views on life; acceptance of partner by Aussie friends; and acceptance into partner's family (Caleb).

Riley (r,d,m) provided another example of a dominant ethnicity student engaging with the texts by demonstrating Altieri's element of passing judgments when responding to Mrs Mac's various comments about homosexuality, race and youth in Baker's story, 'On the 394'. Riley was critical of the source of Mrs Mac's information about the world, stating, 'She is not well educated and learn about things from the radio... which is inaccurate and tends to be pessimistic [sic]'. Riley agreed that Mrs Mac says things which offend other people, commenting, 'her attitude to every think [sic] is very different and... she really doesn't no [sic], she is make a generalisation'. Describing Mrs Mac's character, Riley wrote that she is 'both prejudiced and ignorant because she is not well informed and believes everything she hears forcing her to make generalisations'.

While the examples above provide examples of dominant ethnicity students engaging with the multiethnic literary texts, the students from CALD backgrounds demonstrated significantly higher levels of engagement than did their dominant ethnicity peers ($\chi^2 = 62.6$; $df = 26$ for $p < .001$). A closer examination of Altieri's (1995) aesthetic elements identified that the students from CALD backgrounds were significantly more likely than their dominant ethnicity peers to demonstrate engagement in ways that highlighted the personal significance of the texts to their own lives ($\chi^2 = 92.29$; $df = 11$ for $p < .001$). This was particularly evident when students from CALD backgrounds demonstrated Altieri's element of *forming associations between the text and literary or life experiences*, as demonstrated in Matthew's (m,c,m) response to instances of prejudice in Vivekananda's short autobiography, *Beyond limbo*. Matthew wrote, 'It is difficult to say if the prejudice in these statements are really just a form of rudeness, ignorance or just curiosity [sic]. I see prejudice differently because I know what it feels like' (Matthew). Perhaps one of the key findings regarding student ethnicity and engagement with ethnically diverse literary texts is that students from CALD backgrounds demonstrated this personal engagement with the multiethnic texts even when the ethnicities represented in the texts were different to those of the students. An example of this may be seen in Rakumba's (r,c,f) response to Ana Vrantsis' poem, *V-R-A-N-T-S-I-S*. Responding to the experience of Ana Vrantsis having to repeatedly spell her Hellenised name before it was transcribed accurately, Rakumba shared that "Rakumba" was her Aboriginal name that she was given when she was in Year 3, and that being given an Aboriginal name made her feel "so special". Rakumba indicated that her friends and family members call her different versions of her name and that when someone gets her name wrong, she feels 'Annoyed. I have an unusual name and each teacher makes me tell them how to say it'. Rakumba wrote that she thought one of the meanings of the Vrantsis' poem was that 'Not all people have boring names and it's hard for people to spell them just because they don't have "normal" names'. Clearly, Rakumba's Indigenous background allowed her to discuss the personal relevance of Vrantsis' poem, even though the ethnicity represented in the poem was different to her own.

In terms of participation in class discussions as reported by the classroom teachers, the CALD students' resonance with the non-dominant ethnic perspectives represented in the literary texts heightened participation for those CALD students in learning contexts that were characterised by a small presence of CALD students in a primarily dominant ethnicity class. In classes that were comprised of exclusively dominant ethnicity students, the incongruity between the dominant ethnicity of the students and those represented in ethnically diverse texts did not inhibit the students' participation in substantive classroom discussions. Conversely, in the

classes which were mainly comprised of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, no heightened participation in class discussions due to the ethnically diverse representations of the texts was noted by the teachers. Both teachers and students indicated that class conversations provided students with opportunities to demonstrate the depth of their aesthetic engagement with the ethnically diverse texts and consider the viewpoints of their peers. This was evident by Caleb's comment that he, 'was changed most through class discussions' (Caleb).

Students' learning experiences with the ethnically diverse literary texts provided both dominant and CALD students with opportunities to engage with the texts and participate in substantive discussions about the issues and characters featured in the texts. For 49.7 percent of the dominant ethnicity students and 30.5 percent of the CALD students, this engagement led to a self-reported more accepting position in the way the students felt about people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Carissa provided an example of this when she stated that reading the stories in *Australian Mosaic* and participating in the associated classroom activities changed the way she felt about people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

I think its [sic] too hard for people not to judge others on appearance or something else but in a way I think that by participating in this unit I have become more accepting of other cultures and somewhat more defensive of my own, which may or may not be a good thing... The composition of *Australian Mosaic* emphasised the views of people from other cultures and I think its [sic] sometimes a little hard for us to imagine these views by ourselves (Carissa).

The literary biographies of the student exemplars provided examples of the ways that some students were able to make distinct connections between the texts and their own lives. Perhaps the most apparent example of this was found in the responses of Matthew to the various texts. Matthew's experiences as a member of a CALD ethnicity in both New Zealand and Australia provided him with points of contact with which he could relate to the texts and engage with the characters and themes. These personal experiences included Matthew having his name changed from his Korean birth name to one that was considered more acceptable in a Western society, and the difficulty experienced when his father was seeking work having recently immigrated to Australia. These experiences provided Matthew not only with scenes with which he could compare his experiences to those presented in the texts, but with a meeting place for his own feelings to merge with those expressed by different characters in the texts. Clearly, these personal experiences allowed Matthew to engage with the texts to a degree that dominant ethnicity students could only achieve through heightened imagination.

While the samples of student responses detailed in this report demonstrate engagement with the texts, the degree to which students demonstrated their engagement with the texts was influenced by the scope of the related activities. When students were asked to demonstrate their understanding of concepts explored in the *Australian Mosaic* anthology in narrow ways, such as an activity which simply asks students to indicate whether they thought certain statements about Australians were true or false, the students demonstrated superficial understandings of their appreciation of the complexities of national identities. In contrast, when students were asked to substantiate their understandings of the motivations of Miss Campbell in Mycak's *A dual existence in a seemingly singular country*, they demonstrated deeper understandings of attitudes towards language and cultural differences. This finding highlighted that the activities associated with multiethnic literary texts can influence the degree to which students demonstrate engagement with the texts, leading to valuable implications of the research.

Implications for teaching

In addition to the contributions of this research to the growing body of literature exploring student engagement with ethnically diverse literary texts, this research has two primary implications for pedagogical practice. The first of these implications is the need for pedagogical practices to make spaces for students to demonstrate their understandings and interpretations of ethnically diverse literary texts and for space to be made in lesson planning for substantive communication of these understandings. The second pedagogical implication supported by the findings of this research is the need for perspectives presented in learning contexts to be framed in various lenses. These perspectives relate not only to the content that is presented in classrooms (via the literary texts themselves) but the understandings that are demonstrated by the students and analyses that accompany literary study. The pedagogical implications are outlined below.

Making spaces

For a number of the findings from this research, one of the key factors that the data suggested might have influenced the extent to which students engaged with the ethnically diverse texts was the extent to which spaces were made within the learning contexts for students to demonstrate their understandings and explore their developing understandings, particularly regarding students' reports of the effects of class discussions. Salient with the principles espoused by the NSW DET's Quality teaching framework (Ladwig & King, 2003; NSW DET, 2003a, 2003b), in order for teachers and researchers to be able to determine the extent to which students engage with ethnically diverse literary texts, it is important for opportunities to be built into learning experiences for students to demonstrate such engagement.

Another implication of this research related to the concept of making spaces was identified through the student and teacher comments regarding the importance of substantiated communication, particularly that achieved through class discussions. Conversations provided students with opportunities to demonstrate the depth of their aesthetic engagement with the ethnically diverse texts. Additionally, it was through conversations deliberating the issues raised in *Australian Mosaic* that students noted their growing appreciation of the perspectives and understandings not only of other students in their classes, but of the different perspectives presented throughout the anthology. It is with respect to the notion of appreciating the perspectives of others that the second pedagogical implication, changing lenses, is discussed.

Changing lenses

This research contributed to pedagogical theory by supporting the need for perspectives presented in learning contexts to be framed in various lenses. These perspectives relate not only to the content that is presented in classrooms (via the literary texts themselves) but the understandings that are demonstrated by the students and analyses that accompany literary study. The student demonstrations of aesthetic engagement that were recognisable when students demonstrated Altieri's (1995) elements of 'putting self in character's shoes' and 'discussing the personal relevance of stories' highlighted the ways in which students might consider the perspectives of the characters from the texts and the ways in which the events and issues raised by the various texts were significant to their own lives. This research demonstrated the aesthetic engagement that students might experience when their learning experiences acknowledge and value the perspectives of different texts, characters and students. Thus, the lenses through which perspectives might be considered include not only those of different authors of texts, but the characters depicted within texts and the readers who engage with the texts.

The pedagogical implications of changing lenses are not only vital to student engagement with texts but to the transformative goals of education in terms of social justice. As Rawls (1971) affirmed, social justice necessitates taking the perspective of the CALD group, rather than viewing CALD perspectives through the frames of dominant values and practices. A consideration of Rawls' statement in light of the research findings has clear implications for pedagogical practice. Some student participants reported that engaging with the perspectives of CALD ethnic groups through the literary study encouraged a positive change in the ways that they felt about people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and multicultural issues more generally. That is, through engaging with the ethnically diverse texts, the perspectives of the students themselves resonated more clearly with multicultural ideals. Additionally, Rawls calls for both values and practices to be viewed through CALD perspectives. Once again, the importance of recognising an approach to multiethnic literary study that ventures beyond the notion of inclusion is imperative. In order for ethnically diverse literary texts to fulfill their transformative potential, pedagogical practice needs to surpass traditional dominant forms of literary study.

Conclusion

The implications of the findings from this study are numerous, particularly given the relative void of Australian research in the field of student engagement with multiethnic literary study. By establishing a foundation for future research in the field, this research considers some of the directions that future research might take and specifies the ways in which the findings of this study might contribute to broader understandings of student engagement with ethnically diverse literary texts. Future research, perhaps also extending to earlier and later years of schools, might provide a more complete understanding of student engagement with ethnically diverse literary texts by conducting classroom observations that examine the pedagogical practices employed by teachers when teaching multiethnic texts (including the perspectives through which values and practices are framed) and the substantive communication that occurs in classrooms as students deepen their understandings. Additionally, future research might examine the contribution to student achievement that engagement with ethnically diverse literature might make, particularly for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The value of this research will lie not in its own ends, but in its capacity to generate further school and research discourse pertaining to the role that student engagement with multiethnic literary texts might play in attempts to realise transformative goals of multicultural education.

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