Literature for All of Us

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Introduction by Beatrice Figueroa

Critical literacy is an educative approach in creating a safe space for the self-expression of young mothers. As a pedagogical practice, literacy invites young women often in the age range from 14-21 to renegotiate their lives, their relationships, and their bodies, minds and spirits. The use of poetry, literature, pen and paper or computers are the literary tools they use to construct new frameworks and tell new stories—writing with creativity and expressing themselves with confidence. (Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) writes that “what matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that….whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all, they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives”) In Critical Literacy and The Politics of Gender, Barbara Bee acknowledges that while her program itself will not instigate a ‘revolution’ she hopes it will “enable women to travel with a different consciousness of their world, their place within it, and their personal and collective power to transform what is inhumane and unjust within their current circumstances.” Similarly, the Evanston-based literacy program Literature For All of Us serves this very purpose.

While the lives of these young women epitomize the ‘personal as political’, Literature for All of Us focuses less on the politics in order to nurture natural talents and foster their ‘intuitive intellect’. The program is exemplary in its intentions with a mission that proposes to “connect young women and girls to their strengths through literature, engaging them in book groups where they read, discuss and write original poetry.” Their gatherings usually open with a ritual of self-affirmation by appropriating a poem or word phrase, expressing gratitude for an aspect of their lives and acknowledging their ‘neighbor’ in the group. The young [often] teenage-mothers in the groups reconstitute their lives with words and in doing so challenge the social stigmas imposed upon them. Their “pedagogy of resiliency” is also one of resistance to the subjugation of their lives as simply written off the page of societal standards.

Although many of these young women are categorized as adolescents, their life experiences catapult them into another sphere of being young women/mothers. The poetic and literary works of young women in groups like Literature for All of Us and other such critical literacy programs provide these young mothers new insights and perceptions in a space that is transformational as it allows them to re-invent themselves. Their literary works reveal that they are positioning themselves with power, critical knowledge and an awareness of who they are in society. They indeed are “making sense of the world” as they are “making sense of the word.”

SOURCES:

2. Worthman, Christopher. Literacy Program for Association House. 2000
The Irene Dugan Alternative High School serves approximately 30 students from the Back of the Yards Community who have previously dropped out, or have been expelled, from a regular high school setting. Students range from the ages 16-21 and attend grades 9-12. The population is primarily Mexican-American; 25-30% are parents, and 100% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Dugan School has had an impressive impact upon the lives of these young people, and the community they live in: since the school's founding, the neighborhood crime rate has dropped, and homicides have been cut by 57%. Because of these successes, Mayor Richard M. Daley, and former President and CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Gary Chico and Paul Vallas, have each expressed their support for the Irene Dugan School, and for replicating this successful model in other neighborhoods in the city of Chicago.

Literature for All of Us was invited to facilitate a book group for a class of Mexican-American young women by the school's director, Father Bruce Wellens, pastor at Holy Cross/Immaculate Heart of Mary, and member of the local school council. As Father Wellens has written, "Most of our young women have not come to terms with the violence and abuse they have experienced. The work that [Literature for All of Us] does with the books, the poems and the journals allows the girls to safely put into words their pain, their suffering as well as their triumphs. They are able to discuss a poem, a character or an experience that helps unlock their pain and their dreams—two things that many of our young people have buried deep inside themselves. The group also exposes them to the bigger world outside our neighborhood both figuratively through the books and literally through the field trips." Increased literacy is an important component in the process of cultivating competent and productive community members and citizens.

The LFAOU book group meets at Irene Dugan Alternative High School weekly during school hours for 90 minutes, for a total of forty weeks, and is led by a professional Book Group Leader. Because the LFAOU program supports the Illinois Learning Standards in English language arts for secondary students, participants receive English credit for their work in the book group. A typical book group meeting includes a focusing ritual, round-robin reading and discussion, a poetry writing exercise, sharing writing with the group, and a closing ritual. Curriculum is chosen for thematic content relating to participants' lives. The discussions and writing exercises focus on: Community, Family Relationships, Dating Relationships, Domestic Violence, Parenting, Sexuality, Coming of Age, Women's Friendships, and Racism. Some examples of authors/poets we use are in our book groups: Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni, Edwidge Danticat, Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Sister Souljah. Each group member is given two books monthly, journals, and two copies of a published poetry anthology containing their work.

Participants present their book to their community in a public poetry reading hosted by a local café, community center or bookstore. Through these poetry readings, they interact with and receive affirmation from an audience, which gives them a sense of pride in their poetry. We now use these anthologies as part of our core curriculum because participants are encouraged and inspired by reading the work of their peers. In addition, we often receive requests for copies from libraries and social advocacy organizations such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund.
The following are examples of some of their elegant outcomes/Literature For All of Us/Irene Dugan Alternative High School Poetry Group

Freedom
by Antonia Alba
I've never actually known you
'Cause I've never actually been free.

But I can still dream of you,
And in my mind you grow like a
beautiful tree.
That shows me that somewhere I may
find a way to be free.

Sometimes I can feel you.
I love your sweet smell of freedom.

Yet all my dreams can collapse
When my mother calls me dumb.

There are some times in my life
Where I can feel you so close.
Oh, how I love that feeling.

I feel like a beautiful butterfly
Flying across the sky
And asking God why is it
That although she tries to find freedom,
She always has to stop
And cry.

Dreams
by Antonia Alba
I dream of dreams that don't come true
I dream of dreams that hurt my soul
I dream of a motherly love that ceases to exist
I dream of love that's always true
I dream of love that's never cruel
I dream of things that seem to be just that--
A dream

Putting together the puzzles is just a start
Boost up their self-esteem and never let them down
Give them the strength, the need
And they'll come around
I know I can make a difference as you can see
Because I know that some day
Someone will make a difference in me

So much pain, she felt that the only way out was for her to take her life, like the life she took from her child.
None of this would have happened if her parents weren't too ashamed to have a single, pregnant Latina as their daughter.

Latina
by Veronica Imperial
Our history is forgotten.
Nobody looks back at our history,
Our lives and what we've been through.
Me being Latina, I had to go through my own obstacles.
Since I'm a Latina and proud
I keep my head up.
I always walk with pride and never let anybody change that.
I'm a Latina and nothing holds me back from stating that.
I'm very proud of my heritage.
My people struggled a lot to go through life.
I will never let anything get in the way of my life and the direction it's heading.
My people did not struggle so I could let them down.

4th of July
by Leslie Hernandez
How can you tell me I'm not American?
Was I not born under your star-spangled sky?
What makes your white pale skin that turns red in the sun
More American than my dark skin which is tan all year long?
How come your bright blue eyes see more than my deep brown eyes?
Doesn't the same breeze that blows through your honey gold hair
Kiss the dark brown tendrils flowing from my head?
What exactly makes you more American than me?
Is it because my grandmother picked your grandfather's fruit?
Is it because you think you were here before me?
Is it because the 5th of May for you is just another day?
Why then do I embarrass myself holding a sparkler in my hand
To celebrate the independence of a land that doesn't even claim me?
How can this be?
You more American than me?

I can make a difference
by Estela Flores
I can make a difference in people's lives
Lift up their spirits when they're not so high
Listen to their problems and try to help them out
Because having someone there is what it's all about
Trying to mend the broken pieces of their heart

The Struggle of a Latina
by Janet Vega
She struggled all her life.
No one listened, no one cared.
One day he walked into her life.
He spoke gentle loving words.
Soon she fell in love.
Within three months she was pregnant
and out the door he went.
A baby was on the way, no one to turn to, nowhere to go, she felt so alone.
As she walked in those doors, down the hall and into the room, she thought this is for the best.
A few pains and minutes later it was all over; no more worries in the world she thought this is for the best.
A few pains and minutes later it was all over; no more worries in the world she thought.
A year passed. More alone than ever, she regretted what she did in that cold room.