

“Be the change you wish to see.”

Clare Rachko

Abstract Clare Rachko describes her early teaching experiences in a combination first- and second-grade classroom at a Catholic school in Phoenix. Having spent four years volunteering in an urban school as an undergraduate student, Clare developed strong social justice leanings by the time she graduated from college with certifications in elementary and special education. She stayed in her teacher education program for an additional year to become certified in reading. Clare brought this knowledge to her first teaching position and created a transformative curriculum that included culturally responsive literature and critical examinations of stereotypes and issues of power. She also worked to balance the teaching of literacy skills with authentic literacy engagements. By linking with students’ caregivers, Clare learned of their unique circumstances, including the undocumented status of some community members.

Keywords Caregivers • Critical literacy • Culturally relevant/Sustaining literature

1 Introduction

The desire to teach came at a young age. I conducted an imaginary classroom, forcing my younger sister and other friendly victims to be students completing grueling worksheets and tests in Ms. Rachko’s “classroom.” I remember eagerly awaiting the second grade so I could visit my aunt’s classroom and participate in a tradition extended to all of her nieces to be the teacher’s special guest and helper for the day. But my transition in thinking came from stepping outside of my bubble that was suburbia and into the pulsing and contrasting culture of the urban classroom. In simplest terms, I knew that with the appropriate schooling and skills gained at a good university, I could teach, especially in the classrooms where materials seemed

C. Rachko (✉)

KIPP Cooper Norcross Academy, 525 Clinton St, Camden, NJ 08103, USA
e-mail: clare.rachko@gmail.com

to appear at the slightest whim and parents seem to jump at the chance to offer their children any support. Basically, I had always thought where there is money, there is a sufficient education. But I was thirsty for a challenge and a purpose beyond sharing academic knowledge. *Be the change you wish to see in the world.* Yeah, that had me all over it. So I made the informed decision to attend a university where I knew I would see culturally and economically diverse communities and where I could challenge my predetermined beliefs and face the reality outside of my Pleasantville rearing.

2 My Journey

I grew up in the house next to the neighborhood playground in Pennsylvania suburbia until the third grade. My childhood was filled with games of freeze-tag, pumping legs to get the highest on the swings, riding bikes in the driveway that I shared with my best friend's family, climbing trees, and scaling jungle gyms. Summers involved walking a few blocks to splash around in the pool with neighborhood friends, yearning for the day when we could pass our deep end test and at the glorified age of thirteen take the independent swimmer test and go to the pool without our parents.

Our suburban homes were sandwiched between a high security prison and a juvenile detention center, where my dad had been employed for over 25 years. His mother did not want him to take the job upon graduating college. It was dangerous, and it didn't pay enough. My mother's father thought it was too risky to raise a family and did not want his daughter living in that neighborhood. And yes, this school served primarily African American and Latino adolescent boys. But it remains my home to this day and in some ways is my primary reference for cultural difference. Growing up, I was told that this was the place where "bad kids ended up." But in my direct experiences with the students I never viewed them as such. I recall them always doing "the Battling Bulls wave," their enthusiastic and musical cheers at all the sporting events at the center, and how they would politely move out of the way for me at the snack bar. But they were also disciplined this way, and they had to follow a strict rulebook. My parents explained that the students were there because of the choices they had made.

As an elementary school student, I was welcomed by walls of colorful store-bought posters surrounded by displays of student masterpieces. Shelves of books, a fully stocked library with a librarian, a nurse available every day of the week, a computer lab, friendly faces of parent volunteers, and all the extracurricular activities one would expect. My middle school was a close-knit parochial school, which had a familial feeling the second I walked in the door. I received individualized attention and a community that contributed much to my personal growth. Later, I attended a college preparatory high school that prepared me for the next educational step and beyond.

I went off to college and had my opportunity to begin to stretch. I didn't wander very far, a mere forty-five minutes from my home. But my world was about to be transformed as I began my journey as an educator and walked into my first Philadelphia classroom. Passing the security guard at the front door signaled that this was much different from Glen Oakes Elementary. The building was old and somewhat dilapidated, and most of the artwork was the hand-made contribution of school faculty. The nurse was sporadic, and I never even saw a library. The teachers were a mix of those who were eager to make a difference intermingled with the veteran teachers reaching their breaking point after facing the lack of resources and, with that, a lack of caring and concern from the district for far too long. There was still a desire to learn and to achieve, but there was more adversity with the looming shadows of No Child Left Behind and the Everest-like climb to reaching AYP (Annual Yearly Progress).

One thing that stood out so much more prominently amid the decaying décor, the low test scores, and the lack of resources was that in this Philadelphia public school nearly all the students were African American. Obviously, something was going on here. I was confused and angry. How did this happen? I was changed. I had fallen head first into the achievement gap.

During my crawl toward the end of this long tunnel, I credit my light-bulb moment to one particular student and one particular scene. When I knew I was officially hooked into this career, and even more this calling to teach where there was a culture different from my own, there was a conflict I had yet to face. She was a fourth grader at an after-school-mentoring program. I began volunteering in the program during my sophomore year of college. I was told I was being given a "challenging" group of girls, that they would test me to the brink of wanting to throw in the towel, but really what was being said was, you are new blood, new flesh, so let's see what you got. No one else in their right mind wants this group. Ready, set, go.

Madea called every bluff, she told it like it was, and her shrill voice and sassy swagger told me she was born and raised to give any opposition absolute hell in the form of pounding headaches and tearful car rides home. One afternoon, hearing the pitch of Madea's voice from the moment I stepped foot in the building, I shuffled into the assigned classroom which I shared with a newer mentor. *Deep breath, collect your composure and any patience you can muster, enter, Ms. Clare.* Madea was spouting off about her teacher that day, spitting her venom in the direction of "Ms. Isaboo" (as she and the other girls dubbed my co-mentor) and me. I came in wide-eyed and confused as to what the hell was going on, but she clued me in soon enough: "You people come in here and you think got the Kool-aid, but you ain't got the flava. You Splenda, we Sweet-n-Low."

I had no idea what the problem was, but I knew what *you people* meant. Madea's metaphor clued me in to the fact that I was not acknowledging or confronting the impact of my Whiteness. This was a most abrasive greeting, and I didn't expect it. I was the White authority figure coming on to her turf to try and do right, but I was not educated as she was. I was not acknowledging my White privilege and what that meant in my role here. I did not know the code she knew as a young Black

female born and raised in Southwest Philly. She was Sweet-n-low and I was Splenda. No matter what you say, you *can* taste the difference.

So how do you cross that bridge? How do you merge worlds that at times seem further apart than galaxies? I kept showing up, and I kept caring. Easy enough, right? Absolutely not. It tested every nerve in my body, every trick in my Mary Poppins bag, and everything I thought I knew. Madea ripped it all apart by challenging and altering my notions of what a teacher in an urban environment should look like. I learned how to earn Madea's and the other girls' trust by meeting in the middle and compromising. Homework breaks where we could have a quick round of *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance*, where I could enter their worlds and I could let my guard down and show my humanity, dancing and singing like the White girl I am. Laughter really was the best medicine. But most importantly I showed up and kept showing up. For four years I was *there*. Madea was the best teacher I've ever had in being successful in an urban classroom. And now almost six years later, as I keep in touch with members remaining in the program, it looks like we saved each other. No one understood what I needed to break down my predisposed notions like Madea did, and somehow I figured out how to get under her skin and convince her to trust me to enter her world.

My college experiences only dulled the itch crawling under my skin. I knew I couldn't only confine my experience to one city in one state with one population. Some people call it crazy. Why would you? How do you? What is the matter with you!? I laugh because I don't know the answer, and I don't care if I ever find out. Whatever floats your boat, right? Well, my sails took me toward a volunteer organization that would help place me in a school for a one-year commitment. And despite the lack of beaches I ended up docking in Phoenix, Arizona. I knew no Spanish but had signed up for a position as the English teacher for first and second grade in a small, urban, parochial school. The students split their instructional time between Spanish and English, and I was responsible for teaching reading and language arts, science, and social studies while also making time for students to receive religious instruction from my classroom aide. I had just decided to uproot myself from my comfort zone and throw my heart and soul into the fire, both literally and figuratively. Teaching in triple digit temperatures is no easy feat. Ultimately, I credit the fact that I wanted to give something back for the greater good, a thank you directed at the entire human race for the fact that I am fully aware of the blessed and privileged upbringing I had, that even I at times take for granted. My education and my rearing are nothing to scoff at, and I wanted to be that teacher for someone else, and I wanted to do it out of the goodness of my heart. But I also have this unquenchable thirst to learn, so send me to the trenches, please. Not even my parents could wrap their heads around what possessed their daughter. I guess I am like my father in more ways than I would like to admit. A challenge? I think so.

3 My Teaching

I was intrigued at what the parallels would be working in this environment. In Philadelphia I taught in classrooms of primarily African American students; now I would be teaching at a school that was 99 % Latino. Furthermore, I faced the infusion of politics as the war on the border crept into my classroom to consume the minds of seven- and eight-year-olds. As Gary Howard describes in *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (2006), my degrees of White identity were stretched in different directions. I was no longer thinking about whiteness and relative affluence in relation to the African American students I had previously taught. Now I thought about myself as a White American and the significance of citizenship on the kind of education a person can receive in this country. I thought I had begun to overcome the guilt associated with the realization that with whiteness comes great power, transitioning to the thought that I had a choice to use that power to assume some of the responsibility and owning it in a positive and constructive fashion. I could teach. I could do more than have power; I could share power with my students. And now the fact that I am a citizen escalated that gap and it was daunting. It was frustrating to me that my students' opportunity to be adequately educated was hindered because their rights were limited. They weren't free.

My students were not inferior; they were not unteachable. Who has the authority to say something so condescending? They brought beautifully rich stories that I had never heard before and enhanced my classroom beyond what I could have imagined. So, I was grateful for this disequilibrium, this opportunity to learn and to teach. I had to use the language barrier and make it into a bridge. I had to tap into the culture that was represented in my classroom. Unfortunately, I had to make mistakes to get there. I only hope my students have learned as much from me as I have from them.

It is amazing being in Arizona. Immigration plays such a huge role. Many caregivers aren't documented citizens. Second graders worry that they will be stranded at school because they live in constant fear that their parents will be picked up by the deportation police. The older kids knew the ins and outs of what legal status means. Despite the fact that many of my students were born in the U.S. and were citizens, their parents and guardians are left to float in limbo. The kids go home at 3:10 each day to see if their caretakers were picked up for "being brown" and shipped to the prisons on the border. Some families choose homeless shelters, food banks, drug sales, stripping, or being hired illegally in sub-human conditions over leaving the dream of America to return to Mexico. Their children are worth it; their education is worth it. It is astounding and heartbreaking.

Considering the circumstances, maintaining parent and guardian relationships is difficult. Working often interferes with daily interactions, so parent-teacher conferences are precious opportunities, if I can make scheduling work. When I do meet guardians, there is about a 50 % chance that I will not be able to communicate with them without a translator beyond the feeble Spanish greetings I have collected from my high school and college education. I am sure I sound ridiculous as they wave,

nod and walk on. Phone calls posed the same problem, so when having to address Spanish-speaking families I often have to turn to my Spanish partner teacher to make the call for me and relay the discussion back to me. But there are always questions about home that I dare not ask. Who is a citizen? Whose family is suffering and how?

At first, these thoughts were a weight I carried with me, and they wreaked havoc on my mind and body. Stress stole my sleep, some weight (which was perfectly okay with me), my emotional stability, countless hours, and in exchange left me with the habit of grinding my teeth and having after-school panic attacks. Instead of draining me completely, it fueled me. It was the first year kick in the ass I needed to get me through my Monday through Friday, the show-your-face part of the job.

Through literature I was able to enter their world and not seem like an intruder. Sure, the current education system seems to want to tell you that our students, especially “high-risk” children, are struggling with the most basic concepts. I nearly had a heart attack after gleefully picking up my second graders’ first reading test, thinking I had done a great job fulfilling the requirements of a comprehensive reading block. Well, according to those scores, I bombed. Reality check, week three. This was going to be a hell of a year. The scripted anthology I used just didn’t work. I guess I can’t blame this book entirely. I was the one who *actually* used it. But here it was. I knew they had a world knowledge way beyond this textbook, so I decided to tap into it.

When I stepped outside of my narrow curriculum box, my kids responded well. We swallowed real literature whole while also tasting skill building without them even knowing I had slipped it into their mid-morning snack. It was deceitful and delightful. Luckily for me, my principal was a free-reign kind of lady. She knew I was teaching, she knew I had a handle on one of the rowdiest bunches in the school, and she knew I was passionate about my work. She let me fly, and I credit her for my butterfly metamorphosis. I closed the door to my classroom for the first time that August morning, and I was allowed to be creative and leave aside many of the cautions that come with the high-stakes atmosphere that we currently teach in. And I also had room to make my own mistakes, to swivel my desk chair around to face a dusty chalk rail and, at times, cry. But I also had room to get up again and grow. I had received the opportunity of a lifetime. I got the freedom to teach.

Some of my kids were homeless. Malinal lived in a domestic violence family shelter after watching her father beat her mother for most of her childhood. She was quiet and well-behaved, the kind of student easily overlooked in a classroom when dealing with Bert who would solicit other first graders for sex or call a peer a “pussy” to show his disdain towards him. Yes, my hands were full. Her docile demeanor often comforted her third grade sister who, for the first semester of school, entered and exited the school the same way, in hysterics. A mother who drove the girls with her daughter to and from school once told me Malinal was too embarrassed to cry at school, especially since her sister had a reputation as the one who made a scene, but at home she would weep and sob, coping with the loss of a father and a fear of him in the same fell swoop. They were hiding from him while the mother tried to find work.

I sat with Joseph's mother while she wept at her son's parent-teacher conference, gasping into tissues while spinning a devastating tale translated to me. Her husband had been pulled over. He had been living and working here, paying taxes and contributing to our American economy, but he had no papers. She was going to have to support her five boys alone, facing the reality of a grocery store bagger wages and no documentation herself. They were draining their finances on an attorney while having to prepare themselves for the fact that he would most likely face three months in jail in a border city and then be sentenced to deportation.

What do you do with that as a teacher? You have no control over the hand they are dealt and how the game is played. You get the hours of seven to three, five days a week, for about 10 months of the year. That's what you control, the time you spend with them in hopes that they might remember you when you aren't there. So you take what you are given, and you roll with it. I chose to address the issues I couldn't check at the door and make them mine.

I decided to start with the first graders after grappling with the issues of Malinal and Joseph. We addressed homelessness and stereotypes. This was basic yet real stuff. Who is bad and who is good? Why do you think so? Reeling them in with pictures of cartoon characters and then slowly sliding in printed photographs of people of different ethnicities. Happy, friendly people were good; mean and angry looking people were bad. Pretty natural instincts, right? After all, Ursula stole Ariel's voice in *The Little Mermaid*, and Scar threw Mufasa off a cliff in the *Lion King*. They aren't the greatest individuals in my book either, but the media portrayed morality as simple as light versus dark. I wanted them to question this. In our tight back-carpet circle, kids squirming over one another to insert their thoughts, we looked at the trends. People of color were bad, even with smiles, and most of the reasoning was, "They look mean." Even the sole African American student in the class had nothing to say against this defense. This was the world of first grade, cut and dry. I said nothing, just soaked it in, reveling in their innocence.

Then there were the drawings and short sentences. I gave simple instructions without much elaboration: *Draw what you think a homeless person looks like, and write a sentence describing your work of art.* I won them over with our broken collection of mismatched crayons. But here they were thinking and addressing their own stereotypes, sharing their interactions with the homeless that were so prevalent in the optimal weather conditions in Arizona. They displayed homeless men outside of the local convenient store, begging for money, committing violent acts, or some other crime, like stealing. Most students cast the homeless in a negative light.

Now that our ideas were gathered, our minds had been warmed up, now it was time for the true mental exertion; it was time to open a book. We displayed all of our thoughts, which had not been disputed, just pure brainstorm in circles and squares in one of Ms. Rachko's crazy word maps, displaying their pre-conceived notions. Then we invited the author Eve Bunting into our classroom and introduced the students to her characters in *Fly Away Home* (1993). In this text, the issue of homelessness is addressed as a father and a son live in an airport. The father has lost his job shortly after the death of his wife. They must live a covert life and make a little money to try to save enough to live elsewhere. In this childhood struggle the

boy finds meaning in a bird accidentally flying inside the airport's automatic doors and, eventually, being set free.

The students were enthralled. This boy was not mean, not scary, and neither was his father. They were struggling, and they were together, and they were living in an airport. They even understood the symbolism of the bird. Clara raised her arm while sitting in impeccable crisscross position, ballerina posture, to disclose that the little boy wanted to be able to leave the airport and go outside and be free like the bird. How do you assess a child who can pull that from her beautifully molded brain? I suppressed my excitement and ventured on.

I knew that many of my students lived in dire economic circumstances. They knew sacrifice. At times they themselves were vulnerable to homelessness. They knew that their parents were in and out of work and how this affected their day-to-day lives. Joseph swore that where he ate out every night was a restaurant, not a food bank. Darren asserted that his Mom had lost her job because she slept too much, and he had three dads that at one time or another lived with him. Their stories started exploding into the air like bright fireworks on the fourth of July. They could tell their stories and not be ashamed. It was frightening and invigorating. My master plan had worked. This was the beginning of a great start on a path toward critical teaching.

Language was a barrier for some. Of the 16 students in my class, two were still in the beginning stages of learning English, but most students were relatively bilingual. They didn't even realize how lucky they were, at the young age of seven, gaining fluency in two languages. Then there were my two lady friends who were primarily Spanish speakers. Acilina was toothless, but she compensated with her Rapunzel-like hair, falling in cascades down her short torso. She sat in the middle of the group when the first graders filed in for the first time, wide-eyed, yet mostly smiling. She was hoping to remain invisible, though you could not miss such a beautiful round face; she relied on her peers to speak for her. After discussing her background with my Spanish-teaching counterpart, I learned that she was excelling in Spanish but due to her primary language being the sole language spoken at home, she was frustrated and fearful of failure at having to grapple with the harsh tones of a new language. Quite frankly this student intimidated me.

I trod quietly. I met her with every ounce of grace, patience, and all the smiles I could muster and pulled her close. I found that Acilina had more spoken English proficiency, which was helpful when addressing phonemic awareness. She attempted to use a few English words, but was intimidated by the unfamiliar. I held her hand through the process, the basics through finger pointing, tapping out words, and investigating letter-sound correlations. Literacy stations were a blessing for her and the other students. This meant I could focus on one small group at a time, and the rest of the students learned the independence they needed to control their own literacy learning. Acilina began to acquire more English, and soon, even in whole-group lessons, her hand would shoot up in the air when she knew she had the answer. Ponytail swinging, it was pleasantly shocking. She was getting it, and we were getting it.

I was excited for this parent-teacher conference: I was going to have great news. Her mother had been concerned and had expressed it to Senora, my partner teacher, and now I could tell her that Acilina was making phenomenal progress. But before I could say so, her mother was talking rapidly and somewhat excitedly to Senora. Senora turned to me and told me that Acilina's mother was happy to find her daughter was no longer afraid to come to the English part of her day. She *liked* it; she liked me. I thought I would weep. It does feel great to win.

Acilina inspired me to delve into literature that mirrored her heritage. I found a character in the story *La Mariposa* (Jiménez 2000), a first grade boy whose family comes to America and struggles through school, never knowing exactly what is going on because he does not know the language. We started, as was our routine now, with a sometimes-grueling process to make their first-grade light bulb flash on. Progress is a process. We took the appropriate avenues to discover the themes of being understood, learning, and feeling different. We constructed a word map while also filling out anticipation guide questionnaires to see where we all stood about certain ideas. The anticipation guide was their ticket to the back carpet where we shared stories. They defended some of their ideas, and we dove in. This was the first time we had ventured into a story without many illustrations, so patience was a virtue. But we got through and hit the necessary stops. We discussed what it would feel like not to know a language and being somewhat abandoned and disciplined by your teacher for it. They made sure to reassure me that I was good teacher, not a bad one. I crossed my fingers that they were being as brutally honest as usual, such as when they ask me, "What did you do to your hair, Ms. Rachko?" or pointing out my latest pimple, asking equally inquisitively and disgusted, "What is that on your face?" I usually joked by saying it was the result of working with them. Somehow that usually sufficed.

The month of February brought the usual teacher-oriented thoughts. Should I spend the next 28 days dedicated to African American history? Well, that seemed a little bit exclusive if you ask me, especially since only three students out of 38 identified themselves as African American. Most of my literature focused on themes related to African American heritage, so I thought I would focus on Civil Rights and relate it to the experiences of all oppressed people. I knew they hadn't participated in discussions surrounding this topic before so I wanted to open their eyes and expand their horizons and their vocabulary. Why can't second graders understand the history of Whites and people of color? I thought we could manage it.

I decided to start in my second-grade literature block. It was time to emerge from the stories that I considered to be getting mundane as I felt I had compensated for some of the skills they lacked. Their test scores had improved, the way they needed to be met in reading was improving (on my part), and we were succeeding in the world of reading. They were so excited when I handed out "real" books, not textbooks that there were fights over who would hand them out despite the fact that the paper passer was given this honor, bestowed during our highly competitive job-changing ceremony. This ceremony came with blissful silence for ten minutes, with the exception of the jeers when the job was only awarded to one person. It got them every time. Their enthusiasm to even hold the books in their hands fueled my fire; this was going to be fun teaching, real teaching, teaching that I owned.

I had already addressed an issue that permeated our second grade classroom from the get-go. I had a class of thirteen boys and seven girls. I thank God my girls were angels, because the boys gave me a run for my money. I had never seen such bullying and aggression in such little people, and I felt I had spent from August to October focusing on classroom management, behavioral strategies, and disciplinary measures. If I didn't before, I perfected talking firmly, placing my hands on my hips in a disapproving manner, and giving the meanest teacher look I could muster. Eventually there was yelling. I resorted to yelling, convincing myself that it just got my point across in a much louder manner. In hindsight, I realize what could have been done differently on my end. The supportive structures I failed to instill could have helped them. But in sweltering Phoenix as a first year teacher, it was baptism by fire, no pun intended.

Before introducing the Civil-Rights unit, I wanted students to understand oppression on a personal level. I did this by reading aloud a book about bullying, *Jake Drake, Bully Buster* (Clements 2007). This book mesmerized the students, and it prompted many discussions about how one person could hold power over another. I then selected two texts, *Freedom Summer* (2001) by Deborah Wiles and *Freedom River* (Rappaport 2000). *Freedom Summer* displays a friendship between Black and White adolescent boys, John Henry and Joe, during the Civil Rights movement. They spend their summers together and are excited to hear that the town pool will be opened to people of all races. Their seemingly innocent friendship is tested when they find the pool filled with asphalt by White authority figures and they must decide how to act. *Freedom River* tells the story of a freed slave, John Parker, who helps others escape across the Ohio River into the safe haven of Ohio so that families can continue to journey further north.

My overall objective in using these texts was to discuss power. I wanted to provide them with a concept that was applicable across curriculums and settings. I knew my literature selection was as limited as my bank account had become, so despite the fact that I struggled finding age-appropriate stories, I thought I could teach them a theme that stretched beyond the pages of the books.

They were used to the way we started books, and it was always a worthwhile struggle, building our concept maps, invading their space by really digging around in their bountiful brains and seeing what I could glean among dreams of recess and lunch menus. We were throwing out wonderful words: different, power, abuse, help, and fairness. They were all strewn in colorful boxes and ovals, arrows mapping out our direction of thought, a chaotic glimpse of my own mental processing. We made our prediction and we were off, flying out of second grade in Phoenix, Arizona, on our magic carpet.

They were entranced by *Freedom Summer*. Did this really happen? Why can't everyone go swimming? That would be an absolutely absurd concept in Arizona. But again, the fireworks went off when Amelia grasped my concept and made it her own. It took some pruning and prodding, nudging them to keep treading in the right direction, but the words were unfurling themselves like popcorn kernels. John Henry wouldn't be a fire fighter because he was Black, he ate in a separate room because he was Black, and he couldn't choose his own ice cream pop because he

was Black. Who had the power? Students guessed the White people did. They were the ones who filled up the pool with asphalt so that John Henry and all the African Americans in his community couldn't swim. My students were captivated by the beautiful illustration of John Henry gazing at them, eyes brimming with tears. "Why?" my students asked. We talked about how this did not have to happen. White people in the story could make different choices; they could be allies to people of color. Conversation ensued over the ending when John Henry enters the store, arms linked with his White best friend, Joe, his own nickel in hand. Amelia said Joe was going to see what it was like for John Henry and he was a good White person, an ally. My little caterpillar became a butterfly, and I felt like there were pterodactyls in my stomach. Had this really just happened, and had it worked? I was ready to find out.

Reading and discussing the story *Freedom River* had a similar effect, although I don't think I totally won their hearts over. The characters were not as developed, and there was no young voice for them to hear ring in their own ears to which they could respond and relate. I decided it was time to release responsibility and have pairs of students read the books together and help each other write responses to questions about their stories. They loved this freedom, when after introductions and instructions they had control over their learning. I too loved the freedom of being able to wander and become a lingering shadow, only to be called upon when someone needed me. I helped them with a troublesome word or a question they had with the reading.

Arranging students in pairs gave me the opportunity to provide certain students who struggled in reading the support of stronger peers or from me, but it also offered me the room to step back and watch their light bulbs click on and off. It was not easy, it took practice, and there were many wrong answers before the right ones came. There were many incomplete sentences scribbled that had to be erased and re-thought. There was modeling, re-teaching, correcting, more re-teaching, and scaffolding, but at the end of it all there was communal learning.

Their approximations gave me insight into what I needed to teach. I had them completing compendiums that built upon different skills, mainly vocabulary and word knowledge as well as inferencing and critical thinking by questioning the author. I wanted them to be *thinkers*, not re-callers. I wanted them to know how to meet a text and become active readers, and as was our motto, to look for a message, because that's what good readers do.

Social studies was always a struggle for my students. Many of them had not had the opportunities to venture beyond Arizona, but some had seen Mexico, California, or places where they had family. When students in grades kindergarten through four went bowling as a field trip, it was a first for many of them. This was also the case when we ventured to the zoo. Most of my students lived in areas colored more by gangs, violence, and drugs rather than beautiful buildings, gardens, parks, and stores that are welcoming and physically attractive. I wanted to show them the endless possibilities while also engaging our social studies curriculum of being good citizens and positive and active members of the community. I was trying to open this up for them with books. *City Green* (DiSalvo-Ryan 1994) lent itself to

discussions of community building as a young girl rallies her neighbors to change a run-down lot into a beautiful garden.

Continuing with our Black history focus, I used the book *Band of Angels* (Hopkinson 2002), which allowed us to explore the particulars of slavery and the struggle of Black people long after slavery ended. They knew who Rosa Parks was, as well as Martin Luther King Jr., but the fictional character Ella was an African American young woman striving to be a singer against all odds. She struggled to attend college to join an all-African-American singing group which has difficulty performing in front of White audiences. Success comes to her when she is reminded of her ancestors' struggles and she sings their songs, the old spirituals. This was reachable for my students because many of them had dreams of becoming famous whether by sports, theatre, dancing, or singing. Ella also made an effort to educate herself. I accentuated this, knowing that many of their guardians did not have high levels of education themselves. I knew that for some I needed to be that advocate. The teacher in this children's story was also White and was an ally of this Black choir and supported them, against public opinion. This text solidified the definition of an ally in a concrete fashion. We were getting somewhere here, and I liked where we were going.

We ended the year with the challenge of a short chapter book. I splurged and ordered enough copies of Roald Dahl's *Magic Finger* (2009) to have a book for each pair of students. Although this did not quite fit into our compilation of texts discussing race and the power struggle of discrimination, it confronted what I considered to be another valid and approachable issue for my students. After all, who likes being confined in the box? This story is a fantastical twist on animal rights felt by an avid adolescent. She despises the unwarranted killing of animals, and when she discovers her neighbors joyfully hunting ducks, her magic finger gets the best of her and she turns them all into the victims. These characters get to walk or waddle around in their victim's feathers and see what it's like to be the prey, and the ducks get to take control and teach these humans a lesson. Power struggle? I think so. We filled out anticipation guides after completing concept maps and discussed issues as they appeared in the chapter of the day. We discussed how to use our power and our abilities in positive ways, constructive means of expressing emotions and beliefs, as well as animal rights. I had molded my students' minds to think about these big ideas.

4 The Impact

I feel I had many achievements and small victories. Many of my students *got it*. But in reflecting, I know there are many areas I could have improved, things I should have said. One failure I feel I had was not addressing their personal issues head on. No children's author to my knowledge has addressed the deportation issue in a way that is comprehensible to young children. Despite relevant texts discussing issues of immigrants, there has not been much said about the undocumented in America and how the children who had no choices are affected. After all the readings and

discussions about power and allies, I wish I could have turned it over to them to see what they could share with me. I could have let them be the authors.

There is much to lose and to gain in a job where you work with struggling members of society, especially if they are children. In some ways they steal your heart and soul. It can be quite draining; you can't help but care and at times be overly concerned with coming to their aid. What do you do when you have to sit in the office with Bert and wait for the police to explain to him that he cannot threaten to kill his whole class, especially after he chased his peer, George, with a sharpened pencil around my classroom, saying he was going to stab him? I knew his story. I knew his mother and grandmother struggled with drug abuse and his father was deported. Yet he had to be respectful to his peers. For kids like this, transitioning between home and school is difficult. There are days where my sanity was severely threatened. But at the end of the day, my students gave me so much more goodness than heartaches.

One of my mentors, Mr. G, told me in the beginning months of the teaching, "If you can teach here, you can teach anywhere." In fact, he repeated it constantly, as if it were some term of endearment. He told me after we became close friends that I gave him "that Rachko death look" as a response when he told me that: "You looked like you were going to kill me." In some ways I thought I had already learned this lesson about teaching in challenging environments and circumstances. What a conceited generalization that was. My first and second graders taught me so much. At their root and most basic element they are still children; they just live in different soil. But from that, we grew together, and I am forever changed and eternally grateful.

I have never felt so loved as I have working in this population, with my students. After a few months, there wasn't a day that went by that I wasn't called Mom, and at times it was intentional. I had many hats to wear; teacher was just one of them. I was a magician after this year in mastering the fact that I could pull things directly from the air at the time. In many ways, my 38 students taught me how to be a real teacher this year. They taught me how to conform to their needs, not my own. It is just a matter of listening. And although my students all wanted a Nintendo DSI for Christmas, they were still grateful for the things they did receive. Yes, I still had to remind them to say their thank-you's, but even just receiving your attention, your smile, your high-five and your secret handshake, or totally flipping out with praise like a goon in front of the whole class, they just ate that stuff up. At least I could finally be considered cool in a crowd; it only took 24 years. They boosted my self-confidence. Even after days that I felt two inches tall, someone would leave me a note on my desk that said, "Ms. Rachko, you have nice shoes," or someone would reach up and hold my hand on the walk to lunch. They knew that I needed it.

References

- Bunting, E. (1993). *Fly away home*. St. Louis, MO: Turtleback Books.
- Clements, A. (2007). *Jake Drake, bully buster*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

- Dahl, R. (2009). *Magic finger*. New York, NY: Puffin.
- DiSalvo-Ryan, D. (1994). *City green*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Hopkinson, D. (2002). *Band of angels*. St. Louis, MO: San Val Inc.
- Howard, G. R. (2006). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Jiménez, F. (2000). *La mariposa*. Bellmawr, NJ: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Rappaport, D. (2000). *Freedom River*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.
- Wiles, D. (2001). *Freedom summer*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

New Teachers in Urban Schools: Journeys Toward Social
Equity Teaching

Lazar, A.M.; Reich, L.M. (Eds.)

2016, IX, 180 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-26613-8