

The Effects of Reading Ethnic Literature on the Attitudes of Adolescents

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Vision: "Load those sons-of-bitches back on the boat and send 'em back where they came from."

Revision: "We don't see 'em deep down what they are. The White people that go to school won't let their minds listen to their eyes . . . see deep down inside the Vietnamese."

The first statement reflects one student's vision of her world and her solution to one problem in that world. Written in an essay which asked white students for their reactions to having Vietnamese in their school, the statement reveals a limited view of the world and possibly a parroting of community rhetoric. The second statement is an oral response by the same student taped during her reading of a novel which dealt with ethnic issues. Her revised perception indicating the need for a new look at other ethnic groups, rather than an expulsion of them from the country, suggests the power of literature to reshape a reader's vision of the world.

Visions of reality, of humanity, and the world can be limited by presuppositions inherited from our parents and our culture. To consciously question culturally established notions of reality takes not only exposure to other world views,¹ but immense courage—exposure so that we are aware other realities exist, and courage so that we are willing to live with that discomfort caused by the unsettling of our belief system. Literature can offer opportunities for such exposure and growth, as well as create a nonthreatening experience where belief systems can be questioned.

Many of us who teach literature believe that the nonthreatening experience which literature creates allows students to question their belief systems. H. R. Jauss suggests, in fact, that reading "compels us to a new perception of things," therefore, "liberating" us from prejudices.²

Thus, it is important to note that the students in this study struggled voluntarily with the texts, with minimal teacher promptings. Through merely reading, they were driven to reflect on their visions and to test these visions against the notions of reality discovered in a text.

The purpose of this article is to share the results of an investigation of five white adolescents' oral and written responses to literature dealing with ethnic issues. Through the literary experience, they were offered opportunities to shape and reshape their conceptions of the universe. The case study approach was used because prior research into the nature of racial prejudice and literary response suggested that both prejudice and response are highly individualized. The subjects in this study were attending a public high school where white students had often been seen throwing food at Vietnamese students in the cafeteria. Many fights occurred between white and Vietnamese students at the school, and some Vietnamese students had withdrawn from the school because of the hostility directed toward them.

Selected for this study were three girls and two boys from a high school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area. All five, Jimmy, Melissa, Valerie, Jean, and Patrick were sophomores. None were high academic achievers. Their grade point averages ranged from 1.6 to 2.4 on a 4.0 scale. Their chronological ages were 16 and 17. These students had previously revealed a high level of prejudice in classroom discussions, on a Bogardus Social Distance Scale, and in a composition before the reading process.³ Two of the subjects, one male and one female, had been reported for initiating fights with Vietnamese students.

All five students were asked to read two nonfiction books, one novel, and five brief compositions written by Vietnamese students. The texts were divided into segments, and students were interviewed individually for their immediate reaction after the completion of each segment. In order to discover what students learn merely through reading without the aid of discussion or teacher prompts, only open-ended questions such as "How do you feel?" and "What do you think?" were asked during the readings of all chapters and at the end of all chapters.

The interview sessions for each subject lasted from thirty to forty minutes five days a week for six weeks. The tapes from all of the sessions were transcribed for descriptive analysis of the subjects' responses to the literature.

The students also wrote about their feelings and responses. Before reading the literature, they were asked to write an essay discussing their reactions to "having Vietnamese students" in their school. The students were allowed a fifty-minute period to draft and write the essay. No limit was put on the number of words. After the students had completed all the reading and oral response sessions, another written response was requested on the same topic. A modified version of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale was also administered after the complete reading of all texts.

What Was Read

The texts were chosen from a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) list of recommended adolescent readings on ethnic issues. One selection was recommended by the school librarian and a social studies teacher as suitable for an adolescent audience. As the study progressed, two of the subjects experienced such difficulty with the non-fictional literature that one of the non-fiction selections was discarded for these two readers.

Each student read *Immigrants from the Far East*,⁴ a nonfiction text, first. The second selection read was a novel. Four students read the novel *Sea Glass*⁵ and one read the novel *Child of the Owl*.⁶ Five brief essays written by Vietnamese students—one award winning essay from a student attending a local elementary school and four written by students from the high school—were read next. All five subjects read a novel, the five essays, and one nonfictional work. The two male students, who had the highest reading scores, chose to read the nonfictional *The New Americans*⁷ as a fourth choice. This text had originally been chosen for all to read.

Both novels, *Sea Glass* and *Child of the Owl*, were chosen because of their portrayal of adolescents dealing with cultural identity issues. The protagonist in each novel is a Chinese student caught in a battle between two cultures, Chinese and American.

Immigrants from the Far East, a non-fictional work written for an adolescent audience, was selected because of its sympathetic portrayal of the trials of immigrants as they come to America and after their settlement. The book deals with racism as it affects the various groups of immigrants. *The New Americans*, also non-fiction written for adolescents, is a sensitive case study of various immigrants with a general overview of immigration laws from past to present.

The five essays written by the Vietnamese students included two concerning the escapes of the individual student writers from Vietnam to America and three concerning the student writers' experiences and adjustments to the American school.

The Results of Reading

Positive changes in attitude were revealed by all three measurements. All five students indicated from marginal to major positive change on the Bogardus Social Distance Scale after the reading. Three of the five students showed positive change on the written essay after the reading. During the reading, all subjects verbally revealed attitude modification with one admitting behavioral change.

As measured by the Bogardus Social Distance Scale

Jimmy, a student who had suffered physical abuse by upperclass students because of his small size, indicated the highest degree of prejudice of all of the five subjects on the Bogardus Social Distance Scale at the first administration of the scale. At that time he indicated no

tolerance for the Vietnamese. He wanted none of them in "his country." By the second administration of the scale and after the completed reading of all texts, Jimmy checked that he would now like to have Vietnamese in his country. For Jimmy, who had been suspended from school for fighting with Vietnamese students, this was, indeed, a concession.

Melissa indicated the greatest number of increased positive responses from the first administered scale to the second. She checked only twenty-one positive choices the first time and thirty-nine the second. Originally, she indicated no tolerance for Polish, Vietnamese, or Russians. After the readings, she checked three positive responses for the Polish and Vietnamese and two for the Russians. In fact, for every group, except the Italians and the Americans, *Melissa's* positive responses increased. Her scores on the two scales indicated that after having read the literature, her change of attitude toward different races and nationalities was the greatest of the five subjects. This change was noteworthy when considering that her original score of twenty-one paralleled the original scores of Jimmy and Jean (fifteen and eighteen).

Of the five subjects, *Valerie* checked the highest number of positive responses on the first administration of the scale, indicating the highest level of tolerance for "out-groups." She had fewer increased responses than *Melissa*, but more than the other four subjects. She increased, by nine, her number of positive responses. On the first scale, *Valerie* indicated her lowest tolerance was for the Vietnamese (2), Chinese (2), and Russians (0). This intolerance was also reflected in her first interview when she was asked her feelings toward the Vietnamese:

I feel as if they're trying to take over our school and our town and everything 'cause they're just moving all in here, and mostly all of our school and everything is made up of Vietnamese and Chinese and Laotians. I wouldn't really like them as neighbors.

But after having read the literature, *Valerie's* positive responses to the Vietnamese and Chinese jumped from two to six.

Patrick's total number of positive responses on the first scale was almost as high as *Valerie's*, yet he indicated less change on the second scale than *Valerie*. However, on the second scale, his responses for the Vietnamese jumped from two to five.

Jean's checked responses on the Bogardus Social Distance Scale indicated the lowest tolerance for more groups than any of the four other subjects. She made no positive responses for seven groups. Her raw score described a tolerance level slightly modified from 18 positive responses before the reading to 20 positive responses after the reading.

Consistently throughout her oral responses to the novel, *Jean* revealed a recognition that people should be respected for their differences. However, she was the only subject who indicated no change in tolerance for the Vietnamese on the second administration of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale.

As measured by the subjects' essays

Jimmy's first essay on the topic "My reactions to having Vietnamese students in my school" reflected an intolerance for them as a group. He complained throughout the essay of too many Vietnamese: "There are so many here at this school that it is ridiculous." This complaint also surfaced repeatedly in his oral responses.

He did not like the Vietnamese students' use of their own language. He mentioned it twice in the first essay and a number of times in responses to the literature. However, his strongest disregard came when he wrote of the need to "get our American soldiers back from them." At this point in the essay, he said he hated the Vietnamese, suggesting the intensity of his prejudice.

Jimmy's second essay, written after reading the ethnic literature, indicated that manifestations of prejudice remained. Nonetheless, it also revealed a change in tone and intensity. In this essay he said he didn't "really want them [the Vietnamese]" in his neighborhood and school, but he followed this statement with "that might seem bad." This hint of an apologetic tone was never present in his first essay. He opened the second essay with a begrudging acceptance of the Vietnamese in the community if they "at least, try to keep it clean"; and he ended it with "I feel sorry for them about what happened to their country." Feelings of sympathy never emerged in his first essay. If the second paper were read alone, it still would reflect racial prejudice. When compared with his first essay, however, definite changes in attitude were evident.

Melissa, like *Jimmy*, wrote no positive comments on the first essay about the Vietnamese. Her complaints were that the Vietnamese made their homes "look like junk yards"; they had caused problems in her city; they were unclean; they drove "nice" cars, yet everyone knew they were on welfare; and they should all go back home. She ended the first essay with "I know this may be cruel, but I say send them home."

Melissa's second essay consisted of only positive comments. She declared that there was no reason for "foreigners" to be refused from her school or community; they were human beings and should be treated as such. She ended her essay with: "This quarter I've learned to appreciate foreigners." That she still viewed the Vietnamese students and parents as "foreigners" suggested that she had not overcome all her notions of prejudice. Nonetheless, her second essay revealed a more accepting attitude and an absence of hostility toward the Vietnamese in her community.

Valerie's bias against the Vietnamese was of a more subtle nature than the other four respondents. In her first essay, as well as in her oral responses to the literature, she commented that she did not "mind the Vietnamese coming" to her school, "if they would try their hardest to adjust to America." She complained that they would not give up their language, and that "We want them to speak English." Her tolerance came with conditions.

After struggling throughout the readings with that concept of conditional acceptance, Valerie's second essay indicated that, for her, tolerance might have taken on a new dimension. She ended her second essay with "Foreigners should be accepted because they are themselves. We all should remember that." She expressed no desire for the Vietnamese to become "Americanized," speak English and act more American. That she implied a willingness to accept them for "themselves" suggests a strong connection with the vision of the text that everyone's differences should be respected.

In his first essay, *Patrick* reported that he did not like the Vietnamese; they were treated badly in most of his classes; they were a drain on the American society; and their language was a nuisance. He did, however, mention twice that it might not be right for the community to feel the way they did about the Vietnamese, but that he knew that was, indeed, the way they felt.

His second essay defended the presence of the Vietnamese in the school and community on patriotic grounds. "I may not get along with them all or even like them, but they are still Americans who want an education." He ended his essay with "That's what our country is based on, and it would be wrong to do it any other way."

Jean's first essay was steeped in hostility. She opened with the comment that the Vietnamese "are a total disruption to our society," and her comments became progressively more negative. She complained that they did not keep their neighborhoods clean; they did not pay for their apartments; "they stink"; and ended with a demand that all the "sons-of-bitches" be "loaded" on a boat and be taken "back where they came from."

Her second essay, revealed some of the same negative feelings, but none of the vituperation, and none of the abusive language. Jean admitted that she still did not like the Vietnamese, but expressed no desire to get them out of the school or country.

As measured by the oral responses to the literature

The oral responses were the real story in this investigation. In fact, all five adolescent readers' oral responses to the literature revealed some changes in attitudes and perceptions. The oral responses revealed a tug-of-war transaction manifested by the readers as they wrestled with the realities of the texts. The subjects reflected; they questioned; they juggled ideas; they threw out assumptions; they reasserted assumptions, and generally attempted to reckon with the new experience of the text. This manipulation of ideas is the behavior of the thoughtful reader intent upon transforming experience into knowledge, and that adolescent readers voluntarily undertook such labors suggests the power of literature to motivate serious and productive thought.

Of all the subjects' responses, Jimmy's were the most fascinating because they revealed such a conflict within him to discover what to do with all these notions of reality as they collided with his own. He often

vacillated from admitting sympathy stirred in him by the events he encountered in the texts to distorting these events and sometimes totally disregarding them so that he need not take them into account.

During the reading sessions, Jimmy revealed several strong and recurring presuppositions about the Vietnamese and about immigrants in general. These presuppositions were generalizations that Jimmy appeared to use as rationales to support and explain his feelings of hostility toward the Vietnamese and other ethnic groups. Allport explained this process of “overgeneralization” as a problem typical of the prejudiced personality.⁸ Jimmy’s generalizations formed a pattern, almost a backdrop against which he juxtaposed the notions confronted in the texts as he responded.

The conflict of these generalizations with the reality of the text created an inner tension throughout his responses as he attempted to either explain away the visions of the text or to submit to them. His efforts to cling to his rhetoric and the subsequent relinquishing of some of it during these responses revealed the demands made on Jimmy by the text. These demands illustrate the anything but passive transaction between text and reader. The dynamics of this transaction between the sympathetic visions of ethnic issues represented in the texts and the constructs of Jimmy’s racial prejudices were evidenced throughout his oral responses. Except for Jean, none of the other readers clung to their prejudices as strongly. Nonetheless, for some, similar patterns in rationales for prejudices did emerge.

These common rationales, expressed justifications for the dislike of the Vietnamese, emerged during the oral responses to the literature and, for some subjects, within the written responses. The justifications included: Immigrants take jobs from Americans; there are too many refugees in the country and too many Vietnamese in the school and community; refugees and/or Vietnamese in the school “stay secluded”—they were clannish; the Vietnamese didn’t fight hard enough—“allowed others to take over their country”; and, through welfare, refugees receive unearned possessions. Both Mauro⁹ and Rokeach¹⁰ suggest that predispositions can interfere with appropriate interpretation of data. Jimmy’s responses reflected their theory and often revealed his intense struggle in reckoning with his belief system as it collided with the visions in the texts.

In responding to *Sea Glass*, Jimmy, at first, chided the protagonist, Craig, for not trying hard enough to be like the American boys. He said that Craig should “try to fit in more as an American like his cousins: speak better English, try harder to be more like his dad as a youth, an All-American athlete.” However, during the reading of the eighth chapter, Jimmy applauded Craig for standing up to his father and telling him “that he didn’t wanna play sports, and he didn’t want to be an All-American boy . . . you know, it’s good that he stood up for hisself.”

One of the most surprising changes was Jimmy’s approval of Craig’s and the uncle’s ethnic traits. During his reading of chapter four, Jimmy

expressed pleasure at the uncle's insistence on being "really Chinese." Toward the end of the novel, Jimmy continually congratulated Craig for being proud of his Chinese heritage and for refusing to be like all the American kids; yet Jimmy had earlier condemned the Vietnamese and other refugees for refusing to fit in with the Americans, for wanting to retain ethnic mores and "for jabbering in Vietnamese."

Given his previous stance, another surprise occurred during Jimmy's response to the end of the novel. He expressed displeasure with the Chinese cousins who "figured they're, if they're not like the Americans, they won't have no friends . . . I didn't like them at all." Because the cousins, whose American acculturation was total, have ignored their Chinese heritage, Jimmy was extremely displeased.

Acculturation had been, in the beginning, a goal that all five subjects seemed to hold for all refugees. They expressed anger many times at the Vietnamese and all immigrants who maintained any ethnic vestiges, especially languages. Valerie, who, of all the respondents, was the least hostile toward "out-groups," continually before and during the readings insisted that immigrants needed to adapt to American society. This adaptation, she suggested, meant attending American churches, eating American food, and refusing to speak languages other than English, even at home.:

And so they still, most of them, still won't adapt to our culture or food or stuff because they go home, and they'll talk Vietnamese, and they've got some of the churches around here. They'll have a special church service that's all Vietnamese and all that stuff.

For Valerie, ethnic freedom in America meant freedom to be only American. Although the texts often elicited from her expressions of intense sympathy, they did not influence her limited view of ethnic integrity until much later in the reading sessions—and then her responses hinted at possibilities of modification.

In her final reading sessions when reacting to the Vietnamese student essays, several of Valerie's comments indicated that she was continuing to grapple with the notion of acceptance of ethnic differences. In response to Essay #3, she said ". . . If I was going to a new school, a Canadian school or whatever, I would want people to try and accept me for me . . . try to get to know me and accept me." While in the beginning of her reading sessions, Valerie had suggested that the responsibility for being accepted belonged to the ethnic group, here she suggested a transference of that responsibility to the "in-group." Further in that same response, she chided the white students in her school for accepting other new students while not accepting the Vietnamese.

In response to the Vietnamese Essay #4, while explaining that, "all the Vietnamese are having real problems being accepted [at her school]," Valerie expressed a hope that

Instead of the Americans fighting Russia all the time and stuff like that. That we can begin to accept each other as human beings instead of Communists or whatever . . . So we should accept them as they are and try to get along with it.

Her inclusion of “accept them as they are” seemed a major concession and modification of her original notion that acceptance was predicated on the condition that immigrants would shed all their cultural vestiges.

Cultural manifestations created problems for Jimmy also. In his discussion of the first chapter of the novel, *Sea Glass*, Jimmy had suggested that Craig would have more friends and be happier if he “spoke, you know, English, if he spoke it like the regular Americans did, you know. I don’t hassle nobody like that.” He further explained that the reason one of the foreign students at his high school “fits in” is that she spoke “perfect” English. Yet by the end of Chapter 4 Jimmy, in describing the uncle, said “I like him a lot. And he’s so fair, he’s really ChineseHe won’t really speak all that good of American.” This change from disdain for ethnic traces to admiration of ethnic integrity and differences seemed a quantum leap in conviction for Jimmy.

Given Jean’s vitriolic posture in the beginning of the study, quantum leaps might also be suggested in her oral responses. During one of her responses to Chapter 4 of *Sea Glass*, Jean revealed a connection with Uncle Quail’s wisdom:

[Craig’s] learning that people have different attitudes, have different feelings about everybody. Some don’t like anybody, Blacks, Whites. Some don’t, you know, just difference between everybody. He thought that just nobody like Vietnamese [Chinese]. He just had to be White, and now he’s finding out that it don’t matter.

Jean’s substitution of the word Vietnamese here for Craig, who is Chinese, may suggest a subconscious effort on her part to make generalizations about the implications of the theme of the novel, that ethnic differences are acceptable whether Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. Her assertion that being white does not matter indicated a possible relinquishing of her earlier assumptions of white supremacy indicated in her responses during the reading of Chapter 1.

During that chapter, Jean commented on the cousin’s rejection of Craig because he acted Chinese. She approved of the rejection on the grounds that “they should be just like us.” Continuing, she responded that “everybody wants to be a White American.” From Chapter 1 to Chapter 4, Jean’s responses suggested a great deal of interplay between text and reader, and definite implications of the reshaping of perceptions.

This apparent growth of both Jean and Jimmy seemed, at times, an outcome of their attention to the imagery and metaphors in *Sea Glass*. Jimmy consistently reflected on the sea imagery in the novel. During the reading of the fourth chapter, he expressed appreciation for the use of that imagery in the exchanges between the uncle and Craig: “And he’s always, you know, relatin’ it to the sea life and, you know, and how would you like it if all the sea animals were the same?: You know he said, ‘Would that be right?’ and I like that a lot.” Through that analogy, and similar ones in later chapters, Jimmy seemed to modify his intolerance for ethnic groups who choose to maintain their cultural heritage. In his comments after having read the novel, Jimmy said, “I learned . . . to accept people that are different, you know, try to accept people that are different ’cause,

you know, a different race.”

This recognition was expressed also by Jean while reading the uncle’s metaphor, “Let your mind listen to your eyes.” At first puzzled by the metaphor, she stopped reading it silently, read it aloud, and then explained to herself that, “I guess he’s saying that what you see with your eyes may be different, uh, he says there’s no person who sees the world, no one sees it the same way.” Later in this same session, she elaborates further:

Well, we don’t see the Vietnamese here, what they are. Not just call ’em Vietnamese just ’cause they are. See ’em deep down what they are. The school, white people that go to school won’t let their minds listen to their eyes. I don’t see how, see deep down inside the Vietnamese. They may act different.

When juxtaposed with Jean’s written response that “We ought to load the sons-of-bitches back on the boat and send them home,” her response to the metaphorical language of the text was a startling revelation. It suggests the power of the vicarious experience of literature.

Melissa during her first reading session said that the Vietnamese “should have stayed and fought for their own country,” yet by the end of the readings, she implied forcing the Vietnamese to stay in their own country would have been a travesty of justice:

But now I see that there’s no reason for them not to be here. ’Cause they live in a Communist country, and they’re treated terrible. They have to live by one certain way which is not fair to anyone. And I think it’s right for them to be here.

During the reading of the chapter on Vietnam from the *Immigrants*, Melissa began to note changes in her attitudes: “Well, I feel like um, before I read it, I felt the Vietnamese were a bad influence on the U.S. because they came over here. But in here I really felt sorry for them.”

At the end of her reading of *Immigrants* Melissa responded enthusiastically that her feelings and her perceptions had changed:

Well, I felt, at first . . . that they had caused America trouble and everything, but then I realized that it wasn’t them necessarily. It was us and the way we were treating them. And then I read that one on the Chinese . . . I mean the Americans just treated them like they were trash. And they were over here tryin’ to do the best they could. . . . And they were treating ’em like they were nothin’ . . . and the Japanese-Americans, they were treatin’ them like dirt

Melissa’s complaint about the Americans treating the Chinese like “trash” was especially notable since, in her first essay, she had written that the Vietnamese were “trashy.”

Melissa’s strongest reflection of emotional and perceptual change came during her response to the essays written by the Vietnamese students. She no longer expressed a desire to “send ’em back to their own country”:

I never felt like, you know, we don’t see how hard they really had it. We just try to make it worse on ’em instead of understanding, you know, understand what they mean and how they feel. We don’t do that We just make ’em feel worse and make ’em feel unwanted and everything. And we shouldn’t do that.

Where many of the students reacted to the literature primarily from an emotional frame of reference, Patrick seemed to react from a more rational one. He continuously remarked that he had been unaware of

many of the facts and feelings related in the books. That he learned some history and gained some understanding of cause and effect of immigration, especially as it related to the Vietnamese in his school, seemed to delight him.

When reflecting on his reading of the *Immigrants*, Patrick said he valued it because it “helped me understand a lot of stuff,” especially what the Vietnamese “went through to get here.” In response to *The New Americans*, he said, “I think you need people to just read it and kinda, uh, get what they want to out of it If it was used right, it could be a lot of help to people, especially here.”

Patrick’s prediction held true for Jimmy. After having read all three texts, Jimmy claimed a behavioral change:

I ain’t been, you know, messin’ with ‘em as much, you know, ‘cause if you find out really what, you know, what all they went through, you know, you’ll think well, hey, they had enough, and you shouldn’t, you know, put ‘em through too much of anything else.

Implications

Literature, then, can be powerful in exposing us to world views, in eliciting response to other realities, and in reshaping conceptual and emotional reactions to peoples and issues. These students through their reading dealt with and admitted to reshaping some of their notions concerning problematic social issues relevant to their daily lives in their school. However, as long as there is a solid context of racism in their school environment, and this context is ignored by educators, the new found notions of cultural understandings, for some of these students, may be short-lived. With little support available in their homes or school environment, the nurturing of these new understandings may be impossible.

These students attended a school where white students were continuously observed by faculty, administration, and other student body members harassing Vietnamese students. Yet, they never heard the incidents addressed in their classrooms. The racial problem was ignored so that basic skills could be attended to. The standard curriculum and the prescribed lesson plan were observed because preparation for the future loomed larger in the classroom than present needs.

Rigid adherence to lesson plans and curricula, which we, as educators, develop to prepare students for their future lives, often blinds us to the pressing demands of present school realities, making schools an imitation of life rather than a significant slice of life. For this student body, the future, as well as the present, might have been better served if the basic skills of reading, writing, social studies, etc. had been used to deal with their real life issue of student conflict, survival and responsibility. Students could have written about their feelings in poems, short stories, editorial cartoons, essays, songs—discussing how it felt to be the attacker, or the attacked, or the observer. They could have read literature which dealt with multi-cultural issues and histories that dealt with the

Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese war, and the immediate consequences of war to them, students (not just the Huns or the Peloponnesians).

In other words, they could have used all their basic skills in exploring a crisis moment for them and their immediate environment. Through this kind of exploration into the present moment and present feelings and present conflict, they might have come closer to understanding and sharing what made them tick. They might have come closer to understanding the depth of the individual's responsibility to her fellow citizen in a democratic society. And they might have come closer to realizing what "right" relationship means. Then, no matter what future they walked into, through this shared experience, they would have developed skills and understandings which would be like gold in any college or market place.

Schools are the proper and most logical forum for dealing with racial prejudice. Studies such as Rokeach's *The Open and Closed Mind* have found that ethnocentricity thwarts intellectual processes, reducing the power of such functions as problem-solving, memory and perception. Knowing these research results, educators would be remiss if they avoided the exposure of students to other world views, other cultures, and allowed them to wallow in ethnic prejudice. This study illustrated that the lack of a "world view" appeared to hinder the thinking of some students, preventing them from adjusting to the social changes caused by the entrance of Vietnamese into their environments.

When ethnocentrism prevents students from eating lunch unharassed, from walking down the halls unmolested, from learning in an unthreatening environment, then it needs immediate attention. It becomes not just a philosophical issue, but an issue of basic human rights, a practical concern for students' daily lives. For a school to ignore the problem as one irrelevant to its function is irresponsible, not only to the students who are victims of ethnocentrism but also to those students who are ethnocentric.

The subjects of this study were lacking information germane to issues confronting their daily existence in the school and their community. Their responses revealed that before the reading they had no knowledge of the events leading to the influx of Vietnamese into their country or school. This lack of knowledge suggests we pay attention to certain theories of education, such as Dewey's, which indicate the need for all courses of study to relate to the life of the learner. If students are confronting ethnic issues in their immediate world, we are obligated to introduce materials into the classroom which offer other visions and other perceptions to aid in solving immediate problems.

Few educators, of course, would propose social engineering—the use of literature as propaganda or as dogma. Teachers are not expected to use literature to mold students' visions; rather, through the literature, students are invited to continually examine perceptions offered in

various works and to consider the implications of these realities for their own perceptions. A literature curriculum designed to bring the perceptions of the students into contact with the perceptions offered by texts, to invite response, both oral and written, and to encourage discussion of those perceptions and responses would provide rich opportunity for students to consider alternative visions and, thus, to grow intellectually.

For decades, physicists have been telling us that the universe operates on the very principle of diversity. Students need unlimited opportunities to explore the significance of this principle; they need to know not only that there is strength in diversity, but also that there is little growth without diversity. Through the reading of ethnic literature, exploration of this principle is possible.

From physics, we also have learned that nothing in the universe operates in isolation, that every atom functions in relationship with another. Therefore, it is not only appropriate but necessary that students investigate their relationships with one another, with their culture, with other cultures, and with the world. Literature unattached to any meaningful discourse, disassociated from the dynamics of students' lives, provides little opportunity for students to grow within their own environment, much less grow toward a world view.

We are all discovering that a tribalistic mentality is no longer useful nor conducive to survival in a modern world. Rather, as anthropologist Edward Hall insisted, "The future depends on man's transcending the limits of individual cultures."¹² Ethnic literature has the power to aid in such a difficult and important feat.

Notes

¹Robert E. Probst. *Adolescent Literature: Response and Analysis*. (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1984).

²Hans R. Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982).

³E. S. Bogardus. "Measurement of personal group relations." *Sociometry*. Vol. 10 (1947) 306-311. A version of this scale modified by K. M. Miller and J. B. Biggs ("Attitude change through undirected group discussion." *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Vol. 49, No. 4 (1958) 224-227) was used. It comprised seven statements identical for each ethnic group. The students were asked to check all statements which best described their reactions to the groups. The statements were: "I would like to have live in my home. I would like to have as a close friend. I would like to go for a holiday with. I would like to have on my sports team. I would like to work with in school. I would like to have live on my street. I would like to have live in my country." The groups included Americans, Germans, Irish, Polish, Vietnamese, Jewish, Blacks, Russians, Japanese, Italians, and Chinese. Clearly the groups overlap and mix national, racial, and religious affiliations in one list. Also, the terms fail to distinguish between immigrants and those born in the United States with strong ties to an ancestry in another country. Nonetheless, the terms do seem to represent categories into which people are likely to sort others. The term "American," for instance, is obviously a dangerously ambiguous term, too easily used as a careless label or an ill-defined group favored by the individual. Nonetheless, as many of the transcripts of student responses showed, the students use the terms comfortably, and often without awareness of their imprecision, in discussing others. Thus the scale may have identified fairly well some common conceptions about the groups into which people fall.

⁴L. Perrin. *Coming to America: Immigrants from the Far East*. (Delacorte Press, 1980).

⁵Lawrence Yep. *Sea Glass*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

⁶Lawrence Yep. *Child of the Owl*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

⁷B. Ashabrunner. *The New Americans: Changing Patterns in U.S. Immigration*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1983).

⁸Gordon W. Allport. *The Nature of Prejudice*. (Garden City, NY. Doubleday & Co., Inc.: 1958).

⁹Linda Mauro. "Personal constructs and response to literature: Case studies of adolescent readers." *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Vol. 28 (1985) 3899A. (University Microfilms N. 68-04785, 156).

¹⁰Milton Rokeach. *The Open and Closed Mind*. (New York: Basic Books,

Inc., 1960).

¹¹John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*. (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

¹²Edward T. Hall. *Beyond Culture*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1976).

Critique

The intent of Joan Sullivan's project as described in this article is one that can only be applauded—working toward minimizing ethnocentrism and xenophobia must be seen as a *sine quo non* for a nation or a school community which aspires to realize a democratic ideology. Furthermore, there is no more important an age group on which to focus this project than that of the adolescent who is on the threshold of adult freedom and responsibility. Finally, educating the imagination toward a more just society for *all* through literature is a most meaningful use of the secondary school curriculum.

In considering the merit of Sullivan's project, one looks for persuasive and convincing arguments regarding its effectiveness. Unfortunately the project as described seems to come up short for at least two reasons: first, one senses an oversimplified conception of what it means to read literature; and secondly, one feels that the author is engaged in a rather unsubstantiated exercise in psychoanalysis. Both of these shortcomings, I believe, could be overcome, possibly by revising the language and style of the paper so that it indicates a more critical and substantive use of the scholarship around the "act of reading" as well as that concerning adolescent psychology. In what follows here I will briefly elaborate on the above two points.

Many would agree undoubtedly with the premise that the reading of literature can be a significant opportunity for one to begin to question one's world view, one's understanding of oneself and the other, especially the other who may be of a different ethnicity, race, class or gender. However, the act of reading is not one-directional, that is, the reader's thoughts are not necessarily controlled by the text. Rather, it seems that