A Gay-Themed Lesson in an Ethnic Literature Curriculum

Tenth Graders' Responses to "Dear Anita"

Steven Z. Athanases

In this article, Steven Athanases describes the responses of a multi-ethnic class of tenth graders to a lesson dealing with gay and lesbian experiences. The teacher of a course entitled "The Ethnic Experience in Literature" chose to introduce her class to Brian McNaught's essay "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual." Athanases describes the teacher's goals for the course, her curriculum, and student activities to support her goals. He then describes how the lesson itself unfolded, analyzing the essay that introduced the issue and the students' responses to it. Athanases shows how a careful selection of text, a classroom climate that welcomes thoughtful discussion of diversity, and sensitive treatment of gay and lesbian concerns can deepen students' understanding about identities and oppression, which, in the context of an ethnic literature curriculum, can help students develop a deeper understanding of the common ground that oppressed groups divided by difference share.

Beginning early in the school year, I watched Reiko Liu engage her students in literature study through discussions that required thinking about, and invited exploration of, such issues as cultural identity, subculture/dominant culture tensions, and ethnocentrism.* The works students read in her course, "The Ethnic Experience in Literature," also raised the difficult issues of cultural domination, racism, sexism, lynching, and rape. Reiko's class norms enabled her tenth graders to respond with curiosity, candor, and, at times, anger. Generally, however, they responded with sensitivity and maturity, despite the potential for awkwardness, tensions, and divisiveness that can occur when such issues arise in multietnic urban public high school classrooms where racial and other tensions often run high.

In January, however, most of the class responded with little empathy to Marguerite, the character who struggles with her sexual identity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Students remarked that being a lesbian is not normal, that gays choose to be gay and too often "go around talking about it." As with the entire curriculum, Reiko's goals for a unit on Ethnic Short Stories and Essays, to follow Angelou's book, included not only explorations of difference, but also recognition of common ground. She hoped her students would, as she put it, "take with them an understanding that people they thought were strange or different are not that strange or different after all." In that spirit, Reiko chose to "get gutsy" and include a piece dealing with gay experience. With the assistance of her best friend on the faculty, a gay man, she searched for readings, deciding on the essay, "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual," by Brian McNaught (1988a), a counselor and speaker on gay issues. For a workshop she later conducted, Reiko composed these notes on "Dear Anita":

This article is addressed to Anita Bryant, who campaigned against the rights of gay people to teach in Dade County schools. McNaught discusses how he, like Anita, was raised to believe stereotypical notions of homosexuality as a sin and a mental disorder and of gay men as sexually interested in children. He effectively argues against each of these points and relates the painfulness of living in a society that denies him his human rights.

Reiko's purpose in the "Dear Anita" lesson fit her goals of teaching sensitivity to diversity and seeking common ground across marginalized groups. She told me she had wanted her students to understand how it feels to be different, in this case as a gay person, how the whole world tells you that you're sinful, that you're a shame to the whole society, that you're a child molester, all these negative things. I want especially some of the more homophobe members of our class to understand where this person is coming from. And I want them to make a transition to how that's not too unlike having people tell you you're ignorant or you're stupid because of your racial background. These kids will probably say that being gay is different from being a member of an ethnic group. They've voiced that already. But I want them to understand that the effect on the person is not all that different.

What follows is background information detailing the inclusion of issues of sexual orientation in curriculum; an account of how the “Dear Anita” lesson unfolded; an analysis of the essay, the lesson, and the students’ responses to these; and a close look at one student's role in the process. My analysis focuses

* The names of students, teachers, and the school have all been changed.
on ways Reiko stimulated thoughtful discussions of literature and diversity and examines students' responses to such work.

Background

Calls for more inclusive literature curricula from the English Coalition Conference (Lloyd-Jones & Lumsford 1989), the Task Force on Racism and Bias (1986) for the National Council of Teachers of English, and other groups serving English and language arts teachers argue that “content integration” (Banks 1993) can help ensure that all students learn of the pluralistic nature of the United States, of contributions from all groups to U.S. culture and letters, and of the realities of racism and oppression lived by many in this country. To encourage inclusiveness and to work against stereotype formation, thoughtful educators can select texts by and about groups defined by not only race and ethnicity, but also gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other significant definitions of cultural and social group (Banks & Banks 1993; Stotsky 1994).

Despite the inclusion of sexual orientation in the language of some literature on diversified curricula, teachers, particularly in K–12 classrooms, seldom provide positive representations of gay and lesbian characters or address issues of sexual orientation or homophobia when they arise in lessons. Reasons for the dearth of such work in the classroom are numerous and varied. For example, the larger sociopolitical context within which schools operate has generally marginalized contributions of people of color and women, and concealed or avoided revealing the sexual orientation of prominent gays and lesbians. As a result, texts selected for class use have remained almost exclusively those authored by White men (Applebee 1993); when authors are gay, this fact is generally repressed.

The deliberately limited use by teachers of gay and lesbian authors has been partially due to a lack of information and resources on diverse selections, although other reasons figure in this picture as well. Many teachers, for example, feel uncomfortable dealing with issues of sexual orientation, are not convinced it is a topic appropriate for study, or are themselves homophobic. Even when teachers are convinced of the importance of exploring gay and lesbian experiences in literature, they often still fear that community members will view such study as promoting homosexuality, thus instigating a backlash. For gay or lesbian teachers not out at school, such a backlash could lead to being “outed” or, for teachers already out, it could lead to accusations of “recruiting.” In addition, some administrators who are unwilling to take risks censor their own teachers’ efforts toward such inclusiveness (e.g., Hammett 1992), while others use threats of dismissal to censor teachers. For example, a teacher in New Hampshire faced job loss because her twelfth graders were reading E. M. Forster’s Maurice and May Sarton’s The Education of Harriet Hatfield, which have, respectively, gay and lesbian protagonists (McVicar 1995).

Other factors contribute to the lack of inclusion of gay and lesbian lives in curricula. Many teachers may avoid such issues as racism in schools that are fraught with racial tensions. In a similar way, some teachers fear responses to gay and lesbian issues by youth who are in the process of sexual identity formation. Some teachers may worry that male students in particular will resist such lessons, finding them objectionable or disturbing.

Finally, few published works describe ways teachers have managed such work and how students have responded, although essays in recent collections (e.g., Garber 1994; Harbeck 1992; Jennings 1994) include mention of such work, and recent narratives describe the teaching of Rita Mae Brown’s Rubyfruit Jungle (Boutilier 1994) and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (Lankewich 1992) in high schools. Additionally, teaching of queer issues in Mexican American literature (Gonzalez 1994) and of homophobia in writing courses in college settings (Hart & Permet 1992) have been described. Harris (1990) also offered strategies for studying gay- and lesbian-themed literature at the secondary level. However, despite these efforts, descriptions of what occurs when lessons unfold and analyses of how students respond to and co-construct this work are still needed to aid in building theories of successful pedagogy in the teaching of gay- and lesbian-themed literature.

What follows is an account of a study that asked two questions. First, when a teacher working in a multiethnic setting includes a lesson on gay and lesbian experiences and homophobia in the context of an ethnic literature curriculum, how do students respond to the text and the lesson? Second, to what can those responses be attributed?

Framing the Study

Reiko Liu, Her Curriculum, Her Students

My study of the “Dear Anita” lesson is part of a year-long ethnography in which I observed two tenth-grade English classes in two different urban public schools. In each case, the teachers worked to make text selections more diverse by using newly designed ethnic literature curricula, supported by instruction grounded in the elicitation of students’ own literary responses rather than the pursuit of canonical interpretations, and by classroom discourse supportive of exploratory thinking rather than mere recitation of facts (Athanas 1993b). I visited the sites two or more times weekly during the school year. My field notes were supported by audiotapes and videotapes of full-group and small-group discussions, student surveys and writing samples, and school and classroom artifacts. In total, I interviewed more than sixty teachers, students, parents, and other school personnel. Two years later, I returned to the school where Reiko taught and conducted a retrospective survey. I led a pair of group discussion interviews with all but three students from the original class, focusing on their reflections on the class from the distance of two years. I also conducted
Table 4-1. Reiko’s students by ethnic identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>African American</th>
<th>European American</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alycia</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra</td>
<td>Celeste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demar</td>
<td>Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeTonia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Alberto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanisha</td>
<td>Cristina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>Ferdy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genevieve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yong</td>
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periodic informal follow-up interviews with both teachers in the two years following the focal study year. This discussion features Reiko’s “Dear Anita” lesson, but draws on the larger study for elaboration and support.

Having immigrated to the United States from Japan as a teenager, Reiko experienced culture clash as an immigrant and later in marriage to a Chinese American. Seeing herself as a child of the sixties who had a vision of social change, Reiko remained committed to social justice and to public education as the vehicle for equality and for participation in a democratic society. During her eighteen years of teaching, Reiko developed “friewheeling discussions” to enable her high school students to explore social issues arising from literature. She helped shape the district’s new tenth-grade course on “The Ethnic Experience in Literature.” In her first year of implementation, Reiko exposed her students to literature by and about people of a range of ethnicities and socialized students into discussions of diversity with the care that is her hallmark.

Richards High School where Reiko taught is a moderate sized school of grades 9-12 serving children of primarily middle-to-low-income families. Reiko’s tenth-grade English class was representative of the student body—of the twenty-one students, one-third were African American, one-third Chinese American, and the remaining third of Filipino and European ancestries (see Table 4-1). Despite the name of the course, Reiko’s Honors English class included students at various academic levels.

While overt hostility or violence rarely occurred at the school, most students characterized the interethnic climate as one of avoidance and, at best, tolerance.

Few at Richards reported appreciation among students for cultural difference, and, as attested to by letters to the editor in the school newspaper and comments by teachers, counselors, and students, some tensions existed between groups, particularly African Americans and Asian Americans. All of Reiko’s students of color wrote of experiences with racial injustice.

Community Influences

All students shared two influences originating from the community—a strong religious presence and exposure to gay and lesbian life. In the predominantly African American neighborhood surrounding Richards, a large number of Baptist churches are set among small residences and businesses. All the churches operate out of small converted corner buildings, except for one large, traditionally looking church. For Chinese American students, the other large ethnic group at Richards, many of whom bus to school from Chinatown, the Catholic Church is as present in their neighborhoods as the Baptist Church is near Richards. Religion plays a central role in the lives of many Richards students, evidenced by remarks about church-going, stories of church activities, and, in the case of five of Reiko’s students, firm devotion to the school’s gospel choir.

Many of Richards’ students have seen at least media images of gays and lesbians since they live in the San Francisco Bay Area, where lesbians and gays are relatively visible and hold some political power. In the school itself, one teacher, Ms. Saltzman, came out five years earlier and keeps a photo of her partner on her desk. On the first day of school each year, she comes out so that students wanting to make schedule changes might do so (none ever did), and, as she puts it, to clear the air “so we can get on with the business of the class, which [is] learning history.” It was clear to me that most students considered Ms. Saltzman and Mr. Kendall (another out gay teacher and Reiko’s best friend on the faculty) among the most effective and most caring teachers at Richards. Ms. Saltzman sponsored safe, underground, district-supported, student gatherings for gay and lesbian students, made known through posters on corridor walls and announcements in daily bulletins. When Ms. Saltzman’s daughter was born to her and her partner, the principal posted a banner in the office. When Ms. Saltzman and her partner chaperoned the prom, the principal remarked, “This has got to be a first for the district!”

Despite a strong gay and lesbian presence in local news and among educators, and despite the beginning of a school support group and some support from the principal, homophobia persisted at Richards. Rarely did students hear about the support group. In the early stages of the group’s formation, the principal did not include announcements of the group in the school bulletin; when this changed, many teachers ignored or refused to read the announcements. Posters announcing the group were typically torn down. In addition, gay and lesbian students were sometimes harassed by peers, and a faculty member to
down the banner in the office that announced the birth of Ms. Salzman's daughter. A student, before graduation, told Ms. Salzman that if she prayed hard enough she could recover from being a lesbian. These community influences and school-life realities frame students' responses to Reiko's lesson.

The "Dear Anita" Lesson

_The Ethnic Short Stories and Essays Unit_

Unable to locate an adequate anthology, Reiko searched libraries, bookstores, and friends' collections to assemble short prose works and excerpts for a five-week unit scheduled to begin in February (Table 4-2).

Reiko began the unit with a chapter from Martin Luther King Jr.'s book, _Stride Toward Freedom_ (1958), noting that, "It sets a positive tone for more heated discussions that may arise later." Reiko wrote for her district teacher workshop:

"King relates his search for a method of coping with injustice that would be both moral and effective. He gives a compelling rationale for the use of non-violence and brings to light the age-old notions of love as a unifying force, of hating the sin but not the sinner."

During the five weeks, students read, discussed, and wrote about each text, including "Dear Anita," Brian McNaught's essay.

The Lesson

The lesson Reiko designed for "Dear Anita" covered two to three class periods. On the first day, she distributed the essay as homework and provided background, specifically Anita Bryant's efforts during the 1970s to ban gay and lesbian teachers from classrooms. On the second day, after a full-class discussion, Reiko asked students to do the following: "Write a 'Dear Brian' letter in response to the 'Dear Anita' article that you have read. Respond to each of the major points [the author] raises and tell whether or not he effectively addresses Anita's concerns. (Min. 300 words)." On a quiz at the end of the unit two weeks later, students wrote paragraphs on two of four questions, one dealing with "Dear Anita": "If Martin Luther King were to express his view on the plight of gay people as mentioned in the 'Dear Anita' article, what might he say, based on what you know of his philosophy?"

Analysis of "Dear Anita"

In his eleven-page essay, McNaught speaks to Bryant using language that masks how deliberately he has structured the work to teach and persuade. McNaught uses all three of what rhetoricians identify as Aristotle's persuasion categories: ethos (ethics of the speaker or writer), logos (logic or reasoning), and pathos (emotional appeals). Narrating his journey from childhood to adulthood, McNaught first establishes an ethos of a family-loving, religious, ethical citizen who Bryant would value "playing and praying" with if she did not know he were gay (McNaught 1988a, 5). Next, as Table 4-3 demonstrates, one by one, McNaught logically refutes myths common in debates about homosexuality, many of which Bryant perpetuated in her anti-gay campaign. Most of these myths he spells out explicitly, some are implied, all are refuted.

Having established a credible ethos and having logically addressed myths in debates on homosexuality, McNaught then creates a scenario in which Bryant's thirteen-year-old son, Bob Jr., discovers he is gay. With this hypothetical story, McNaught itemizes each challenge a young gay man faces (Table 4-4).

In the process, McNaught creates strong emotional appeal, sharing his own painful journey through a suicide attempt, and noting that "Some people in this country, as we both know, would prefer I hadn't changed my mind [about taking his own life]. But not you, Anita" (13). His persistent use of the direct address (appealing directly to Bryant throughout the essay) and his construction of her as a sensible and caring citizen and mother maintains the appeal that builds in the end to emotionally charged language about the "psychological terror" of being gay and the "primal scream" of the gay civil rights movement.

**Table 4-2. Reiko's Unit of Ethnic Short Stories and Essays**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author's Ethnicity</th>
<th>Literary Title and Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>&quot;A Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,&quot; from <em>Stride Toward Freedom</em>, Martin Luther King Jr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;How I Started Writing Poetry,&quot; Reginald Lockett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>&quot;Four Directions,&quot; from <em>The Joy Luck Club</em>, Amy Tan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Boy Crazy,&quot; Wendy Ho Iwata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>&quot;The Lift That Went Down into Hell,&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-American (Jewish)</td>
<td>&quot;The Magic Barrel,&quot; Bernard Malamud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gay)</td>
<td>&quot;Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual,&quot; Brian McNaught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>From <em>America Is in the Heart</em>, Carlos Bulosan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>&quot;A Scent of Apples,&quot; Bienvenido N. Santos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>From <em>No-No Boy</em>, John Okada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Choo's Daughter,&quot; Juanita Platero and Siyowin Miller</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-3. Myths in Debates about Homosexuals and McNaught's Refutations in “Dear Anita”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myths in Debates about Gays</th>
<th>Refutations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Come from bad backgrounds</td>
<td>McNaught, like many other gays, had strong family and religious upbringing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically imbalanced</td>
<td>Merely living in a hostile world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuous</td>
<td>His sexual encounters were late, tentative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have shameful values</td>
<td>Often share same values with straights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gays are a freakish few</td>
<td>Ten percent of U.S. population: 22 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex is for procreation only</td>
<td>Many straights marry for reasons other than childbearing; human need for touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God hates homosexuals</td>
<td>Easy to abuse Scripture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good religion means literal reading of Scripture</td>
<td>Bible must be understood in cultural context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-dressing is widespread</td>
<td>Most transvestites are heterosexual males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gays and lesbians hate members of opposite sex</td>
<td>Must distinguish between friendships and object of desire for mates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gays are child-molesters</td>
<td>Pederasts are rarely gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay teachers will corrupt</td>
<td>Good teaching is good teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay pride is flaunting a lifestyle</td>
<td>Expression of self and culture are important to all individuals and in many groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality is a choice</td>
<td>It’s an orientation, often “constitutional”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gays want special rights</td>
<td>Gay civil rights are human civil rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pleading to straight society to refrain from forcing us to live in shadows of self-hate” (14). Having used ethos, logos, and pathos to persuade, McNaught closes firmly: “Gay civil rights are human civil rights” (14) and no one has the right to interfere with another’s development of “the wholeness of our being … unless it truly interferes with the rights of others” (15). To challenge someone’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, he argues, is to challenge both “the cornerstone of this country” and “the very fiber of our faith which we both claim to follow” (15). In this way, McNaught closes by suggesting that if Bryant persists in her campaign against gays and lesbians, she is not a hero but someone who is anti-democracy and anti-faith.

Table 4-4. Challenges Bob Bryant Jr. Would Face as a Gay Man, in McNaught’s Scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty understanding confusing feelings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of losing parents’ love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being alone, with no one to talk to (not minister nor teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to be heterosexual but failing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing and participating in anti-gay epithets and jokes (internalized homophobia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with family expectations of settling down with woman and having children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplation of suicide and possible suicide attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciding: marry and hide, remain celibate, or seek same-sex companion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with parents’ failure to come out, their tolerating anti-gay epithets in the home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Data for the present study included an audiotape and a videotape of class discussion of “Dear Anita”; three audiotaped interviews with Reiko (before the lesson, immediately after the lesson, and on the following day); the “Dear Brian” writings; the set of unit quizzes; audiotaped interviews with eight case study students selected from the larger study as a varied and representative class sample in terms of gender, ethnicity, and writing and speaking performance; two sets of surveys, one administered at the end of the unit, one two years later; and audiotapes of discussions conducted two years and three months after the lesson, just before the students graduated.

For analysis of the “Dear Anita” discussion, I transcribed the talk from audiotape, adding behavioral descriptions from the accompanying videotape. I used speaker turn (each time someone audibly took the floor) as the unit of analysis to analyze the talk structure and turn-taking patterns. I tracked the discussion content, charting topics, how they began, and who initiated them, and analyzed questions for who raised them, the functions they served, and what they yielded. I coded Reiko’s questions and her other comments to analyze roles she played in shaping discussion. I examined the discourse for knowledge sources used during discussion to determine evidence speakers used to authenticate claims.

One student, Tanisha, took far more turns than any other student and played an enormous role in discussion. I pulled out all of her turns at talk and constructed a performance script, identifying a verb to clarify the verbal action (Long & Hopkins 1982) of each of Tanisha’s turns at talk (e.g., critiques,
challenges, inquires; cites, reinforces). With the full transcript contextualizing her turns, I then used this script to describe patterns in Tanisha's discussion performance.

In my analysis of the "Dear Brian" essays, a broad set of themes emerged across them. I similarly identified themes in student quizzes, two sets of surveys, transcripts from case study interviews, and transcripts from the retrospective discussion. In addition to analyzing patterns in students' responses within each of these sets of data, I analyzed response patterns of case study students across data sets (i.e., each student's responses in writings, in discussions, in interviews). Also, I analyzed patterns of response across the various individual analyses.

Finally, analyses from the full ethnography were used to elaborate or provide comparison and contrast to those in the present study. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for an investigation of patterns of language use and an examination of how teaching and learning evolved. Claims were strengthened by gaining multiple views of what occurred, including teacher and student perspectives, multiple student perspectives, and perspectives of a diverse group of case study students in terms of gender, ethnicity, academic preparedness, and frequency of participation in discussion.

**Students' Responses to the Lesson**

**The Discussion of "Dear Anit"**

**Structure of the discussion.** From the third-floor classroom, its walls adorned with student poetry and Renaissance newscast posters from an earlier Othello unit, occasional shrieks could be heard through the open window from the P.E. class on the blacktop below. In class, as usual, students sat in a circle with Reiko and spoke without raising hands. Of eighteen students present, fifteen participated in discussion, fourteen of their own volition and one at Reiko's invitation. Conversation was fast paced and highly engaging. Many students took numerous short turns in a volleying manner, rather than a few longer turns. This reflected in part the class norm of co-constructing interpretations, and in part the controversial nature of the topics. Nine of the eighteen students took ten or more turns during the discussion. As in other discussions during the year, Reiko asked questions but rarely evaluated students' responses, letting students respond to each other, build on each other's remarks, and challenge each other's ideas. As a result, students often engaged in long runs of talk without Reiko's intervention. Eight times during the discussion, students took more than ten consecutive turns without comment from Reiko, and three of these times, students continued for twenty-five turns or more without teacher remark. The videotape shows Reiko watching students closely, shaping discussion in a variety of ways. Of forty-four turns she took, exactly half were questions, half statements. For example, fourteen of Reiko's turns aided comprehension of the text by contextualizing it with cultural and background information and clarifying meaning. Six turns, mostly questions, worked toward interpretation, five challenged students to sharpen or elaborate claims, and seven were process-oriented turns to launch and guide discussion. Ten of Reiko's turns addressed the issue of empathy. Her questions pressed students to imagine struggles of gays and lesbians (e.g., "How can it be to be such a person... having the whole word telling you that you are sick and deranged and sinful?"); and, using textual details, she reminded students of McNaught's perspective on the plight of gays (e.g., when she said, "You tried your best to do what's expected of you. You try to be the best student, the best athlete, winner of all these trophies, and swimming and all this, playing the part of the All-American male, and yet inside, you know you're different."). In these ways, Reiko worked to move the discussion toward her goals.

**Content of the discussion.** Reiko began with a discussion of McNaught's Irish heritage and Catholic upbringing, specifically, she asked how these may have shaped his attitudes and sense of self, particularly given the view of homosexuality in Catholicism. Reiko pointed out the impact of cultural expectations, particularly to marry and raise a large family. Next, the class addressed the issue that inspired Bryant's movement, whether gay and lesbian teachers should be permitted to teach. The class easily reached an accord, agreeing that one's freedom to teach should be determined by competence in the classroom and not by sexual orientation. Ferdy, who is active in discussions, offered, "There should be no doubt about it that they should be in school. If they fit the qualifications, you know, then they should have the right to teach." Richard then raised a concern, which Tyronne and Tanisha challenged:

**Richard:** If they start likin' one of their students, then they're like too far gone, it's gettin' personal.

**Tyrone:** But if you were to think about it, a straight teacher could be eyin' a student just as well as a homosexual. Like male teachers, with a girl comin' to class.

**Richard:** But I'm talkin' about with the same sex.

**Tyrone:** I know, but I'm sayin' that it hurt your ego and your pride, but it's the same THING. A grown man lookin' at you just like a woman doin' it. But if it's a woman you gonna—

**Tanisha:** Yeah, you're gonna say, "Oh yeah!"

**Richard:** But you're talkin' about—

**Reiko:** But Tyrone is saying either way is wrong.

Fifteen minutes into discussion, Richard asked if sexual orientation is a choice. He added that it seemed that Brian could have chosen to stay with women like when he dated them in high school. A few students joined him, and
Reiko and Tanisha both challenged them repeatedly with questions like this one from Tanisha: “Why would he CHOOSE to do something that he KNEW was going to cause him a lot of grief and all of his family and a lot of people most likely and everybody around him a lot of grief?” Reiko later referred to this stretch as being “hung up on the element of choice.” The class then discussed development of Brian’s sexual identity, including his exploration of intimacy with women, and Cassandra asked if that made McNaughton bisexual. Students named pop singers they thought were bisexual (Boy George, Prince), but Tyrone and Tanisha said these singers were in fact heterosexual. Reiko returned to the essay, asking how they would feel in Brian’s shoes. Cassandra responded, “It would make you not want to be,” and Tanisha added loudly and intensely, “That’s why he tried to commit suicide!” Demar added, “It should turn you around.” Before anyone could respond to Tanisha’s remark or Tanisha could contest Demar’s, Reiko had a question on the floor.

She asked the class the degree to which McNaughton dispelled the myths of homosexuality, which was a goal of his essay. Students argued that he successfully countered gay stereotypes, especially the notion of gay men as pedophiles. Tanisha pointed out that McNaughton refuted this myth by saying the majority of child molestation is committed by heterosexual males; she added that such acts are about abuse of power and not about sex, anyway. Richard returned to his earlier question about choice, asking Reiko, “Didn’t he sort of like CHOOSE to be with the guys? So didn’t he make that choice?” Tanisha argued that the only choice was about not hiding being gay, and Robert added that Brian was learning to accept his homosexuality: “Sometimes you gotta go where people will accept you and won’t make fun of you.” Tyrone added, “Where people aren’t gonna try to kill you.” They agreed that choice is, as Robert put it, “about where you want to live, but not about being gay.”

After having her hand up for awhile, LaTonia asked about the impact on the child of a lesbian couple: “What do you think the chances are of the child growing up being a homosexual or lesbian or whatever?” The topic was not in the essay, but Reiko told me after class that she let the students explore it since there was intense interest. Six students, three male, three female, argued that the child of, say, Ms. Salzman and her partner would be unfairly hurt by peer pressure and therefore confused. Tanisha offered reasoned responses to these arguments: their daughter likes their male friends, they’ll explain things to her, she’ll be able to handle it if she can be strong. Five of the students (three male, two female), all African American like Tanisha, faced-off with Tanisha, pointing at her and arguing with increasing intensity that a child needs to know that she came from a mother and father. Tanisha stood her ground and gained intensity, too, as she appeared to align herself with Ms. Salzman and her partner. Things reached a crescendo when Tanisha finally dramatized the point that having two parents does not guarantee emotional health. She disclosed that after her parents were divorced she lived for five years with a stepmother who was jealous of her, who called her stupid, and who “beat me with a vacuum, with lots of stuff” that left scars all over her body. “I’m really insecure about it,” she went on. “Like when someone tells me to shut up, it REALLY hurts my feelings. I mean if somebody tells you to shut up, I mean you’re like, NO, don’t tell me to shut up.” Tyrone added, “I’ll say, ‘Your mama!’” Demar, a member of the group discussing Tanisha, said, “That’s child abuse. This is entirely different.” Tanisha could not find the words in that moment to explain how her emotional narrative supported her implied argument that having two heterosexual parents in the home does not ensure emotional well-being.

Feery then asked, “If a student came into our classroom and all of a sudden we broke out with a discussion like this, and that person was that girl we were talking about, how would SHE feel?” Demar responded, “She’d feel like dirt.” Reiko used that moment to remind the class that 10 percent of the population is gay, and “There might be somebody here that might be suffering because you guys laugh and joke... doesn’t this article say that gay teenagers have a really hard time, that the suicide rate is very high?” Her return to the core issue, away from the gay parenting topic that had occupied 20 percent of the discussion, appealed for empathy, in this case not just for Brian and other gays and lesbians “out there,” but also for those at school and perhaps in this very class.

In response, the discussion closed with strong testimonials from three students on behalf of gay people, two of whom had objected to gay parenting. Tyrone argued, “If you wanna be gay, you know, that’s fine, you know, it should be accepted as THAT, not as, ‘You gay? I don’t want to have anything to do with you.’” Robert addressed the myth of gay promiscuity, ending with, “The degree of desire is the same, but with who it’s different.” And Cassandra, who had challenged gay parenting, closed the discussion, pounding her fist dramatically on her desk for emphasis as she exclaimed each sexual orientation label: “Whether you’re a lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, you’re a person, and you have the right to do whatever you want to.” As students filed out, Tyrone called from the door, “That was a very intelligent discussion we had.” Celeste, however, lingered after the bell to reiterate her point: Ms. Salzman’s daughter will be insecure “because her peers will never accept her parents.”

Tanisha in discussion. Just as some students drew on their experiences as members of ethnic groups to better understand literature studied during the year in Reiko’s class, Tanisha may have drawn strength for her convictions on gay issues from her personal experiences and feelings. In her senior year, one and a half years after the “Dear Anita” discussion, Tanisha came out as a lesbian and met with other gay and lesbian students in Ms. Salzman’s group. Although Tanisha had generally been a frequent participant in discussions all year, her involvement increased during the “Dear Anita” discussion, in which she took sixty-five turns, or 27 percent of all student turns in the discussion. Other students often counted on Tanisha to simplify complexities in the readings, and her turns particularly served that purpose during this lesson. Additionally, her
interactions refuted myths of homosexuality, and challenged both her peers and Anita Bryant. She expressed incredulity that anyone could believe a person would choose to be part of an oppressed group. She challenged her peers' problematizing of gay parenting with reasoned responses, and as classmates pointed at her and raised their voices, Tanisha held her ground. Throughout the discussion, she aligned herself with Ms. Salzman and her partner, and through them, all gays and lesbians interested in parenting. Finally she used her own story of a painful family life as support for her stand, though there is little evidence that her peers grasped the gist of this.

Tanisha, well-read and often articulate in class discussions, challenged the group to stay focused on the issues raised by the essay rather than utter remarks that perpetuated stereotypes. Nicknamed "Ms. Equality" by her mother, Tanisha often was a voice of justice. On issues of race and gender, she raged against unfairness and now she similarly challenged homophobia.

Themes in Student Writings

Moving beyond myths of homosexuality. The "Dear Anita" lesson helped break stereotypes and myths (many from Table 4–3) the students had held about gays and lesbians. In the "Dear Brian" letters, the most frequently cited stereotype was of gays as child molesters. Just as the class reached easy accord on this issue in discussion, students wrote of their appreciation for McNaught's clarification. Two girls pointed out that they used to think of homosexual men as a bad influence on children, but they both directly attributed a change in understanding of this issue to the essay. Cassandra also told Brian in her letter that she used to think of gays as child molesters, and "If you had not clarified that, I have had a different attitude toward homosexuals because of my strong feelings for children" (she hoped to some day become a child psychologist). Two others cited experiences as reinforcement of McNaught's dispelling of this myth: Vanessa recalled a gay guest speaker in Family Living who did not look at male students any different from females. Alicia said she used to think of gays as child molesters until she came to know a wonderful gay teacher at her previous school about whom she stated, "I loved [him] with all my heart, he was one of my best teachers, a good friend and confidant."

A second stereotype some students said the lesson dispelled was that of gay men as promiscuous. In addition to the remarks about McNaught's late-blooming sexuality and about "gay" meaning much more than sex, some students wrote in their letters to Brian that they now understood that homosexuality can also be about what Ferdy called "the company of another" and what Vanessa referred to as "feelings, love, understanding, and trust one feels for another." Students reported that the lesson refuted other myths. Vanessa came to understand that homosexuality is not a psychological disorder to be treated. She told me afterward that as she listened to the disagreement in the discussion about whether gays should get therapy to change or whether these are feelings that can't change, "I decided they can't change their feelings. It's not like a disease or something." She felt her one contribution to the discussion helped: "Homosexuals are just like normal people, just like us. It's just that their outlook on things is different." Some students noted that they understood now that notions of gays coming from bad backgrounds and holding shameful values were stereotypes, too. They were struck by McNaught's upbringing as a model child and teen, an athlete, a God-loving and family-oriented person. Demar wrote about Brian's stable childhood, saying, "Hell, you grew up better than I did." He continued, "For Anita to call your values shameful would almost be a sin. A matter of fact, if you and I met somewhere we would probably be pretty good friends."

Finally, in their writing, students reinforced other remarks about myths dispelled in their earlier talk. Demar argued for the importance of teachers doing their jobs well, not their sexual orientation, as what truly matters: "I've had gay teachers and I and all the rest of the students turned out absolutely fine." Cassandra acknowledged that before reading McNaught's letter she thought that gays and lesbians all hated members of the opposite sex. Similarly, Vanessa used personal experience, recalling how the gay speaker in Family Living said he has women friends, something Tanisha echoed in an interview a few days later: "I know a lot of homosexuals. And they all have friends who are women. So if you're not a misogynist, well, of course you like women. It doesn't mean you have to jump in bed with them."

Developing empathy for gays and lesbians. In addition to changed understandings of the nature of homosexuality, some students wrote of empathy they now felt for lesbians and gay men. Five students referred in their writings as well as in the discussion to suicide attempts by gays and lesbians as something truly terrible. Yong said of Brian's attempted suicide, "Thank God you changed your mind after you drank the bottle of paint thinner." Three students reported feeling guilty for the prejudices they had felt toward gays. One apologized to Brian and hoped he would forgive her. Vicki said, "It was people like me that forced you to commit suicide. Your life means more than anything in the world." A few students wrote about Brian's early confusion over his sexual feelings and his struggle to try to conform to a heterosexual standard. One commented that sexuality is a gift and that she felt for Brian since so many people cannot accept homosexuality as natural. Robert remarked that he understood now how gays might fear ridicule based on religious beliefs. Vanessa summed up, saying, "Anyone with half a heart should have been moved or should have changed their stereotyped opinions when he/she read this article."

Equality and justice. The theme of equality and justice for gays and lesbians persisted in students' responses, especially in their responses to the quiz question. A fairly consistent response emerged in papers of students who chose
to answer the question of how Martin Luther King Jr. would respond to the plight of gays and lesbians. Essentially, they argued that if King were alive today, he would support acceptance of and equality for gays and lesbians. All but two students, Richard and Celeste, whose responses are discussed later, stated that other than loving someone of their own gender, gays are no different and deserve support. Vivian, for example, argued that:

No matter the situation, M. L. King will still practice his theory of agape. . . . He has expressed his point of view about many groups of people with different ideas and principles. Why should these . . . changes to people whose sexual preferences are different than that of the majority in the world? . . . Martin Luther King is against negative thoughts or feelings to even our enemies. He does not practice any form of hatred. . . . I'm sure this also applies to people who choose partners of their own sex.

Alberto argued for embracing gays beyond just tolerance, “God made all men and women equal, no matter what creed, religion, sex, or lifestyle, and . . . because God wants man happy.” Alberto felt King would encourage people to “treat gays as part of society” and try to make friends with them and “learn about their lifestyle.” A number of students mentioned that King would endorse equal rights for gays and lesbians, and that he would encourage gays to fight for these rights as he fought discrimination. Two students added that King would have disagreed with Anita Bryant’s efforts since, as Genevieve put it, “She is trying to teach exactly the opposite of what he believes in—equal rights for all.” Tanisha went one step further in her response, envisioning King in a proactive role, staging sit-ins with gay and lesbian groups and building coalitions against anti-racism and anti-homophobia groups.

Cassandra and LaTonya, both Baptists and active in the school’s gospel choir, whose responses shared some similarities with others’ responses, nonetheless left the door slightly open for disapproval. Cassandra suggested that “God may not approve,” and LaTonya stated that some religions or cultures may view homosexuality as sinful. Still, both felt King would support and accept gay rights. Mark, in contrast, offered a unique and sobering possibility, that King would offer gay support at best but would probably remain neutral: “[He] probably would not be any major mover for civil rights for homosexuals . . . since his religion probably would have forbidden it.”

Identification and validation. Two students expressed feelings of identification and validation in their “Dear Brian” letters. Cristina, a Catholic, began her letter, “I am a fifteen year old girl who once questioned myself about my sexuality. . . . I share your [McNaught’s] values and beliefs.” Elaborating on ways society restricts and condemns people, particularly gays and lesbians, Cristina closed, saying:

The worst thing that a homosexual person can do is hide his or her true identity. I chose to try to discover myself. In the process, I realized that I am a con-

fused, young and naive person. Unlike the person I want to be, deep inside, I feel that I will eventually find happiness with the person that I all ready am. A friend, Cristina.

Reiko wrote on Cristina’s letter, “I think you will, too, Cristina. Your letter is quite moving because it reaches out to another person as an equal.” The essay struck a chord for Cristina, who identified with the struggle for sexual identity and self-definition.

A second student who may have found validation in the lesson was Tanisha. While she did not explicitly identify with Brian, Tanisha positioned herself with the oppressed groups in her alignment with him, Ms. Salzman, and other gays and lesbians. Part of this was due to Tanisha’s sensitivity to the oppressed, her sense that “everybody seemed to be against” homosexuality. Tanisha referred to her earlier argument that people need “not be so narrow-minded . . . You need to open up and think how other people feel, don’t just go with what you feel and everybody else.” In her writing, Tanisha critiqued Celeste’s position on sin as “that old crock about how they don’t condemn you but your sin.” She continued, “If you think about it, it’s just as bad, so you’re really condemning the person. I mean it [homosexuality] comes from the person’s being.”

Tanisha’s capacity for empathy was evident throughout the year; she took on her peers directly in discussions of gay issues and continued as if speaking to them in her writings. She wrote, “Why should it matter if you love a woman and are a woman or if you love a man and are a man? If there is love there and it’s pure, why should the form matter?” In a follow-up interview when she was a senior, she recalled how important the “Dear Anita” lesson was in her education about people considered “unnormal,” a lesson that may have helped provide her with courage to be out and strong while still in high school, despite negative responses from peers. Ms. Salzman recalled this courage: after posters announcing the gay and lesbian support group were torn down, the group got a six-foot ladder, and Tanisha stood on it to hang posters out of reach of those wanting to destroy them.

Resistance based in religious teachings. The two students unmov by McNaught’s essay remained committed to the belief that homosexuality is sinful and, therefore, wrong. Richard, who argued in discussion that gays should choose to be gay and argued against gay parenting, said in his letter to Brian that he should have “tried harder not to be gay” and that he should have gotten “more help and kept seeing a psychiatrist.” While the main thrust of his argument is rooted in his religious beliefs, Richard also misread McNaught’s rejection of his Catholic upbringing: “You say that you believe that God condemns homosexuality but you are homosexual. And at that you are a Catholic homosexual. How can you live with that?” McNaught’s remarks about such condemnation were in the context of the beliefs he was raised with, which he rejected and then refuted in the essay. Moreover, Richard either did not agree with or ignored
McNaught's argument that scripture must be understood in historical context if rigid interpretations are to be avoided.

Celeste, a practicing Catholic who entered the class mid-year, steadfastly maintained that "homosexuality is an abomination before God." Following Martin Luther King Jr.'s stance toward racists, she argued that she could justifiably condemn the sin and not the sinner. She told Brian he must read scripture literally and stop trying to change his Catholic faith to justify his sin. Too many today, she explained, have accepted their sinful lives as a good way of life. . . . This is not only homosexuals, but adulterers, murderers, the power hungry, and the greed of those who seek only self-gratification. All of the above I would not want teaching my children because it does not promote life.

In the margin Reiko wrote, "This is rough company for anyone to be put in."

Like Richard, Celeste ignored or misunderstood portions of McNaught's essay. She wrote, "All through the whole entire thing, he's still having this like argument in his mind: 'Am I or am I not?' And he never really chooses at the end if he is." McNaught is, however, quite clear in the essay that he is gay; the subtitle for the essay, "Late night thoughts of an Irish Catholic homosexual," clarifies this. Celeste continued, "gay civil rights, according to you, are more important of an issue instead of the Civil Rights for all living in the United States.

However, McNaught is also clear on this point: In response to Bryant's threat to remove gay teachers from schools, he argues, "Gay civil rights are human civil rights. Compliant people should not be denied jobs because of what they do as consenting adults in the privacy of their homes" (McNaught 1988a, 14).

Celeste's response may have been due, in part, to the fact that as an Irish Catholic she shares McNaught's ethnicity and religion. Celeste felt McNaught's essay painted Irish Catholics as inflexible and unloving, since this is how she judged McNaught, and she resented this and told Reiko so in an addendum to her essay. After responding to Celeste's letter, Reiko wrote to her that she saw McNaught as

thoughtful and loving, not inflexible and unloving as you see him. My intent in having students read this article is to have them think about the issues and draw conclusions of right or wrong on their own. And, please understand, I in no way want to attack anyone's nationality or religion. That is the farthest thing from my mind! The author's being Irish Catholic just means that he faced religious and cultural prohibitions against the kind of lifestyle he leads.

In the retrospective discussions two years later, Tanisha reported her appreciation for Celeste's courage in standing up to outspoken peers, even when she did not appreciate Celeste's sometimes unpopular opinions. Celeste had only been in the tenth-grade class three weeks when the "Dear Anita" lesson occurred, and already she had enraged peers who found her insensitive and Eurocentric. On one occasion, when she protested Black History month ("I don't get an Irish History month"), one African American girl in class stood and exclaimed, "After four hundred years of oppression, you'd begrudge us one lousy month?!" She told Brian in her letter that his idea of living in a hostile world is ridiculous, that "we all live in a hostile world." Here she minimized oppression, flattened it out into something everyone feels in an imperfect world, perhaps, in part, a function of her lack of experience with the racism and injustice most of her peers knew first-hand. She also told Brian, "All sinners want their sins to be justified by others so they will continue to persist in actions towards gay rights, or any civil rights." Her claim that those who struggle for civil rights want their sins justified by others flies in the face of the community-building that occurred for five months in Reiko's class before Celeste entered. Nonetheless, Reiko addressed Celeste's issues head on in her response to her essay, handling her feelings sensitively. This was particularly important since Celeste's major support for her opinions came from her understanding of and faith in her religion, belief systems tied to her own sense of family and culture.

Students' Reflections on the Lesson

The effects of the "Dear Anita" lesson lasted beyond the unit. In a survey I conducted later that spring, seven students, a third of the class, described the "Dear Anita" discussion and lesson as memorable. Although one student criticized how the class got off the subject "discussing homosexuals but not relating to the story," others recalled the discussion as highly engaging and informative. One said he "learned much about gay stereotypes, gay fact and fiction." Another recalled the debate on choice and realized "you can't tell a person to change what they feel because it's impossible." In case study interviews in which I asked students to reflect on the unit and the full school year, most spoke of the impact of the "Dear Anita" lesson. Vivian thought King's chapter and McNaught's essay were the most interesting pieces from the unit. Cassandra remarked:

Before I thought in the Bible it says when two people of the same sex come together it's earthquakes and the world's coming to an end. I was against it. But then I read "Dear Anita" and they have rights, too. . . . I was confused at first. Are they good people or bad people? But I came to realize they're just people, too.

Alberto, who is Filipino, remarked, "I'm a Catholic and the Catholic Church is supposed to be against it, and how could you be against a person when it says in the Bible you're supposed to love your neighbor as yourself?" He told me he had whispered to Mark during the discussion the question he eventually raised to the class: "If you have sex with a man does that make you gay, or is there more to it?" He said he spoke with his mother and wants to learn more about homosexuality.

In the survey I conducted two years and three months later, eighteen students reflected on the works of greatest impact from their tenth-grade year.
Citing reasons such as identification and exposure to learning about difference, students selected Maya Angelou’s (1969) autobiography and an excerpt from Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) as particularly memorable. Three students selected “Dear Anita,” which Genevieve called “an eye-opener” that made her feel “wrong in condemning them.” I felt really bad. It has changed me a whole lot in my perception of homosexuals,” Robert said,”I really had to rethink my feelings on homosexuality... [It] really made me stop judging homosexuals by the ignorant opinions and stereotypes that were going around.” During the accompanying retrospective discussions, students reflected on changed attitudes and new perceptions due to Reiko’s class. Robert recalled the study of “Dear Anita”:

At first I was always calling gay people queers and stuff but then we kept talking about it and then like my homophobia just started to go away because whenever we talked about gay people it was just throwing stereotypes around, right? And then junior year and now... it’s like, you start to see that all people are just like everyone else and you get to interact with them, and all that stuff just melts away, all those old fears and prejudices.

Clearly, the “Dear Anita” lesson had a strong impact on most of Reiko’s students and may have had a lasting effect. To what can we attribute these results? A complex set of conditions made the impact of this lesson possible.

**How Curriculum and Instruction Shaped Students’ Responses**

*Importance of Text Selection*

As my analysis of McNaught’s essay demonstrates, by sensitively describing his own story, McNaught’s piece helps readers move beyond stereotypes (Tables 4-3 and 4-4). While some might critique McNaught as a gay apologist who asks, “Accept us because we’re just like you,” Reiko’s choice of “Dear Anita” showed sensitivity to her students. Rather than deny her students’ religious backgrounds, Reiko chose a work written from a religious perspective by a devout Catholic and loving, family-oriented man. This religious connection provided many students with a firm ground for identification as they grappled with the issues McNaught presents.

Reiko’s choice of text followed principles articulated in the multicultural literature. First, the essay—about gay experiences—was written by a gay man, or “cultural insider,” which made it more possible to achieve “cultural accuracy” (Bishop 1992; Yokota 1993). Students responded to this feature of the work, finding it a credible “inside view” of what it means to be gay. Second, the essay presented sociological perspectives on homosexuality, as important here as in treatment of racism and other atrocities in U.S. history, providing an analysis of institutional structures that have caused and continue to contrib-

ute to social inequities (Gibson 1984; Hilliard 1974; Mura 1988). Reiko’s lesson explored some of this, dealing with the oppression McNaught and other gays and lesbians experience, particularly through the use of Martin Luther King Jr.’s chapter as a way of invoking the issue of civil rights. Third, the essay showed a protagonist from a marginalized group in an empowered state, what is called in the literature “beyond victimization” (Greene 1993; Pace 1992). McNaught reports his suffering, but his convictions regarding human rights come through strongly in the end, and students responded to this strength of voice. Finally, effective multicultural education avoids perpetuation of “othering” that results from study of marginalized groups as purely different (Gibson 1984). Thoughtful educators attend both to difference and to common ground across groups. Here again, invoking King in consideration of McNaught served this purpose well.

**A Safe Environment for Explorations of Diversity**

Reiko’s students had practiced for months various strategies of openly exploring diversity. When students had questions about a culture different from their own, for example, they knew they could comfortably raise these questions without fear of either ridicule for their ignorance or accusations of insensitivity. Reiko frequently modeled this practice and invited students to share cultural knowledge that might shed light on issues under consideration.

In a discussion of an excerpt from Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), for example, African American students asked Chinese American students about words and cultural norms they did not understand when reading the selection. Reiko used Tan’s treatment of mother-child conflict as an opportunity for building common ground, by inviting students to engage in cross-cultural exchange of mother and grandmother tales (Athanases 1993a). Such classroom practices made it easier for Reiko’s students to ask candid questions, without embarrassment or criticism, about “choice” for homosexuals, the place of sex in sexual orientation, and the impact on children of gay parenting. While some of the students at times parroted myths and lines they had no doubt heard spoken by their elders or in the media, the videotape showed a group of students generally trying to understand the issues at hand and responding to Reiko’s prompts for greater empathy. This was one goal of the entire curriculum, and was not new to them. They respected empathy as a worthy goal set by a teacher they respected highly and often looked to for clarity about complex cultural issues.

**Discussion and Writing as Vehicles for Thinking and Feeling**

Though Reiko had goals for her students that included enhanced empathy for gays and lesbians, her lesson invited thinking and not mere recitation of facts. Questions were generally authentic ones for which prespecified answers were
not available. She raised “why” questions that invited thinking and perspective-taking on hypothetical questions that invited empathy. Nine students asked questions during the “Dear Anita” discussion, which is unusual for public school classrooms generally dominated by teacher-controlled talk with a strict pattern of teacher initiating talk with a question, student responding, and teacher evaluating (Cazden 1986; Mehan 1985). Important to this thinking climate is the use of evidence for support. Beyond the text, which Reiko and her students repeatedly cited for support, students used other sources for evidence and confirmation in their talk and writing: gay and lesbian teachers (Ms. Saltzman, Mr. Kendall, a teacher from another school); media portrayals of gay lives (A Current Affair and another television show); a guest speaker in Family Living class; and personal encounters with gays and lesbians. Students tapped other literary works, making the intertextual connection Reiko fostered (such as the Martin Luther King-McNaught link) a way to reason through the issues of diversity. Finally, these students, most of whom had felt the pain of racism, tapped experiences of this pain in the language they used to reason with confidence that gays and lesbians deserve equality and a quality life. Demar, for example, wrote to Brian:

It reminds me of racism. Like some incidents in racism when the qualifications are perfect. You walk in the office, they see you’re black, you’re thrown out on your butt. So Brian I see where you are coming from, and you are right.

Cassandra used a civil rights oratorical style as she pounded her desk during her proclamation of rights for gays that closed the discussion. Finally, Reiko’s use of a “Dear Brian” letter made the author and his struggle real as students addressed McNaught directly. This humanizing device aided the work to develop empathy that Reiko held as a goal for the lesson and for her entire curriculum.

**Discussion**

This study provides evidence that a teacher can successfully integrate a gay-themed lesson into a curriculum of diverse literary works. Across data strands, students reported having myths of homosexuality dispelled, an emerging empathy for gays and lesbians, and a clear sense of the rights of gays and lesbians to be who they are without fear of losing their jobs, or harm. The students genuinely attempted to work through some of the issues. The study examined just one lesson in one small class of fairly motivated students, and at what degree such successes could occur in other classes is unclear. Still, the study demonstrates that even students at the point of early adolescence can discuss issues of sexual orientation and homophobia with candor, curiosity, and maturity when prompted by an appropriate text, a safe and structured climate for exploration of diversity, discussions and writing that invite thinking, and invitations for empathy.

**The Need for Repeated Emphasis**

While literature study can enable students to begin to alter their stereotyped notions of others, the realignment of beliefs based on preconceived notions is a slow process (Ramsey 1987, 1992). Generally, repeated emphasis on such concerns is essential. Despite the overwhelming impact of McNaught’s essay and Reiko’s lesson on her students and their stated beliefs, Celeste resisted McNaught’s reasoning and the lesson. Three months later, she and Tanisha, who disagreed strongly on gay issues, became sisters in outrage over the treatment of Native Americans as depicted in three novels they read for a Book Club assignment. For this assignment, students worked in groups to read and plan presentations on full-length literary works by ethnically diverse authors. Two years later, Celeste identified one of these, N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn (1989), as the most memorable work from Reiko’s class “because it showed me how much the government destroys a people[s] traditions, heritage. And how stubborn and stupid people are because they stick to stereotypes instead of finding out the truth.” Clearly, Celeste was capable of enormous empathy, though not yet toward gays and lesbians in her tenth-grade year. And although I do not know where Celeste stood on gay/lesbian issues two years later, during the retrospective discussion, Celeste sat with her friend Tanisha, now an out lesbian, and laughed with Alycia and others as she recalled their tensions in the tenth grade over such issues as Black History Month.

For other students in Reiko’s class who supported McNaught’s refutations of myths about homosexuality, there were myths not yet dispelled that warranted further conversation and study. The notion of an orientation as something larger than sexual activity is one Alberto imagined to be true but could not yet grasp. Though three students refuted the myth of homosexuality as a choice, the class struggled to find language to distinguish between choosing to be gay and choosing an unconfined life. Finally, while outside the purview of McNaught’s essay, gay parenting aroused concern of a number of students.

**The Need for Role Models**

Despite evidence of homophobia in the worlds inside and outside school, Reiko’s students had been exposed to positive models of lesbians and gay men and, as reported in anecdotes and studies (Sears & Williams 1997), such exposure minimizes homophobia. As students read McNaught’s essay and explored issues, they had positive examples to support this evolving empathy for gays and lesbians: beloved and respected gay and lesbian teachers, guest speakers, and media images. This gay presence enabled students to draw on a wider range of knowledge sources to sort through issues. This reinforces the importance of lesbian and gay role models in educating young people about difference, particularly for those who hear other messages from media, peers, adults, and those who rigidly interpret religious teachings. Even in the San Francisco Bay Area,
which has a large population of out lesbians and gays, it was the personal relationships with gays and lesbians that students at Richards needed to draw on as support for McNaught’s refuting of myths of homosexuality.

Importance of Literary Depictions of Gays and Lesbians

Literature curricula need to include works that explore the gay and lesbian experience, since little evidence exists that sex education dispels myths of homosexuality. Few counselors offer gay youth the support they need, which perpetuates their potentially dangerous isolation (Sears 1992). Bringing gay and lesbian themed literature into the students' "orbit of attention" helps to ensure the cultural reproduction of such works (Smith 1983) and their availability for all students, who can learn from and find validation in them. Inspired by McNaught's essay, Tanisha's discussion performance (aligning herself with the gay author, the lesbian teacher, all gays and lesbians, and challenging myths and homophobia expressed by her peers) prefigured her act of coming out two years later. McNaught notes in another essay, "I would guess that on an average day, the majority of gay men and lesbians are called upon to be courageous about their sexual orientation at least five times" (1988b, 72). Just as the course invited Tanisha to use her knowledge as a person of color and a young woman, and to voice feelings about these identities, it may have also allowed her early opportunities to claim voice on behalf of gays and to rehearse her own lesbian identity. Although she felt at odds with her peers in the discussion, the class provided her with the text, the structure, the forum, and the safety to voice what she did and to help educate her peers.

The Need for Coalition Building

Some educators fear that including sexual orientation and homophobia in a multicultural curriculum dilutes the focus on race and ethnicity that belongs at the heart of the multicultural agenda. Reiko's lesson shows that a lesson on gay and lesbian concerns need not detract from these issues but can, in fact, deepen students' understanding about identities and oppression and the ways in which marginal groups both share features and differ. Among the goals of a strong program in diversity is a deepened understanding of common ground for groups divided by difference, something Reiko's lesson achieved for many participants. Of the lesson, Robert said simply, "I learned that people are people are people. One must judge all people in the same way, and that is by who they are inside."

This search for common ground addressed the need many educators find in schools with students so often divided down lines defined by ethnicity, time of immigration, and class. It also speaks to the essential need for coalition building in struggles for civil rights and equality. Gates (1993) points out the folly of establishing "a pecking order of oppression" and identifies at least one point of common ground between African Americans and gays as groups: Just as Blacks have been portrayed as "sexually uncontrollable beasts...a similar vision of the predatory homosexual has been insinuated, often quite subtly, into the defense of the ban on gays in the military" (43). Noting such connections, as Demar and a number of his peers did, is essential to the coalition-building needed to dispel myths about oppressed groups and to ward off hateful forces that would stereotype and bring harm to members of these groups. The same thoughtful principles that hold sensitive treatment of diversity as a central goal can guide the inclusion of stories of gay and lesbian experiences in any literature program, whether the context is a Mexican American literature course primarily for Hispanic university students (Gonzalez 1994), a college course on women's studies (Kitch 1994), or Reiko's course for tenth graders exploring The Ethnic Experience in Literature.

References


The research reported in this article was funded, in part, by a Spencer Dissertation-Year Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and by a Grant-in-Aid from the National Council of Teachers of English.