Story Club and Configurations of Literary and Cross-Cultural Insight Among Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Youth

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“I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest.” Morrison (1992, p.3)

If literary study with young people is ever going to be capable of creating new maps for intellectual, social, and self-discovery, as Morrison suggests, then the practice of making stories meaningful in school must be reconfigured. Such a change begins with the understanding that stories told or read in classrooms are associated with prior narratives that are situated in children’s and teachers’ experiences, other readings (of multiple text forms), and social discourses. Reading, in this view, is not a matter of ‘getting meaning from the text’; it becomes what Ricouer (1983) calls a configurational act, calling upon readers to bring a collection of images, narratives, and experiences together into a complex whole (Smagorinsky, 2001).

Our research on storytelling with immigrant and non-immigrant students in a middle school setting is based on the concepts of configurational acts, Lee's (2007) Cultural Modeling theory, and Morrison’s “critical geography.” We argue that by documenting the ways a culturally heterogeneous group of students configure meanings for their own and others’ oral stories we can construct new curricula and pedagogies that reflect and support the tacit knowledge they might bring to academic literary study. Our aim is to understand how children mobilize their knowledge of culturally specific stories in ways that relate to the disciplinary practices of literary study. We are aware, however, that like many mandated curricula, their literature curriculum limits configurations of meaning by overemphasizing identification and definitions of literary elements. Our second aim, then, is to understand how a “critical geography” of meaning is possible within the given curriculum and how the story club cultural data sets might be useful in constructing new curricular goals and practices that engage youth whose experiences, story forms, images, and linguistic practices are situated in diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and national identities.

We are addressing these questions through a multiyear, qualitative study of immigrant and non-immigrant middle school youth’s storytelling and literary interpretations. Here, we report on a six month period between January and June 2009 when six to eight students met weekly in a lunchtime story club to share, question, and interpret stories based on everyday life at home and school, traditional oral narratives, movies, television programs, and events they remembered or
were told that happened in cities, rural landscapes, and along refugee journeys before (and during) their first year of middle school. We focus on four ways students developed narrative content and configured meaning about their stories, themselves, and their shared experience in school: 1) Parallel storytelling, 2) Extended storytelling, 3) Joint storytelling, and 4) Reflexive and critical storytelling. We argue that these storytelling forms and the students’ authority over and curiosity about one another’s story content can be transformed for learning in the context of academic literary study if the curriculum is, likewise, transformed to become more oriented to story than the evaluation of isolated skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMES

Cultural Modeling

The configuration process is undoubtedly elusive for individual readers as they try to name what they know and understand about the ways a literary text works on their imaginations and emerging interpretations (Enciso 1996; 2004; Iser 1990). Lee (2007) addressed the gap between implicit and explicit knowledge of literary insights in her theory of Cultural Modeling. This theory argues for a systematic analysis of the practices and literary forms inherent in students’ everyday language and popular media. This collection of practices is accompanied by a review and analysis of the discipline’s cognitive and social demands and the routine problem solving inherent in the field of study—in this case literature. From this joint analysis “cultural data sets” for literary study are created that show students the relationships between their prior narratives and the specific literary tropes, “habits of mind and dispositions” and “modes of argumentation” that accompany sophisticated, engaged literary analysis (Lee, 2007, p. 110-112). As Orellana and Eksner (2006) point out, Cultural Modeling is not a form of cultural matching that assumes people possess a static set of language forms that are then mirrored, for example, in familiar literary dialogue. Rather, Cultural Modeling “highlights the generative role of cultural funds of knowledge, and the specific ways in which one set of skills can be transformed for use in another setting” (Orellana & Eksner, p. 2).

Social Practices and Configurations of Meaning

Storytelling in story club was a new literacy practice in the school setting. This new practice was situated in the school’s structures that typically isolated immigrant and non-immigrant students from one another during language arts education. Students’ stories and storytelling practices were also told and reflected on in relationship with the school district’s literature curricular guides and the accompanying surveillance of teaching and learning as teachers implemented question-answer protocols and skills assessments associated with standardized testing. Across the social practices (Luke 1995: Street 1995) of storytelling in story club and language arts education, we were interested in how students configured meaning when their own stories and processes of interpretation were encouraged.

Working within what Weis and Fine (2004) call a fracture or a place of possibility and change in an otherwise closed system, this research was informed by “an ethical belief that critical researchers have an obligation not simply to dislodge the dominant discourse, but to help readers
and audiences [of the research] imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency, and possibility lie” (p. xxi). To this end, we constructed a hybrid or thirdspace (Gutiérrez & Baquedano-Lopez & Tejada 1999) during the school day, located in the school library, where we could engage children from across racial and ethnic groups in telling and interpreting their stories.

Narrative, Cultural, and Literary Sense-Making

In his analysis of the relationship between Vygotsky’s concepts of thought and language, and literary understanding, Smagorinsky (2001) identifies two interdependent aspects of sense-making. The first is “sense” that can be understood as a “storm cloud of thought that produces the shower of words” and the second is “meaning” or what appears in a zone of articulation which becomes a represented, stable and unified form (p.275). As Smagorinsky argues, these two zones compose a meaningful whole. Sense, in this analysis is changeable across situations, times, and people, while articulation can remain relatively constant. We propose that for participants in story club, a sense-orientation to language and literature developed in contrast with the dominant approach to learning that presented all narratives as “articulated” or finalized. In finalizing narratives, the landscapes of action and consciousness, as defined by Bruner (1990), are reduced to closed propositions; and lose any potential for imagined scenarios, emotional changes, or transformations in perspective. Similarly, Daiute (2004) argues that children’s “narrative texts represent an intersection of dialogues or ‘moving relations’ ” (p.116), and can, therefore, be viewed as sociobiographical activities that are capable of capturing the tensions children experience between “cultural imperatives and responses to those imperatives” (p. 116). We find Daiute’s analysis to be especially relevant to transnational narratives and the complex relations of discourse and power that students face in an articulated curriculum; that is, one which has predefined who is visible in a curriculum, who someone must become, and with what practices—to the exclusion of all other possible practices and stories. Configurational practices in story club were intended to create spaces for informal narrative production and interpretation that would allow us to document children’s dynamic use of cultural resources for learning.

METHODS

Research Context and Mediated Learning Design

The youth in this study live in Alltown (pseudonym), a high poverty Midwestern community that had long been settled by African American and white Appalachian families. Over the past 10 years, new populations of Somali, Mexican, Central American, East Asian, and Caribbean families have established homes, places of religion and community centers. Although people express great pride in their working-class identities, children in our study also reported persistent narratives from peers and the media of exclusivity, superiority, and nationalism, leaving both immigrant and non-immigrant youth to defend their membership rights, in school, in the neighborhood, and in the state and nation.

Each week from December 2008 through early June 2009, children met with a teacher-researcher in their respective classrooms: a sixth-grade ESL class with eleven children (3 girls and 8 boys) from Cambodia, Somalia, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic; and a
sixth grade Emotional Disorders class with 5 boys who identify with local African American and Appalachian communities.

The teacher-researcher also met weekly with the classroom teachers to select literature for study and coordinate the children’s emerging interests and narratives with the district’s curriculum and testing requirements. These weekly meetings with teachers became a significant “mediating space” (Engeström 1999; Moll 1990) for understanding the tensions between district curricular demands and children’s narrative resources, their passion for local and transnational meaning in texts, and their interest in cross-cultural perspectives. In the related mediating space of story club, six case study participants (representing the diversity of the two groups) met during their lunchtime to tell stories.

All sessions were recorded with a high-definition digital camera and two or three digital audio recorders. Fieldnotes established a running account of changes in students’ and teachers’ use and reference to the increasing number of media, narratives, and artifacts children used to generate and interpret stories. Ongoing data analysis, informed by the guiding questions outlined above, focused initially on students’ story topics and the uptake of stories across time. These topics were charted and key topics (e.g., ghost stories) were organized in a separate chart to indicate the sequence of tellings within and across story club sessions. Next, the audio and video data were reviewed to locate specific instances of storytelling confusions, collaboration, elaborations, silences, and transformations.

Four key practices of storytelling became evident in the data, based on several iterations of inductive analysis that included cross-referencing charts, specific instances of storytelling practices, fieldnotes, and video recordings. The four storytelling practices are described next along with an analysis of their potential for transforming literary study in middle school language arts education.

**FINDINGS**

*Parallel Storytelling: Situating the Teller and the Told in the Literature Curriculum*

From January through February 2009, a mandated districtwide curriculum for all middle schools focused on the memoir, *Of Beetles and Angels: A Boy’s Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard* by Mawi Asgedom (2002). The curriculum guide was informed by an underlying assumption that literacy skills can be directly and uniformly taught to children, regardless of their story knowledge, their histories and purposes for reading, or the story itself. These assumptions are evident in the language arts curriculum guides across urban schools.

The curriculum guide for Asgedom’s memoir was structured by daily lessons that focused on predetermined questions, related and unrelated to the story. For example, the guide required the teacher to address the skills and standards for comparing and contrasting. Although the students were reading *Of Beetles and Angels*, with implicit comparisons available in the title, they were required to create a Venn diagram comparing tacos to fruit. The cognitive task assumes universal world knowledge and requires no cross-cultural or literary interpretation. As a result, students and teachers are situated as strategy learners rather than as insightful interpreters of literary forms. In addition, their prior narratives and language knowledge were ignored, even when these would support configurations of metaphor and identity suggested by the story’s title and themes. In
a sense, the curriculum guide represents a parallel text that transforms Asgedom’s story from a personal journey that was selected, presumably, to create greater understanding of immigrant experiences, to a series of isolated narratives used by students to perform literacy skills.

The official discourse of the curriculum guide also situates all readers and teachers as non-immigrant. SIOP or ESL lessons are designated at the end of the guide, but there is no mention of how to build upon or connect with students’ immigrant experiences. For example, in Chapter 7, “Days of Mischief,” Asgedom describes his boyhood perspective and antics related to the American celebration of Halloween. He recognizes the parallels to the Ethiopian celebration, Hoyo, Hoyo, when children run from one home to another shouting “Hoyo! Hoyot!” collecting treats, and eventually joining with the whole community for a feast. He also describes the racism, name calling, and fights he and his brother experienced as children in the small town of Wheaton, Illinois, where they tried to “turn the tables” and trick peers and adults at Halloween.

The curriculum guide for the chapter makes no mention of racism or exclusion. Instead, teacher and students’ goals for reading are described in terms of the standards for being able to ask questions, summarize, define word meaning and practice pronunciation, and use organizational strategies to plan writing. Thus, the overall experience of literary reading is formulated as a practice of “conquest” whereby the story of racism remains unnamed, unaddressed, and, therefore, an unconfigured but highly relevant prior narrative—for both the author and the students.

Members of the story club followed the curriculum guide for Asgedom’s memoir in their classrooms but also experienced more socially interactive literary study when Pat Enciso led a weekly literature class. Of particular interest in our data analysis was a story, prompted by Asgedom’s memoir that Habiba told during class, and later retold during story club.

Habiba’s parallel storytelling. As students in both classrooms listened to and discussed Asgedom’s story, they talked about their experiences of racism on the playground, in shops, and within Alltown. Their analyses of racism included their uncertainties about who could be “legitimately” defined as American and how race and language interrupted a clear discourse for being designated American. In the midst of these discussions in the ESL classroom, Pat Enciso directed the students’ attention to the author’s description of Halloween and invited students’ stories of Halloween in America. Habiba, who identifies as Somali/Bantu, and who was still gaining confidence in extended use of English, responded immediately to my inquiry. She had rarely spoken in front of the whole group, and never at length. In story club, however, she had begun to initiate stories that were often elaborated on or explained by her peers.

The following summary of Asgedom’s story is numbered to illustrate the correspondence of themes and events between his memoir and Habiba’s story. Note that in both stories, the teller’s immigrant status is acknowledged through relationships to place, family, and immigrant and non-immigrant community members’ perspectives.

1. Mawi’s family are, at first, the only Somali immigrants in Wheaton.
2. He hates the playground and afterschool fights based on racialized taunts.
3. Hoyo, Hoyo and Halloween share some similarities. Parents are skeptical of children’s participation in American holiday traditions.
4. A local white woman intercedes on the children’s behalf.
5. His parents were sick at times.
6. Some of the neighborhood and school peers taunted or called names; but others were more friendly and respectful.

7. Mawi and his brother found ways to steal and horde candy.

8. Mawi and his brother played tricks on other kids and adults during Halloween.

9. Mawi and his brother knew they had told a lie and were fearful of the consequences.

Prior to hearing Asgedom’s narrative, Habiba told the following story:

Enciso: This is about Halloween. Do you remember your first Halloween?

Habiba: Yes. I did. I was in a afterschool program,

1. and me and my brother was the only Somali in there.

2. So people just bug us. And then the teacher said we was going on a field trip on Halloween.

3. And then we said we can’t go.

4. And she said she would ask my mom if you can go.

5. And she asked my mom but she was sick. So she asked my dad and my dad said yes. And then she stopped the bad guys and just took the people [who]

6. don’t like, don’t tell people names.

Enciso: So some people didn’t get to go.

Habiba: Yes. Only seven got to go and three stayed home.

7. Enciso: Did you get a lot of candy?

Habiba: Yeah.

8. But my brother hide it from me. And he took it to school every day. And when I ask him, he say, “Oh. Mommy just put it in the trash can.” And then one day I saw it in his locker.

9. And I was like, “You lie!”

“No. Those are my candies not your candies.”

Habiba’s story represents a valuable starting point from which to configure meaning about key events, relationships, and themes in Asgedom’s story. Not only would this recentering of stories enable students to be situated as competent tellers and interpreters, the stories themselves, as others have argued, would be situated as cultural knowledge that contributes to configurations of meaning, belonging, and literary understanding (Campano & Ghiso in press; Martinez-Roldan 2005; Medina 2010).

Extended Storytelling: Jinns Across Time and Place

While parallel storytelling reflects children’s tacit understanding of relationships among stories, extended storytelling points to the ways children attend to and configure meaning around diverse stories and prior narratives. Extended storytelling data helped us understand the tacit knowledge students bring to the process of framing, elaborating on, questioning, and eventually revising their interpretations of their own and others’ culturally specific narratives. Such disciplinary knowledge can be transformed to guide more inclusive, “critical geographies” of meaning-making around multicultural literature study in classrooms.
During the first story club session, Tucker described a Cambodian figure named “Ya-Op,” a ghost-monster who appears in the form of a disemboweled woman in the middle of the night and who eats babies. Tomás then described La Llorona, a spirit woman from the Mexican oral tradition, known in many versions to scare children who wander too close to rivers. Next, Habiba and Sara initiated a description of jinns or ghosts (as they initially called them) that can overtake a person’s body and will. These initial tellings were soon to become the subject of extended configurations of meaning. From the first day of story club in January until our sixteenth meeting in June 2009, five to six stories were told per session, and jinns and ghosts were the subject of more than 30 stories.

Sara went on to say that the only way to defend against the ghosts is to know which lines to read from an ancient book of chants, that had been passed along in her family for generations. A young person, in particular, also needs help from an adult who will read passages from the Qur’an. She also told the story of a ghost that was extremely small, but troublesome, and lived in the walls of the house stealing food from people. But because of its size no one could follow it to exorcise it from the home. Her story concluded by explaining that the real name for the ghost is “jinn.” Her peers listened attentively to her story—which was entertaining and familiar as a ghost story—and yet “hybrid” in the sense that it seemed to link a ghost story with religious practices. As evidenced in the following exchange, Sara and Habiba recognized their stories as connected to religious beliefs, while Tucker viewed his story, and therefore their stories as “just stories.” At the same time, the introduction of a religious text in the jinn story prompted children to describe their bible reading and memorization experiences, and then to consider whether their religious practices and stories were “allowed” in school. In effect, this discussion opened the possibility that story club would not censor stories that mattered to them.

We were aware that jinn stories could easily be misunderstood or colonized by prevailing ghost story narratives. For Habiba and Sara, and later, Hasana, jinns have a specific function within their daily lives and system of religious practices that do not intersect with ghosts as they are known through films and other images of hauntings. This is not to say that the girls’ interpretations of jinns were conclusive or finalized. Over time, they frequently questioned one another’s understanding of the jinns’ origins, forms of influence, and removal. However, it was many months before their stories were tacitly and explicitly interpreted by other students in terms of religious beliefs.

Initially, other story club members were interested in but did not try to elaborate on the girls’ stories of jinns. Instead, they initiated their own stories about ghosts and scary movies. For example, on January 20th Sara elaborated on the value of ancestors, summoning spirits, and the mischief of jinns; and Habiba described the care that must be taken to protect babies from jinns. Parallel stories continued to develop around ghosts and supernatural sightings throughout the session. On January 27th, jinn stories were paralleled again by retellings of La Llorona, a more elaborated description.
of the Ya-Op, and a shared narrative about an Appalachian-origin ghost story called “Bloody Mary.” Between early February and March, the children told fewer jinn stories but developed their understanding of one another’s cultural traditions and religious beliefs, forming new insights about how their experiences are interrelated yet distinct (see Joint Storytelling).

In early May, Hasana joined the group, and told a story about being overcome when she saw a jinn and needed her brother’s help to escape from it and then recite passages from the Qur’an. Habiba recounted a similar story involving a younger cousin, and Sara added that this experience had happened to her young cousin, too. Hasana argued that jinns are very scary because you could be taken away from your family; but “fun” because “you would be dancing all the time with them.” Here she is referencing being overwhelmed or in a trance-like state when your body is inhabited by a jinn.

Following a round of stories about jinn encounters, and a retelling by Sara of the very small jinn behind a very small door, Chris, seated across from the girls, commented: “You guys are full of stories.” To which Habiba replied, “We could tell stories like this for 24 hours.”

Given the mounting evidence that the jinn stories were central to the girls’ lives, Tucker asked if any of these jinns had ever been inside of them. All of the girls responded by saying no, but added that family members saw them and needed help. As the girls continued to question one another about jinns, there were several disagreements about how jinns come into being, and what size, shape and gender they can be. But they all agreed that they are most visible to children at nighttime. The light, they said, makes jinns melt away. This detail became relevant when Chris asked the girls directly if they believed the jinns are real.

Chris: Can I ask a question? Do you all actually believe that?

Habiba: Yeah. Of course it is real.

Hasana: We believe it very well.

Habiba: If you go to Africa and sleep there tonight, you will see them.

Sara: (laughs)

Habiba: I swear you will. And they will freak you out.

Hasana: It’s true. If you go to Africa they will drive you crazy. Because Africa don’t have these lights (raises her arm and hand toward the ceiling pointing to the fluorescent lights). And then they be scared of the light. Africa is dark.

Habiba: At night, when you sleep, it is dark.

Chris listened closely as did Tucker and Paul. But Chris began a story based on the irreconcilable values and practices associated with his Christian beliefs and his self-identified American Indian heritage. The following excerpt reconstructed for purposes of continuity in his storytelling, suggests that although he is telling a parallel story, he is extending the meaning of jinns as a religious story, not a familiar ghost story:

Chris: I believe what you said you believe in. But I don’t believe in curses because my family’s religious and I’m Indian so like we have a pow-wow… Like every three years. We go hunting and things in Washington [state]… Before we can get on our reservation, the shaman has to come out and bless the people that don’t live on the reservation… We believe every person has a different animal spirit.
Even though the spirit Chris describes is benevolent, his tacit connections to the religious aspect of jinns is closer to themes and events of these stories than any others told so far. Similarly, Tucker told a story set in his contemporary Cambodian experience in the U.S. As a tacit extension of the need for a holy book and religious faith to overcome jinns, he reveals that by holding fast to religious beliefs he was protected from fear:

Tucker  In Cambodia…my friends…if you didn’t believe in a religion, you see weird things like nightmares—if you’re like atheist. But when I woke up, I was fine. They’re frightened but I was like what’s the matter?

The extended storytelling associated with jinns began with limited points of reference for most story club members, then continued with shared narratives about ghosts, religious texts, and horror stories. In May, as the jinn stories were more personalized through Hasan’s telling, the other participants began to recognize that indeed, for the girls, jinns are real. In turn, for the first time, the boys restituated and reconfigured the meaning of the jinn stories in alignment with a new set of narratives based on personal experiences of fear, protection, and religious practices. In addition, through their own storytelling, the boys tacitly situated jinn stories as belonging to culturally specific religious practices. Thus, the stories became open to new interpretations and possibilities for understanding human experience. For the first time in their storytelling arc, jinns had a place among other spiritual narratives and were no longer subject to a “map” that described a connected but “haunted” territory.

Story club data on extended storytelling suggest that as a culturally specific narrative evolves over time, the teller considers those details that are relevant to the group’s interests; at the same time those listening work to situate the story, just as they might with unfamiliar literature. In story club however, the thinking and situating process is more available for questioning and development. Over time, the story club members were able to get to know one another and their beliefs as they also learned more about the meaning and implications of their stories. Similarly, in literature study, stories could be selected by students for rereading and interpretation across a year. Certainly, students are interested in sustaining a longer process of meaning configuration that invites multiple perspectives and first hand experiences on the same story content.

Joint Storytelling: Reconfiguring Stories for Alltown

In late January when La Llorona was told and explained again (to a new story club member) the students’ discussion returned to the subject of Halloween. At this point in the collective history of story club, both groups had read Mawi Asgedom’s story, and had been reading related stories including Something About America (Testa 2002), and The Arrival (Tan 2008). Their interest in and willingness to describe their lives across cultural differences had evolved into regular shared configurational inquiry about one another’s lives and narratives in story club.

On February 3rd, the group briefly discussed their favorite stories told in story club, and Habiba was invited to retell the “First Halloween” story she had told in class. She constructed another extended narrative for the members of story club who were not members of her class. After finishing her story, Chris asked Habiba and Sara where they were from (for the second time) and if they did something like Halloween in their “…state …country.” The girls explained their identities as immigrants who lived in Kenya (Habiba) as well as Jordan, Iraq, and the U.S. (Sara). They further explained that Eid is like Halloween because children could go to other people’s houses and ask for
money. Sara proudly described her best Eid when she gained more than $50 from her requests. As she put it, “The good thing about Eid is that the adults have to give you something. But the cheap ones just give you candy.”

At that point, it seemed that Chris began to imagine his own participation in Eid. He repeated, “Fifty dollars!” Fifty dollars sounded like a good idea. Tomás also questioned the girls about the exact day of Eid and whether it overlapped with Halloween. The girls were not sure, and they were not clear, either about the point of the question. But Tomás reminded Chris that a nearby gas station and mini-mart was run by an Arabic-speaking gentleman. Then they both persisted in finding out more information about the practices around asking for money. Finally Chris announced that he and Tomás could plan to go to the Arabic-speaking gentleman on the last day of Eid and ask for money. Sara immediately countered that the boys could not speak Arabic. “Whatcha gonna do?” she asked. Tomás’s face broke with a grin and he said, “I’ll bring you all with me!”

Although their story was not retold in a completed form, the tellers had listened carefully to the culturally specific pieces of stories, reimagined their purposes and meaning in Alltown, and constructed a world where they would use one another’s linguistic and cultural knowledge to outwit an unsuspecting adult. This is a wholly imagined scenario, unlike the stories traditionally told or shared as more familiar content. In many respects, joint storytelling represents the design and transformation of meaning described by the New London Group (1994) as vital practices in new literacy education.

In relation with Cultural Modeling, jointly constructed stories reveal the students’ tacit knowledge about story structures such as setting, character perspectives, humor, and story resolution. In literary study, joint storytelling among immigrant and non-immigrant youth could invite socially created landscapes of consciousness and action that challenge students to interpret and anticipate how literary texts are formed and how they reveal information, as they also point to the ways students can value one another’s experiences and knowledge.

**Reflexive and Critical Storytelling**

As students told stories, they also addressed what stories “do” and what they mean inside and beyond school. Their earlier exchange about religious beliefs, for example, raised questions for them (and the research team) about the place of those stories in school. Sara, Chris, and Paul explained the boundaries they experience around religious practices but continued to explore their meaning in everyday life:

Sara: Yeah. Sometimes we can ask the teacher if we can pray here. In that room (points) I think. We can go there if it’s quiet.

Paul: Before I read the Bible I pray. And then me and my grandmother, she reads three chapters.

Chris: Just like I do.

By describing what they do around religious narratives at home, the students found common ground and a surprising degree of shared skepticism about the relative value of doing school work versus memorizing the Bible. In early March, Sara, Tucker, and Chris shared their mutual misery over memorizing extensive portions of religious texts.

Sara: I’m not even half-way.
She has to memorize it.

So do I!

So do I.

No. She has to be able to recite it.

So do I!

So do I!

If somebody asks you if. OK. If somebody asks you what. What like. What did you read on page 5? You have to say every single word.

And every word is so complicated. And. Really my father. All of my brothers and sisters finished. They don't even know the meanings of all the words. Some of the words are so complicated not many people know it. And it has so many different meanings you don't know what meaning it is.

Then why read it?

Then why read it?

Because! You get a good deed if you finish it all.

They discovered, through their stories of reading religious texts at home, that this obligation was taken seriously by parents and extended family members, across their diverse religious traditions. And they, in turn, understood that this obligation had moral and lifelong implications for their well-being.

The cultural resources they accrued from one another during story club were also transformed in the same March session as they pursued a serious critique of school curricula. Chris argued that their education was missing the value of shared histories, languages, and interaction. In fact, he believed (incorrectly) that if he could enter the ESL classroom (a place he had deemed “uncool” a month earlier) he would have daily access to the multiple languages and viewpoints he had learned to value in story club:

How do you see the connection between the story club and learning to read in school and listening to stories?

It's whack. I think that we should be able to like. I think. Now it's a law. Well it's a law that they have [to learn Black History] because it's in our curriculum guide. When I was in like maybe in third, fourth-grade, we never learned about like Black history and stuff, and now it's gotta be part. We have to know about it. And I think it's not fair that only Black history is shown. But like not Hispanic or Arabic or Cambo- (Cambodian). All different cultures. It's just. It's just white and …

Just because something made history. And that, you know, doesn't mean that... Other people who have history other people don't know about.

No. And nobody really cares.

In the context of story club, and in the company of Sara, Tucker, and Tomás, Chris effectively challenged the injustice he saw in a curriculum that does not include students who do not relate to “American stories.” And rather than introducing parallel stories as they had done earlier in story club
sessions, the members built on one another’s perspectives and critiques. Storytelling about stories that matter invite a serious meta analysis of the nature of stories and being a participant in school and home literacies.

DISCUSSION

A new, critical geography for literary study must begin with a more nuanced understanding of students’ cultural knowledge. Parallel, extended, joint, and reflexive storytelling represent intercultural configurations of meaning and cultural knowledge that, we argue, can serve as cultural data sets for academic literary study. Each form of storytelling engaged students with the habits of mind and dispositions associated with literary reading, in some respects, while not fully addressing other aspects such as interpreting symbolism, story structures, or characterization. Parallel storytelling highlights students’ tacit knowledge of theme and events; extended storytelling reveals students’ deep interest in understanding others’ stories beyond the familiar frames most often used for interpretation; joint storytelling shows the tremendous capacity of students to transform cultural and narrative knowledge for new designs of meaning; and reflexive and critical storytelling confirm that students want to know why stories matter to other people and how stories shape perceptions and values in a society.

The literature curriculum guide does not admit such exploration or revelation of students’ cultural knowledge. Storytelling can only be recentered in the curriculum if configurations of meaning are valued over finalized meaning, and sense, the “storm cloud of words,” is encouraged as a beginning point for finding a way into and through literature. We argue that when young people are supported in sustained storytelling, they develop insight into the processes of forming meaning with others as they also playfully define the geography of their own and others’ literary landscapes.

REFERENCES


