
BOOK CLUBS: A RICH EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

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Book clubs are only for educated women with leisure time, right? Wrong! In the summer of 1990 we established a book club for young girls (9-14 years) in a small North Georgia marble-mining community. Initially, we wondered whether it would be successful. Could young girls with no prior experience with book clubs have rich transactions with texts and one another in that setting? The following narrative documents how our project unfolded, and why we believe our study has implications for every teacher who works with young people.

The idea for this project began to take shape in the fall of 1989. We wanted to work on a collaborative project that would utilize our different areas of expertise (English education and educational psychology) as well as focus on the development of identity in young females. In early discussions, Beatrice Cain shared stories about her experiences with adult book clubs and the impact of those clubs on her development. Thus, it seemed only natural, and perhaps innovative, to consider the

possibility of "doing" book clubs with younger girls.

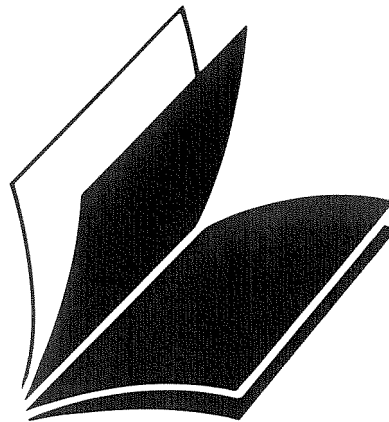
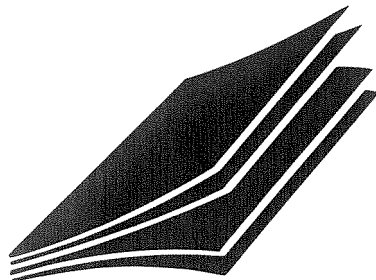
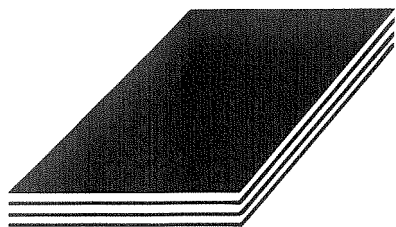
The study *really* came together for us when one of our students in teacher education, Suzette Hermann, agreed to collaborate with us on the project as a Student Assistant for Leadership in Teaching (SALT). She was willing to start a book club with some North Georgia girls who lived in a small marble-mining community near her present home. She agreed to serve as leader of the book club since she knew these girls and their community. Her assistance proved valuable. By March, 1990, she had a group of 11 willing participants. With the support of the A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service and a Kennesaw State College Faculty Development Grant, a book club for these girls was established.

In April, the girls met and selected the books they would read for the summer. The books from which they made their selections were texts recommended in recent *ALAN Reviews* published by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents within the National Council of Teachers of English. Each of the books contained a carefully developed female character. These books were purchased and freely given to each of the participants as tokens of our appreciation for their assistance with the book club project.

On June 21, we launched our first book club discussion. Each week for

10 weeks we read one of the novels and discussed it in relation to the theme of the book club: *what it means to be a young woman*. The first book club meetings were punctuated by bursts of animated discussion and long awkward silences. When the young women talked, however, they often told stories that reflected the issues and concerns that dominated their lives. These stories, in conjunction with discussions of the texts, provided a context for rich transactions. By "rich transactions," we mean that the girls produced new renderings and envisionments of the texts as they brought them alive in their minds and in our book club discussions. We could not be certain that everyone was reading the texts; however, it was obvious that almost everyone was thinking about the themes discussed in relation to the texts. The journal entries and sporadic discussion indicated that this was so.

At the seventh meeting, a discussion of the only text with black characters, *Secret of Gumbo Grove* by Eleanora Tate, led to personal stories from multiple book club members. Margaret, a young black woman who participated in the club, had initially withdrawn from the discussions. When the club discussed this book,



she changed. What follows is a recreation of Margaret's transactions with *Secret of Gumbo Grove*, as recorded on videotape, in Margaret's personal journal, and in a follow-up interview shortly after the book club sessions ended. Note how she relates to the text in a personally meaningful way and how her transactions with the text lead to Margaret's quest for knowledge of her heritage.

On this late July afternoon, book club members were seated around a red-and-white tablecloth covered with food, drink and books. Margaret, who had already recorded her transaction with the *Secret of Gumbo Grove* in her journal entry below, made efforts throughout the book club session to refine and enlarge upon it:

"The *Secret of Gumbo Grove* was a really, really special book for me. I thought some of the secrets that nobody wanted to talk about should be brought back. I like books that talk about black folks back before my time and the things they did. I could see myself in the story taking notes and trying to write a book about the history. Raisin is the kind of girl that tries to prove the history teacher was wrong about there being no history of black folks. I like that in Raisin, being strong and trying to find out about things."

(During a book club meeting. . .)

Beatrice: Well, how do you feel about the family in the book?

Margaret: I like the way they talk because I've got some cousins that talk like that. I can relate to the way they talk because I've got family from all over the world—from South Carolina and in Dalton. A lot of them up there

they talk like they come from the South. And then, I've got some cousins from Ohio and they talk like city people, so I can relate to how they talk Southern.

I also felt that Raisin's dad was too mean because he didn't like Raisin sticking her nose in other people's business. And I didn't like her history teacher saying that nobody around there had done anything worth talking about. Raisin didn't like that either because she knew about Sojourner Truth, and Raisin was determined to find out about the history of the people of her country.

When I got done reading this book, I started thinking that if we had a history book of everybody's history around here—about what people used to do—and somebody got that big old book and started reading about her people, and then there was an old grave with somebody's relatives in it, I bet somebody would want to go and dig it up and clean it up and show them that there is where their relatives are, right there. And then they would want to read about what those relatives did.

(Later. . .)

Susan: You know.

This is the only book we have read that has black people in it. I like stories with black people in them.

Margaret: That's what I like about black history is hearing about black folks. I mean it's no offense or anything, but I like reading about

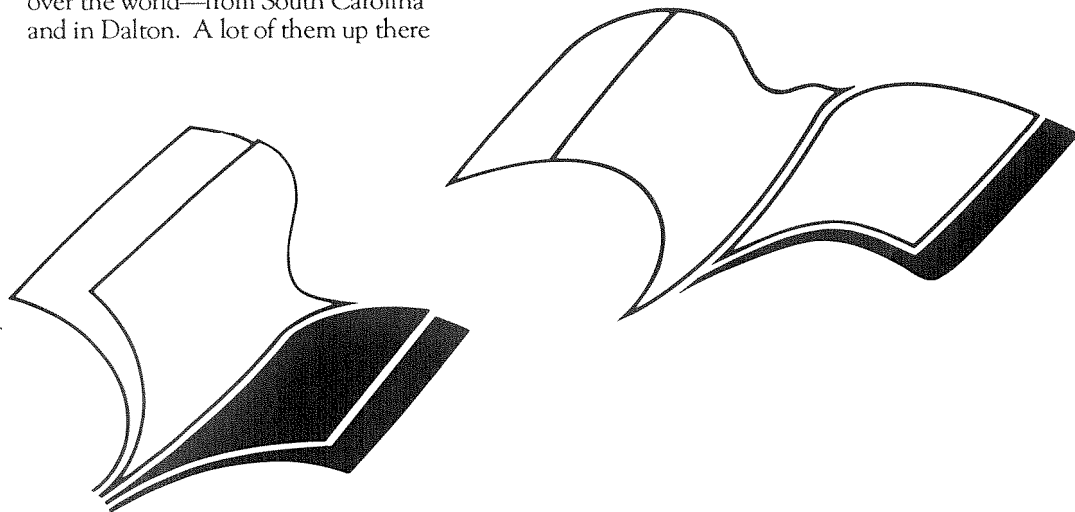
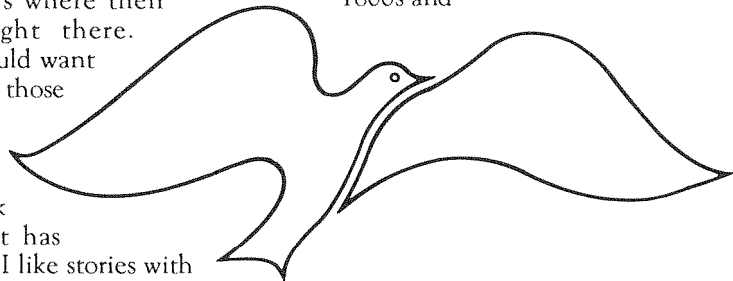
black folks and what they did. If they had a history book of Sojourner Truth, I'd like to pick it up and sit for two hours and read it. . . I mean it's no offense or anything, but at school I just can't stand to read about white people, and when they start talking about white people, I just want to stomp out.

(The discussion continued. . .)

Susan: Margaret, maybe you should write a black history book.

Beatrice: That would be marvelous.

Margaret: Yeah. That's what I want to do. I mean, I try to get started on it sometimes. We had to do a report on Sojourner Truth and I still got my paper and I made an A+ on it. And what she did was . . . and I mean I picture myself as being this woman. This is my hero right here! It's funny too. I think it was her master, but he didn't want her to see her family, and even if she did they would beat her or something like that. And it was back in the 1800s and



she spoke out for slave women. And she tried an underground railroad and she led these women to freedom. And I thought that was neat. And she led about two hundred. And if she were ever caught, they would have hung her, but she died as a hero – to me she did. And I just liked Sojourner Truth. And she changed her name to *SOJOURNER*, which means “a woman with strength.” I know about her family, her background, and what she did, and the places she’d been to.

(Minutes later. . .)

Beatrice: Anything else about the text?

Margaret: Yeah. I liked that banner they had at that pageant: “*BE YOUNG. BE GIFTED. BE BLACK. BE FREE.*” I liked that.

At this point in our study, we can only discuss the range of possibilities we envision for book clubs. This was a pilot study. The 10-week period was not long enough for us to know the lasting consequences of book club participation. However, we are able to document that rich transactions did occur, and several of the girls expressed that transformations—changes in beliefs or actions—had occurred. Margaret’s experience is only one example; there were many others that we do not have the space to document.

We believe book clubs are important as an alternative strategy for teachers in traditional or non-traditional educational settings. Book clubs for young people don’t require elaborate props or complex teaching methodology; they only require books, adult leaders, and small groups of participants. Often the structure of our schools and classrooms inhibits the free expression of thoughts and feelings. For example, the reading of texts in school settings is often guided by a curriculum with prescribed questions and tests; little discussion. Book clubs give students the opportunity to establish intimate communities where there is no censorship and rich transactions are welcome.

Book clubs foster the development of the very skills that educational reformers are demanding that our schools teach. Book clubs are cooperative efforts that encourage participants to be thoughtful, questioning and self-motivated. Successful clubs need heterogeneous groups where each

participant brings a different set of skills, experiences, and perceptions. In book clubs there are no right or wrong answers; there are no failures. All students have the opportunity to achieve their own goals for growth and development through a group effort. The contribution of each member not only strengthens the overall effort, but social and intellectual skills also develop.

Book clubs give young people the opportunity to explore who they are in relation to who they want to be. The only prerequisite for transactions in the book club seemed to be identification with the characters and situations in the texts. Margaret was able to “connect” with the black family in Gumbo Grove because she saw features in the characters that she recognized or admired and wished to emulate. Though she had not been very successful in school, Margaret was able to articulate and share her disdain for a curriculum that ignores her experiences as a black woman. Through the book club, she became motivated to explore her cultural heritage and to forge a new sense of personal possibilities. Margaret was empowered through her transactions with this text. If the experiences of females, particularly minority females, are not acknowledged by the traditional school curriculum, then book clubs for young girls become an important vehicle for exploring and shaping their identities as females.

Book clubs can certainly be incorporated into the traditional educational setting, but in the absence of a restructuring of the classroom environment and an acceptance of divergent ways of thinking about teaching and learning, book clubs can be scheduled after class, in the afternoon or evening, even on weekends. The book club experience has potential to enhance and enrich the life of any young person, male or female. Its use with small groups in a wide range of settings must be considered as an important educational development. Young people can share their personal stories as they read about the experiences of other young people and use the wisdom reaped from both to create a richer sense of self. Habits formed through book club participation may be habits that last a lifetime; habits that lead to lifelong learning and personal reflection. ●

BOOK REVIEW

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Shaping Higher Education's Future: Demographic Realities and Opportunities, 1990-2000 by Arthur Levine and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.

The most compelling sentences in Arthur Levine and Associates' recent book forecasting demographic trends are the following: “*Don't trust demographers*” and “*Demography is not destiny in higher education.*” These two statements pinpoint the promises and inadequacies of using current census figures to foretell the enrollment size and makeup of colleges in the year 2000. They also exemplify my own mixed reaction to *Shaping Higher Education's Future*, whose subtitle *Demographic Realities and Opportunities, 1990-2000* is a more accurate description of the book's usefulness for administrators, faculty, and others interested in what students the next decade will bring to our admissions offices and classes.

In one sense, this collection of essays from a two-day symposium on higher education sponsored by the Ford Foundation touches upon a very important matter for some colleges: *their survival*. At more fortunate places, such as Kennesaw State, the essays have implications for curriculum change and diversity of the student population. But for Kennesaw State readers the primary interest is in the main editor, Arthur Levine, speaker at last fall's Faculty Forum and in Ernest Boyer, co-author of *A Quest for Common Learning*, the philosophical progenitors of Kennesaw State's new Core Curriculum. Dr. Levine is responsible for both the introduction and conclusion of this book, a vivid anecdotal introduction and a conclusion suggesting far-reaching societal and curricular changes, possibly the book's reason for being.