

Reading The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao in Dominican-Haitian¹: Analyzing a Literacy
Interventions Approach

Literacy Interventions

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¹ This refers to the fact that reading this text has been a collaborative approach, as one of the students Edgar is Dominican, and I am in fact Haitian-American. The hyphen serves to connect our identities, and how they in turn informed our reading.

I have been reading since I was three. It is not a chore, or a task to be crossed off the to-do list; it is transportation out of my life. Closet doors leading to new worlds, boats crossing different islands, and the synapses of my brain firing off like a red-eye jet taxiing the runway at JFK. Clearly, I enjoy it, escaping briefly to explore the topography of regions that I may never in reality experience all the while staying local on the number two train to the Brooklyn College-Flatbush Avenue stop known colloquially as “The Junction.”

Navigating the different lands of reading including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, where one finds capital cities of drama, fairy tales, fantasy, autobiography, and more, require a mental agility forged at the intersection of words, language, syntax, semantics, and grapho-phonics. This process does not occur overnight. For example, atoms of particular knowledge are required to understand the wording of theories, data and findings of experiments. But what if you are not a part of that special control group familiar with the facts, and cannot determine the correlation between the variables being presented via text with your life?

The Beginning

This has been the case in working with two 16 year-old boys, Felix² and Edgar, attending high school, located on the west side of Manhattan. Each young man plays a part in the narrative of his literacy, and in agreeing to work with me have provided parts for the construction of a story. It has been my hope not only to transfer knowledge, but also to use that knowledge to transform how they interact with their education.

I last saw Felix in early April, before he was whisked away for a three-week trip to Mexico. Our interactions led me to believe that he formulated an idea that school is about finishing. This was demonstrated through his main goal for our literacy intervention work, which

² Please note that all names have been changed to protect the identity of the students.

was to help him graduate. He displayed an attitude of compliance towards education. He sought to provide teachers with the right answer, without making connections or attempting to build understanding for himself.

Graduation was an achievable goal. Felix has two characteristics that he has not identified as resources that would have enabled him to achieve this goal: (1) a sense of humor, (2) common sense or street smarts. Both traits are useful in the process of critical thinking. In order to help a student develop academic literacy a teacher must have an attitude of abundance. By this I mean asking the question, what resources does this student have? How can using those resources help achieve an authentic rather than a coercive learning experience? Felix has been operating within the competing dichotomy of “haves” and “have-nots”, “smart” versus “not smart”. These splits demonstrate the use of a deficiency-based versus a strengths-based model of education. Ramón Antonio Martínez uses the term “funds of knowledge”, to explain the richness of the resources found in the homes of Latina/Latino households that may be used to help students perform academically in school, bypassing notions of deficiency. Though his research is in regards to the use of Spanglish, it is applicable to Felix, when one examines his hobbies and interests. For example, his knowledge about skateboarding can enable him to make connections to geometry and physics. His love of the television shows Family Guy and Futurama; help develop critical thinking skills, because in order to understand the subtlety of the humor one must have cerebral capability. Acknowledging these “funds of knowledge” is critical to building his confidence as a student. It is my goal to continue to help Felix discover these rich resources within himself, which he does not recognize. This may be due to the lack of interpersonal knowledge that exists between students and teachers.

Felix in School

He wears an olive green coat in class, and appears to remove his extra large purple Nike backpack only because it will not fit with him in the very small and (in my opinion) uncomfortable student desk, where he is required to spend most of his time at school. During Economics class Felix appears easily distracted. He will turn and talk to a young man who shares the desk next to his. They will laugh together, until reminded to focus on the lesson at hand. The progress card, that he must present the teacher with before he leaves class, is an extrinsic motivator for completing classwork. He speaks softly when called on, and slightly shakes his dark head of hair. While reading he sits hunched over, and the large glasses he wears provide him with an almost owl-like appearance.

On a day in which I peek in on him through the windows of his English class his body language does not change. His shoulders are bunched up around his ears as if he is trying really hard to either be invisible or focus on the text he has before him. At 5 feet 11 inches, it is difficult to shrink into one's self, and the small desk only serves to magnify the disproportion. The only difference is that in this class, his coat is off. His right leg shakes as he stares intensely at the timer magnified on the Smart Board screen at the front of the classroom. He then looks at the text on the computer in front of him, and with his left hand pressed against his face leans forward in concentration, in what looks to be a struggle to understand the text.

In his U.S. History course, Felix speaks to the two students next to him. He is laughing, and appears very relaxed. He is not reading an article on populism or filling out the graphic organizer that accompanies it. When the teacher moves closer, he begins to fill out the organizer. He skims the online text looking for answers to the questions, and jots them down as he finds

them. Felix has not developed what Beer's describes as a "process" for reading (Beers, 2003, p. 11). Skimming the material he looks for an answer, before attempting to understand the question. He focuses more on achieving a "product" or answer.

Though Felix will try to do work in class, he tells me that once home he does not do homework. This refusal should not be interpreted to mean that Felix is an illiterate reader; he is a reluctant and dependent reader. His non-reading is selective. The evidence for this is that he enjoys the young-adult Percy Jackson book series, about a boy who is half god. He demonstrates dependent reading behaviors including recognizing causal relationships, recalling information, creating questions about a text and organizing thoughts, that cause him to stumble and struggle (Beers, 2003).

Felix is surviving, not thriving, within this highly stressful place called school. How do I help Felix recognize the transactional nature of reading? He reads not for meaning, but to try to find the answers to questions teachers are posing. How do I help him make inferences, and think about questions not just as "tests" but also as helping him figure out a story? How do I help him scaffold and organize his thoughts? For this young man, school has become a high-stakes environment. Earlier in the year he was told, by his guidance counselor, that he was in danger of not graduating. His biggest fear aside from losing his mom is being the oldest kid in the classroom and not graduating. The shame and stigma associated with not passing a class weighs heavily upon him. I believe that Felix is not only afraid of failure, but that he has internalized it. I was afraid of failing him; uncertain whether or not our one-on-one time could make a difference.

For Edgar and Felix, success in literacy depends on working within the zone of proximal development, or the area in which they feel successful. Building up their competency is

extremely important in order to help them “struggle” or build stamina when working through text (Beers, 2003, p. 16).

In working with the two readers, the point of greatest point of divergence happened with the struggle. With Felix, if a word or idea proves to be a greater challenge than anticipated, it is at this juncture, that the process of trying to figure it out is quickly neglected. Edgar, will ask for help, but continue to sound it out in the process. He practices how to learn.

When readers come to unfamiliar words, they do a fast search through their cognitive word stores for similar words with the same letters in the same places. They then use these analogs to come up with possible pronunciation that they try out and crosscheck with meaning. (Beers, 2003, p. 239)

I observed that when Felix gets to a word he doesn't know how to pronounce, with encouragement he was willing to decode or sound it out; he was willing to participate in our sessions, but as you will see not in school.

An Educator's Failed Attempt

Paolo Freire's writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

However, the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires (1970).

In the end, for Felix, I believe fear outweighed the possibility of his becoming an independent reader, the fear of failure, the fear of struggle, the fear of admitting that sometimes it is easier to be someone everyone else expects you to be, than who you would rather be. Is his family complicit in his decline? The answer is possibly, especially when considering he has been taken away for a three-week trip. Is the school responsible for not trying to convey the seriousness of Felix's situation?

His English teacher repeatedly shakes her head, “It’s Felix,” and one day I am surprised that I shake mine back. And what role does Felix play? As documented in the notebook, he skips school, and will in all likelihood repeat junior year. As Pedro Noguera points out in his writing about students of color, “Recognizing that Black males are not merely passive victims, but may also be active agents in their own failure, means that interventions designed to help them must take this into account.”

As reading is active, intervention must also be active. Literacy specialists, special educators, and general educators must be willing to care not only about whether or not a student passes or fails, but whether or not the student is living fully. As an independent reader I know and have experienced the transformative nature of words, and the ability it provides for the navigation of worlds beyond my own. Felix is cognizant of the pragmatic nature of reading, operating within the four cueing systems of reading. Dr. Janette M. Hughes, an associate professor of education at the University of Ontario Institute of technology describes the systems as (1) Grapho-phonemic or knowing about print, (2) Syntactic or knowing about language, (3) Semantic or knowing about words and the world (4) Pragmatic or knowing about the purposes or functions of reading.

Since Felix has formulated the idea that school is about finishing, to him the function of reading is pragmatic. He needs the right answer, and does not tap into the semantic function of reading, which would allow him to make connections and attempt to build understanding for himself. Consequently, in order for Felix to become an independent reader he must experience the disruption of the negative schema he has developed through the years about success, failure, and school. This is demonstrated through his main goal for our literacy intervention work, which

was to help him graduate. His attitude is one of compliance, rather than cooperation towards education.

In comparison, Edgar, whom I have worked with for a few weeks, integrates his intra and interpersonal life into the reading experience. Edgar is a first-generation, Dominican-American, who after being born in the U.S. was raised in the Dominican Republic until he was about seven. His first memory of his mother is one of fear. He recalls hiding behind his abuela peeking out at this strange woman. His older brother who remembered his mother had no such fear. Edgar speaks English with a slight accent, and has a tendency to leave off 's' and mispronounce vowel sounds. His goal is not to graduate high school but to integrate his life with knowing how to learn. He recognizes that knowing how to learn requires reading. In *A Holistic View of Reading: Theoretical Understandings*, Goodman et al (1987) write that language is a process. Independent readers understand that it is not passive, but an act in which one participates and responds. Therefore, argues, Goodman et al, reading models need to treat reading as language. In working with Edgar and Felix, I saw the effects of interacting through the "communication of ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions through shared syntactic systems in the same way oral language does" (Goodman et al, 1987).

A Brief Note on Technology

Unlike Felix, Edgar is not intimidated when confronted with dense text on a screen. During our working sessions, he uses Google docs to share information with me, and corrects multimodal projects (samples attached). For both Edgar and Felix paper is beneficial, and I believe that for literacy interventions to be successful teachers must be willing to make such accommodations.

Edgar asked that I teach him how to read in order to take tests. Upon returning from Spring Break, I decided it would be best to teach him how to do this by exposing him to the texts he would most likely encounter on the NYS Regents exam. Using Horace Greely's text "A Prayer of Twenty Millions" Edgar and I are going over literary strategies for taking the NYS Regents. The questions (see attached) that we are asking can also serve as guides for making reading active. With Edgar, I will take texts that are used for testing purposes and teach him and code-based and not meaning-based strategies. My reasoning is that on the exams there will be no pictures, nor will he have time to re-read sentences. My goal is to help him by teaching how to "fully analyze the orthographic and phonological features of printed words...increasing the likelihood that those words will be recognized in subsequent encounters" (Gelzheiser et. al, 2011).

Working with Felix taught me that vocabulary can be a high school student's biggest struggle. Words including exotic, originating, and disadvantage were difficult for him to comprehend. His inability to situate a word in context, has taught him the power of "Googling" it. The internet provides, a simple and effective way of figuring out the meaning of the word, and replacing the word with its definition in context to make meaning. Google has helped Felix acquire "facility and confidence with vocabulary", aiding in the development of a different attitude towards vocabulary (Cunningham, 2009, p. 185). I wanted Edgar to experience the same reduction in cognitive load as Felix, and provide him with a different perspective on meaning making. I have learned that Google is useful in mediating the interactions of a student's cognitive, social, and emotional confidences when reading. Consequently, instead of worrying about what he does not understand, he becomes independent, and is able to figure out what is confusing him.

Edgar and I completed pre-reading for the Greeley text, which included vociferously, eradication, sentiments (a word that Edgar previously had trouble with during the miscue analysis – see attached analysis) appropriation, preposterous, futile, and emancipation. These are not *high-frequency* words, and challenges are the norm. However, when listening to Edgar read I notice that he skips high-frequency words including a, the, is, and to (Cunningham, 2009).

The first problem many children have with the high-frequency words is that most of them have no meaning... words like are, is, and have are functional, connecting, abstract words that children cannot connect meaning to. How do you explain, demonstrate, or otherwise make sense of words like of, for, and from?

As Edgar and I continue our work through May, I will use association to help with the process of meaning making. Cunningham (2009) recommends the use of pictures to help kids make the connection. At 16, I am not sure Edgar would appreciate flash cards with pictures, and will instead employ what eText, which is “electronic text supplemented with rewording, description, media, highlighted text, or other strategies to increase comprehension of material” (Anderson-Inman, 2009; Anderson-Inman & Horney, 2007 as cited in Courtad and Bouck (2013).

Reading as a Culturally Relevant Process

Edgar is very interested on colorism in the Dominican community. This stems from his ELA class, which has been examining the idea of race and identity throughout the year. Unlike Felix’s earlier reluctance to interact with text, as demonstrated through his reading of Shakespeare’s “Othello” Act 1, Scene 1 during our session on February 29th, Edgar has an easier time responding to the elements of easy or hard reading. Both students write explicit notes during

our think-aloud and modeling, but in order to become an independent reader the notes must serve more than the purpose of producing a final “product” - it must also lead to comprehension.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, does not simply ask a reader to make inferences, it demands active attention, and inveterate readers or people who regularly read (Beers, p. 3). Junot Diaz’s text also requires that a reader make inferences, have background knowledge on science fiction, the Bible, and Shakespeare. Shakespearean plays require the process of deduction, and that readers revise and correct predictions as they travel deeper into the narrative. This is about monitoring for meaning. The text provides footnotes on life in and the history of the DR, but for a struggling reader this does not make the text more engaging³.

“The struggle is not the issue; the issue is what the reader does when the text gets tough” (Beers, 2003, p. 15). Recognizing that reading is not a linear process is of utmost importance. Reading Shakespeare, an epistolary novel, or an intricate historical novel forces readers to stop, cycle back, and ask questions about the text, and use relevant experiences to draw conclusions. “Reading is not a flawless process; a good reader is not a perfect reader, but active, knowing how to integrate knowledge” (Oyler, 2016).

When reading about the DR, colorism, or the Civil War, Edgar demonstrates this process. For example, he led me to a line in Diaz’s novel, “Yo soy prieta, pero no soy bruta,” which translates to, “I am black, but I’m not dumb.” Using the think-aloud strategy he models “If and then” logic, saying the author is conveying an idea about racial identity, black is being equated to dumb. The word “but” functions to distinguish the speaker from the label “dumb.” Edgar demonstrated how culturally relevant pedagogy aids in the critical thinking reading requires. Sixty percent of the school he attends identifies as Hispanic or Lantino/a. In my day-to-day

³ I found the footnotes to provide an engaging story within a story, much like a dream within a dream, perhaps that is the effect the author wishes to produce?

interactions I have come to the realization that most of the students who identify as such are of Dominican origin. For Edgar, interest in the book is intrinsic because daily he wonders about the effects of internalized racism, and self-hate.

Ken Goodman's theory of reading states that literacy is about monitoring for meaning. It also says that re-reading is a sign of a metacognitive reader. Beers argues that independent readers employ certain strategies including re-reading in order to create meaning (2003). Felix oftentimes finds himself confronted with problems concerning the cognitive aspects of reading. Though fluent, Felix reads without understanding the definition of the words limiting the ability to situate the word in context. This should be interpreted as trouble with reading comprehension, and not with phonemes.

During the second half of the school term, Edgar and I annotated, and talked through colorism, using Diaz's text. The first paper, based on "Othello", also asked students to use Beyoncé's song "Formation" and Kareem Abdul-Jabaar's *Time* magazine article on Rachel Dolezal. According to Ernest Morrell and Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade:

If one goal of critical educators is to empower urban students to analyze complex literary texts, Hip-hop can be used as a bridge linking the seemingly vast span between the streets and the world of academics. Hip-hop texts, given their thematic nature, can be equally valuable as spring-boards for critical discussions about contemporary issues facing urban youth. Provocative rap texts can be brought into the classroom, and discussion topics may be produced from a listening/reading of the text. These discussions may lead to more thoughtful analyses, which could translate into expository writing, the production of poetic texts, or a commitment to social action for community empowerment (Duncan-Andrade & Moran, 2002, p. 89).

Felix was better equipped to analyze the difficult topics of race, identity, and feminism when reading Beyoncé, and build inter-textual connections. He was able to connect the line “I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils,” to being black and being judged by how you look.

Duncan-Andrade inspired me to support Edgar by finding text and videos that addressed colorism and bring those to our sessions. Edgar was able to draw from his bank of knowledge and make inter-textual connections. Collaborative sessions (Hichman, 2008), I believe are the most productive ways to help struggling readers dissect a text and make meaning. As I had learned from my work with Felix, think-alouds produce results in that students begin to demonstrate reading comprehension. I was intentional in using Bloom’s taxonomy to help Edgar organize his thoughts. His higher-level thinking was achieved by asking ordered questions. Earlier this year, Edgar was required to read *The Color Purple*. The epistolary novel may present difficulty due to what the author Alice Walker terms “folk language.” The letter writing style does not always appeal to students who take the pragmatic approach. Yet, in our sessions Edgar was able to verbalize the idea of oppression, define oppression, and relate it to imperialization, and the colonization of the Dominican Republic, and tie that into racial identity. He demonstrated great progress in one session with the simple use of thinking out loud, and identifying the word relation in *correlation*, after I asked him two simple questions, “What is correlation,” and “Why is black bad?”

As a literacy coach my understanding of the text was empowered by the cultural relevancy it had for me. Haiti and the Dominican Republic share a long history of dictatorship of the cruelest order, on the small island of Hispaniola located in the Caribbean. I understand why Diaz alludes to the island tradition of keeping secrets, which is directly related to the idea that one wrong word could spell death at the hand of a dictator. As a Haitian, the idea of Dominican

fukú, or curse, suffering at the hands of *maji* or sorcery because of something a *houngan* or Haitian voodoo priest does is very real, making the surrealism of the book relatable. Literacy requires syntactic and semantic knowledge. Edgar's syntactic understanding of English, and Spanish, his understanding of what it is like to be Dominican were pivotal in his comprehension. As documented in the plan, I was able to use Edgar's interest in colorism to show him that reading is not effortless, but requires critical thinking, the making of connections, and in order to teach him what reading is. Edgar defines smart as knowing and having information, these literacy sessions have taught me that "smart" is biased.

If I am reading *The Brief Wondrous Life in Haitian* – I use the word *Haitian*, as an *identifying factor* - meaning with all the comprehension that I have as a woman who has been surrounded by the culture, I have been *front-loaded* with the information necessary to completing an internal dialogue with the text. The *explicit* modeling, read-aloud, thinking aloud, annotation, and walking through text, to identify the main idea, topic sentences, and thesis statements were not effortless but easier because of the knowledge that comes through being a Haitian-American.

Recognizing this I become a critical evaluator. Wolff (1969) differentiates between criticism and evaluation. I believe that they work in tandem in literacy coaching, in order to correct challenges in reading. As the attached notes show, Edgar over a short has trouble decoding and spelling big words, his miscue analysis demonstrates that he has trouble with endings and writing patterns. Unlike, Felix, Edgar does not *word call*, or say a word without full comprehension; he does *substitute*, or giving up meaning in order to match the visual, in this he is an inaccurate reader. For Edgar, errors in reading usually pronounce themselves as *miscues*, or saying something unexpected, which are *syntactically* (grammatically) and *semantically*

(structurally) acceptable, because the text still makes sense. He will delete “s” or “ed” to words, changing the structure.

Using Cunningham’s (2009) evaluation, I am able to see clearly where Edgar used patterns, pictures, and sentences to decode, how he uses letter patterns to spell words (i.e. inferior and superior), and as how well he self-monitors, for example he self-corrects when meaning is distorted but not when he produces a nonsense word. Also as demonstrated in the attachments, Edgar writes fluently, with a focus on meaning, but has trouble with the syntax of a sentence. We will need to continue to work on this aspect of the cueing system. This will enable me to come up with more strategies to improve and empower his writing process.

Teaching literacy, I have learned, is about helping students see themselves as knowledge producers. This means recognizing that mistakes are not a determining factor for intelligence. When writing, both young men were afraid of making mistakes. The difference was that Edgar overcame his hesitation, but Felix had developed the schema that he is not smart. “It’s much better to be bad than stupid; it’s much better to protect your identity, than to be incompetent” (Oyler, 2016). Both students were doubtful of their ability to spell. But spelling is not demonstrative of your personhood. Vocabulary is a distributive process consisting of orthography, phonology, and semantics (Hollins, 2016). As a teen, it’s easy to think that if you cannot spell or pronounce words, have an accent, compare yourself to classmates who belittle your ability, that you are not smart; it becomes easy to give up on the process of reading. “In inclusive education contexts, praxis - the coupling of critical reflection and action - can be conceptualized as catalytic, communicative, and interactive...from a reproductive and assimilative context to a generative and inventive one” (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007, p. 362).

My observations have led me to conclude that the assignments given by the English instructor were in the hopes of making something concrete out of critical reflection. Confronting issues of race, and identity helped the students learn themselves. Themes in literacy are like maps, but if students do not know how to navigate or “read” the map, how will they explore to explore the topography of regions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and locate the essence held in the capital cities of drama, fairy tales, fantasy, autobiography, if they are left wandering at the intersection of words, language, syntax, semantics, and grapho-phonics?

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