

# Arkansas English Journal

AEJ is an official publication of the  
Arkansas Council of Teachers of  
English Language Arts,  
An affiliate of NCTE

**Fall 2019: 5.1**

# Arkansas English Journal

## Fall 2019

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# Arkansas English Journal 2020



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Manuscripts should be no more than 10-15 double-spaced pages in length. For additional guidelines, please visit <http://arkansas-english-journal.weebly.com/>

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**Submission Deadline:**

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AEJ is an official publication of the Arkansas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (ACTELA).

ACTELA seeks a variety of submissions based on the issue theme. Submissions must be original, previously unpublished work. The AEJ is peer-reviewed by fellow teachers, ELA educators, and professionals. The AEJ will publish a variety of articles and materials on subjects of interest to English teachers.



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## From the Editor

# A NEW JOURNEY

“The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.”  
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

As I read the words from von Goethe, I confess that I must smile to myself. Over the past 30 years of my career in education, I have stood for plenty. I seemed to have had a new soapbox on which to stand—a new passion for which to advocate—every couple of years. I’ve been vocal about over-testing students and under-serving students. I believe that novice teachers need a strong support system, but we should not forget about our veteran teachers who are being asked to change instructional pedagogy and curriculum at the drop of a hat. They need support, as well. I feel that one of our main missions as English teachers is to inspire in our students the love of reading and writing. I also maintain that students deserve teachers who possess such a love of reading and writing themselves. I think there is room for both canonical literature and current writings in the classroom, and students should be able to experience authentic purposes for creating their own pieces. Anyone who knows me knows these are all places “where I stand.”

I suppose we could debate von Goethe’s meaning of the phrase “where we stand.” Did he mean where we stand physically? Spiritually? Philosophically? Professionally? Could they actually be one in the same? In all aspects, we cannot grow if we remain in a place that is fixed. That movement, that first step on a new journey in a new direction, is

tantamount to enriching our lives. As uncomfortable as that first step may be, it is a step that must be taken.

With this new issue of the AEJ, I am taking my first step forward on this journey as the editor. I am humbled by the trust and faith that has been placed upon me to do this job and create a quality publication. I am incredibly grateful for the work that our previous editor, Dr. Janine Chitty, has completed over the last four volumes of our journal. Her work has set the standard to which I hope to achieve.

I am thrilled to take on this challenge and begin the journey.

—Dawn Bessee, EDD





# The Women of Mango Street: Esperanza's Journey to Womanhood and Self-Identity

By Lea J. Delcoco-Fridley

*[Abstract: This article is on Sandra Cisneros' coming of age novel "The House on Mango Street." I take a feminist, socio-cultural look at the young female character of Esperanza and her journey into womanhood, and the impact it has on her identity and growth as a woman in a multi-ethnic culture. I also show the crucial impact that the women around her have on her own self-discovery.]*



The young female narrator, Esperanza Cordero, in Cisneros' novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984), is greatly influenced by the other women characters in the text. By observing and interacting with these women, Esperanza is able to find a path to her own self-identity and awareness. Cisneros (1984) creates these women in unique and purposeful ways that portray the importance of the female connection in the self-discovery of a young, Chicano woman. Each woman has her purpose in the life of the young narrator, and each woman, no matter how small a role, is a part of Esperanza's awakening and journey into

womanhood. The women of Mango Street have their flaws, but because of these flaws, Esperanza is able to see and identify what it is she wants out of her own life. Esperanza achieves her identity as a woman by observing and writing about women who pass through her life on Mango Street. Through these women's lives, she is able to unearth her own identity. Although her journey into womanhood is a struggle due to cultural, familial and societal expectations, Esperanza evolves with sense of self awareness that is a crucial facet in finding one's identity. These women: Mama, Great-grandmother, Marin, Mamacita, and Sally, although flawed, have a profound influence on the self-aware young woman Esperanza becomes by the end of the novel.

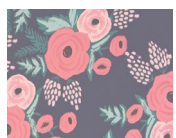
Esperanza's Chicano culture traditionally treated its women as subordinates. Women were supposed to obey men and the culture at all times, never questioning their treatment or subordination. They were expected to quietly accept their fate—all the while being the "perfect" wife, mother, and Chicano woman. Anzaldua (1987) speaks out about this treatment of women in the Chicano culture:

Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them...The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish...

Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. (pp.38-39)

Anzaldua (1987) argues that women were forced to obey these laws of the culture that were established by men. A woman was expected to get married and have children, and if she did not follow this path, she was looked upon as being an "outsider" or someone who does not respect the culture. In *The House on Mango Street*, the majority of the female characters maintain the traditional Chicano cultural conventions—they are subordinate to their husbands/fathers, they have children (many of them, in Rosa Vargas' case), they remain in the home doing the domestic duties while their husbands go out and work and do other extracurricular activities that do not include them, and, most importantly, they have no identity of their own. These characters' identities are based on what their husbands or their culture expects of them, and they live their lives accordingly.

The women in this novel are very traditional when concerning their Chicano culture—they seem to abide by the rules and keep silent about their feelings. The text alludes to the fact that Mexican men are the ones that create these expectations, when in fact, according to Burcar (2017), it is the society as a whole (both American and Mexican) that create this



type of patriarchy. Burcar (2017) argues that institutionalized patriarchy is detrimental to a women's ability to

separate herself from men and her societal roles involving them. Burcar (2017) states:

The novel decontextualizes and dismisses the problem of institutional patriarchy by redefining and reducing women's plight to a seemingly inexplicable and ancient antagonism between individual men and women, and to a form of gendered oppression that it presents as though it emanated strictly from individual Mexican-American men. The novel ends up blaming machismo as being solely responsible for Mexican-American women's domestic entrapment. By obscuring the deeper structural mechanisms at work, the novel proceeds instead to pin the blame on individual men, homogenizing them as a group. In this way, individual men come to be seen as the ultimate originators of Mexican-American women's oppression and subjugation and as the main obstacle to women's advancement. (p. 121)

So while men, more importantly Mexican-American men, do reinforce this patriarchy, it is society that creates the restrictive roles that Chicano women are to abide by, thus making it even more difficult for women to break free and formulate their own identity.

The first two women that have an impact on Esperanza's journey into self-discovery are her mama and great-grandmother. Esperanza is named after her great-grandmother. From the very beginning of her life, Esperanza's identity is determined by the life of someone else. In the Chicano culture, it is tradition to name children after family members; however, by doing so, the children are inadvertently expected to take on the role of this person. In

Esperanza's case, her name represents all that her great-grandmother was or was not, and because of this misguided representation, she resents being named after this woman. Esperanza states:

It was my Great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong .  
(Cisneros, 1984, p.12)

Even at a young age, Esperanza realizes that her great-grandmother's name has negative connotations. She is angered because she feels that being named after someone else does not give her the opportunity to start fresh and grow into the identity of her liking. Instead, she is expected to mirror the woman she is named after, due to Chicano cultural expectations. She makes a comparison between herself and her grandmother, which leads her to make the statement that Mexicans do not like to have strong women. When she compares herself to her great-grandmother, she realizes that her culture is forcing her into subordination, even as early as birth.

A name is impactful, and Esperanza is quite inquisitive when it comes to analyzing the ramifications that her own name has on her identity as a Mexican-American woman. She realizes that her true identity is masked because she bears the name of someone else: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees" (Cisneros, 1984, p.13). She believes that if she could choose her own name, she would free herself from the societal constraints in place for women of her culture:

She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (Cisneros, 1984, p.12)

As only an adolescent girl, the realization that a name is defining and restricting is a big step in Esperanza's journey to womanhood and self-discovery. By disassociating herself with her great-grandmother's life and way of living, Esperanza is paving the way for creating her own identity. Esperanza is able to begin piecing together her own identity by focusing on how she does not want to be passive and submissive like her great-grandmother. She knows that she wants more out of her life—Esperanza wants independence, and is determined to achieve this goal.

The next woman in Esperanza's life, who plays an important role in her self-discovery, is Mama. Mama is a traditional, Chicano mother who dedicates her entire life to her husband and children. Mama represents the traditional submissive woman in Chicano culture. As Anzaldua (1987) states, women were expected to become mothers and dedicate their entire lives to their husbands and children. Mama is no exception. Naturally, Mama passes on these expectations to her daughter. Petty (2000) argues that Chicano mothers want their daughters to follow tradition, but at the same time, want their little girls to become independent and strong. She says that their culture dictates these contradictory teachings that are difficult for young girls to grasp and can often confuse them. Petty (2000) states:



Esperanza's mother is a protector, a haven for her daughter during the rain. This idealized memory is marred somewhat in "A Smart Cookie," in which it is clear that Esperanza's mother is very talented, that she can "speak two languages" (90), and "can sing an opera" (90), but that she is not contented with her life. Mother says, "I could've been somebody, you know?" (91). Apparently, being the nurturing sacrificing mother whose hair "smells like bread" is not sufficient to make Esperanza's mother's life complete. Instead of being a dependent female, Esperanza's mother tells her daughter that she has "[g]ot to take care all your own." (pp.123-24)

Mama wants Esperanza to fit in with her culture, yet at the same time, she wants her to be her own person—something Mama did not do when she was young. As Petty (2000) alludes, Mama gives these mixed signals to her daughter, especially in the section "Smart Cookie". Cisneros (1984) writes:

Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool. She stirs the oatmeal. Look at my comrades. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head. Then out of nowhere: Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. (pp.83-84)

These contradictory signals are confusing to young Esperanza. On the one hand, Mama wants her daughter to be independent, to not let tradition and

culture shame her into being something that she does not want to be. However, she also wants her to remain subordinate. Mama is sending mixed messages to her daughter because she, herself, is unsure of her own identity.

Mama's mistakes and insecurities also allow Esperanza to clearly see her own path. "Being somebody is full of unarticulated significance, but in its impact on Esperanza, it means primarily to be herself and not what others want her to be" (de Valdes, 1992, p.59). However, like Petty (2000) argues, there is a contradiction in what Mama is preaching to Esperanza. It appears as though in either situation, a Chicano woman cannot be truly free—her path is restricted. De Valdes (1992) argues that "the syndrome is there; it is a closed circle. You are poor because you are an outsider without education; you try to get an education, but you can't take the contrastive evidence of poverty and 'it keeps you down'" (de Valdes, 1992, p.59). While Mama tries to show Esperanza the importance of being strong and going after her own path regardless of the cultural and societal obstacles, she is at the same time a walking example of someone who has tried to do just that and failed. Esperanza uses these mixed messages in an inquisitive way that allows her to learn from her mother's missteps to become stronger as a woman, and fight for the independence that she knows she deserves.

Another woman on Mango Street that has an impact on Esperanza's journey into self-discovery is Mamacita. Mamacita's life teaches Esperanza to refuse passivity and to stay true to herself and her convictions. Esperanza observes Mamacita's life as



being hopeless and lonely. She sees this woman as one who is desperate to hold on to her culture, and thus her identity, which is determined by that culture.

Mamacita comes to America with her husband to start a new and more fulfilling life. Her husband seemingly adapts well to the American culture and language, due to him being active in the new environment, experiencing, firsthand, new and exciting things. On the other hand, because Mamacita is a woman, she is forced to stay in the home, tending to her child. She is unable to experience the new life that her husband is experiencing. Instead, she is frustrated with the new culture because she does not understand the new language, is not in a situation where she is able to effectively learn and speak the new language, and is strongly discouraged to continue speaking her native language. She feels trapped because she is literally caught between two worlds. Esperanza observes:

Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat or can't climb the stairs or is afraid of English, she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull...The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would. (Cisneros, 1984, p.74)

Esperanza observes this woman clinging so tightly to her old culture that she is losing who she is as a person, and who she could become. Mamacita is unable to be part of two cultures, and American society reinforces this lack of duality. To her it seems that the choice must be made: Chicano culture or American culture. Esperanza reflects on how difficult it is in American society, to be both

American and Chicano. It seems to her, that in order to "fit in" a choice must be made: American or Mexican. Esperanza, at a young age, is perceptive enough to know that language and culture are part of one's identity, and when these two things are taken away, one is left with a void—a loss of personhood. Anzaldua (1987) argues that when a person is forced to speak a language other than their native tongue, they lose their identity in the process, just like Mamacita. She states: "So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 81).

Esperanza realizes the importance of accepting her culture and learns from Mamacita that she must never disregard her heritage or language to appease others. This realization allows her to feel proud of her culture and embrace it. She knows that her culture is a significant part of her identity. If Esperanza refuses to accept her Chicano lineage as part of who she is, she knows that she will be silenced. She will then be lost forever. Esperanza recognizes the importance of embracing the duality of her being, and by doing so, she is one step closer to finding her identity.



Bellas (1999) discusses Mamacita's role in Esperanza's journey for self-discovery. She states: "Esperanza's compassion for Mamacita suggests that Esperanza also feels like Mamacita: a foreigner in her own neighborhood" (Bellas, 1999, p. 65). Esperanza is an outsider, just like Mamacita, who is trying to find her place in the world. She is Mexican, but also American, and she is trying to embrace both of these cultures, which proves to be a difficult challenge. Esperanza knows she does not want to

turn out like Mamacita—a lonely woman who is forced to deny her culture, language, and, eventually, herself. Instead, she learns from Mamacita’s plight by focusing on the importance of staying true to who she is inside.

Bellas (1999) also argues that Esperanza feels isolated by both cultures, just like Mamacita. Bellas (1999) states that Esperanza finds her identity by using her voice to break the silence:

Her voice resists the objectification of women and the economic poverty she finds within her own neighborhood, and the prejudice and stereotypes imposed upon her by the dominant culture. Esperanza suffers a feeling of alienation from her own culture and the consequences of replanting herself as a new entity. She is blazing a trail for a new Chicano woman as she attempts to overcome the sexism and diminishing opportunities and value on education within her own community, and the racism present in the dominant American culture. (Bellas, 1999, pp. 66-67)

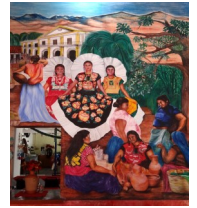
Esperanza uses Mamacita as an example of what she must resist. She must learn to accept and confront both of her cultures—a very difficult, yet crucial task, when trying to find her identity. By accomplishing this feat, Esperanza knows that she is paving the way for future Chicano women.

The next woman in *The House on Mango Street* who has an impact on Esperanza’s quest for identity and self-realization is Marin. Marin’s character is very different than Esperanza. She is an older girl and much more mature and experienced in life. She also does not have a solid mother-figure in her life like Esperanza does. Although they have their differences, Esperanza is fascinated with this

girl. What Esperanza learns from Marin is critical in finding her own identity. She learns the importance of self-reliance and to never depend on a man for survival. Marin’s character seems to rely solely on male attention to survive. Esperanza observes Marin to be a woman who needs a man to feel good about herself. Marin bases her life on getting married. She believes that if she can just get married, then she would be safe, happy, and secure. Marin does not have an identity of her own—her future husband would be that self-defining aspect that Marin so desires. Esperanza observes:

Marin says that if she stays here next year, she’s going to get a real job downtown because that’s where the best jobs are. . . and [you] can meet someone in the subway who might marry and take you to live in a big house far away. (Cisneros, 1984, p. 27)

Esperanza wonders why Marin, or any woman, cannot do those things on her own. She wonders why Marin needs a man to buy her a “big house far away?” Esperanza views Marin as someone who cannot make it on her own—a weak person—and she rejects that idea. Esperanza knows that she wants to make it on her own. She wants to leave Mango Street, become a writer, buy her own house, and then come back to help all those women like Marin—women who are not as strong as she is, who cannot get “out” like she will be able to do. Esperanza realizes, with the help of Marin’s flawed weakness, that she must find a way to be strong and stand on her own two feet. She learns that without herself to depend on, she has nothing. Esperanza understands that in order to make something good happen in her life, she needs to make it happen; she cannot stand



around and wait for someone to “change her life”. She refuses to be like Marin, who waits for that “someone” to come into her life and change it: “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros, 1984, p.28). Esperanza does not want to be that type of woman who waits for a “star to fall” and by rejecting that idea, she is able to determine what she does want: a big step towards self-identity.

The final woman to have a major impact on Esperanza’s quest for identity in *The House on Mango Street* is Sally. In Esperanza’s eyes, Sally is passive, weak, easily taken advantage of, and lacks self-respect. Sally moves from one man to the next to find her stability. Because of Sally’s abusive family-life, she desires male attention for self-identity, whether it be good or bad, and only feels content when she is the recipient of the male gaze. Sally’s need for any type of male attention is bothersome to Esperanza. Esperanza questions why Sally acts so differently when she is at school versus when she is at home and notices two very different sides to this girl. She questions why Sally has to act two different ways, and concludes that Sally’s behavior is due to her inability to define herself.

Esperanza also realizes that Sally is being abused by her father. She does not understand why Sally accepts her life as it is and refuses to accept help or help herself. Esperanza questions her: “Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room

is waiting for you...And you could laugh, Sally” (Cisneros, 1984, p.79)?

Esperanza’s question to Sally is complex. On the one hand, she is asking this question of Sally, wondering how Sally’s life could be different. And on the other hand, she is asking these questions of herself as well. Esperanza, seeing Sally’s sad life, is thinking about her own life. When she says “you wouldn’t have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway,” (Cisneros, 1984, p.79) she is finally beginning to self-actualize. She knows she wants to go to a place someday where she is not different, she is not ostracized, and she is not alienated. She wants to find this place, with the big house, the accepting people, and the freedom to be herself. So, while Esperanza is observing the horrors that occur in Sally’s life, she is at the same time knowing in her heart that both she and Sally deserve so much more than they are getting on Mango Street. She knows that someone like Sally will never escape, but someone like her can—and will. Her fierce determination is a crucial facet to her identity.

Esperanza’s journey into her own self discovery is one of learning, acceptance, rejection, and determination. This young girl realizes, at a young age, that she wants more than Mango Street can offer her. Esperanza wants to embrace both of her cultures, be an equal, reflect on her life as a writer, be independent and, most of all, she wants to be free to be herself. Esperanza uses the lives of these five women: Mama, Great-grandma, Mamacita, Marin, and Sally, to help her define who she wants to be. Her identity is formed by observing these women figures in her life. Had she not experienced their lives and been so perceptive of them, she may have never found the place of true self-acceptance that she finds at the end of the novel.

As the book progresses, the reader is able to see a more confident and aware Esperanza. She develops from a child into an adolescent, young woman in the course of a year. Her observations become more and more insightful and more and more useful to her own identity. For example, in the section titled "Bums in the Attic," Esperanza shows signs of confidence and self-awareness. She knows what she wants out of life and is determined to get it: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from" (Cisneros, 1984, p.81).

Esperanza is showing signs that she knows what she wants from her life. When she does make it out of Mango Street, she will never forget all that she has learned, for what she has learned on Mango Street has made her who she is. Although Esperanza is young, she is becoming self-aware and confident in who she is. De Valdes (1992) argues that Esperanza's quest for an identity is also a quest for answers as to why the women on Mango Street are so oppressed. De Valdes (1992) writes:

This quest for answers takes on an explicit tension because of the depth of the themes the narrator treats, but the manner in which she develops her search for answers is the fundamental dialectic of self-world. She describes what is around her, she responds to people and places, but, most importantly, she reflects on a world she did not make, and cannot change, but must control or she will be destroyed. She is a young, dark-skinned girl of Mexican parentage, born in Chicago, speaking English, and feeling alienated.

(p.63)

Esperanza's journey for self-discovery cannot be done alone. She must use these women to help her find her answers to all her questions. Her percep-

tiveness is crucial to her finding what it is she is looking for: her own self.

At the end of the novel, the reader can see that Esperanza has made the leap from a struggling, identity-less young girl, to a self-respecting, self-knowing young woman. Esperanza differentiates herself from the other women on Mango Street, in that she plans to leave. She has a goal: to be a writer and to live in a big house far away from Mango Street. But she does plan to return, so that she can "save" all those women who taught her so much about herself, and who could never save themselves.

Esperanza knows that she must leave Mango Street, but she also knows that she must come back. Doyle (1994) writes that Esperanza becomes so strong because of the female influences in her life. Although these women may have not been strong themselves, they set an example for Esperanza—they teach her what to be, because they never could themselves. Esperanza will never forget the women who helped her find her identity. Doyle (1994) writes:

But Esperanza will go away to "come back": "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out." [Cisneros's] book, dedicated "Alas Mujeres/To the Women," will tell not only the story of her own artistic development but the stories of the many women around her. "You must remember to come back," Lucy and Rachel's mysterious aunt tells her, "for the ones who cannot leave as easily as you." (p.23)

Esperanza's journey to find her identity on Mango Street is a struggle, yet a beautiful quest. The women of Mango Street help Esperanza discover who she is and who she wants to be.

They may not be the type of women Esperanza desires to become, but their strengths and weaknesses help Esperanza clearly see the person that she does want to become. Her friendships and encounters with other women on Mango Street are crucial to her self-discovery. Esperanza's identity shines through at the end of the novel. The reader is able to see this significant transition into womanhood. Without the help of the women on Mango Street, and without her perceptive nature, Esperanza could have ended up being just another Sally, Marin, or Mamacita. Because she uses these women's flaws and weaknesses, as well as their hidden strengths, she is able to set a goal for herself: to leave Mango Street and become a successful writer and independent woman. However, she promises never to forget those women who helped her so earnestly on her path to finding her true identity.

Finally, by the end of the novel, Esperanza is able to accept herself as Esperanza. As Carter (1994) writes "any woman who had been fortunate and persistent enough to gain a sense of her own personhood in a patriarchal society has a sense of the fragility and importance of her achievement for herself and for other women—and men" (p.199). Esperanza realizes how fortunate she is to have the ability to get "out" of Mango Street and the importance of making sure she helps all those women who helped her become who she is: Esperanza, a Mexican-American woman who is confident and proud to be who she is.

In today's society, teaching identity in the literary secondary classroom is a vital concept, considering that there are many minority female students that feel especially lost during adolescence, and they have a difficult time finding a reflection of themselves in American literature. Esperanza's jour-

ney is a way to address the uneasiness these students may feel when trying to grasp the concept of self-discovery. More specifically, minority female students are those who struggle to find identity at this "coming of age" time in their lives, due to the lack of representation in literature that is being taught in the secondary classroom. It is important to use literature to reflect society and to reflect life. The student reader can use to use Esperanza's adolescent journey to reflect on her own struggle to find identity at this often confusing age.

Averback (1998) writes that what students read in the classroom has a direct impact on how they see themselves, especially during adolescence. She argues that when a young woman, especially a woman of color, processes texts, such as *The House on Mango Street*, she can see herself, her race, age, and gender, being represented in the characters that are being developed. This novel is unique in the fact that it directly reflects what young, minority girls are struggling with in a "typical" American classroom:

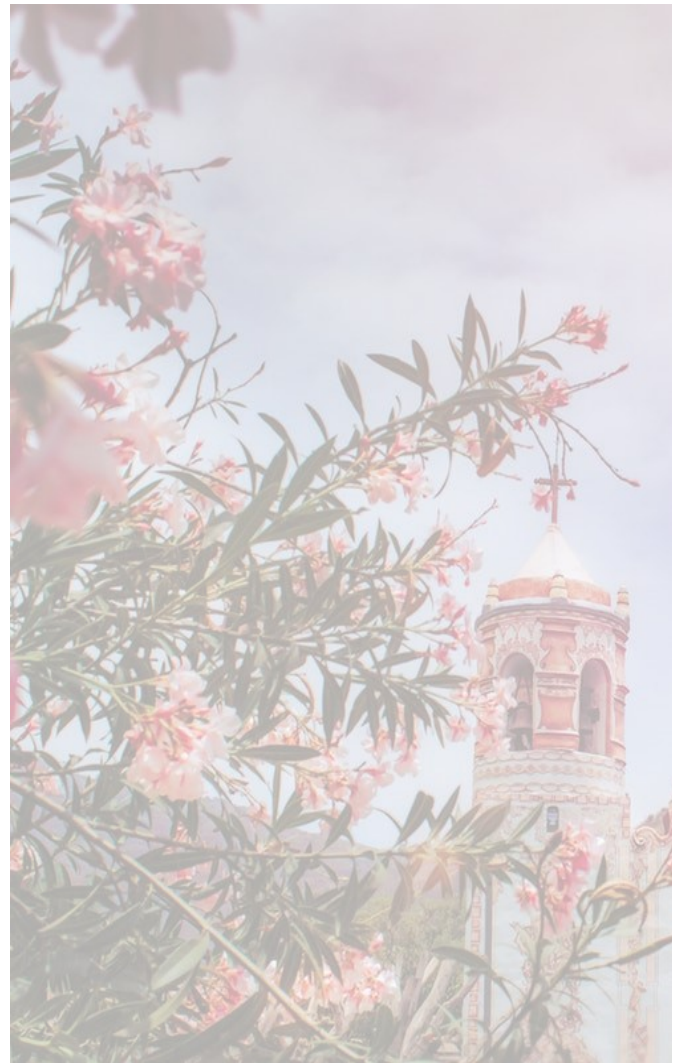
The attraction [of the novel] lies in its expressive voice which vividly depicts the world of females [. . .] The active reader embarks on an empowering journey with the protagonist, wages battles, defies established restrictions, and emerges unscathed as they both discover self-expression and identity." (Averback, 1998, p.383)

Averback (1998) agrees that the power of teaching a text such as Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, is irrefutable. The minority, female student is able to identify with Esperanza and her journey to self-discovery in a white, male dominated society. She learns to "confront oppressive silence" as she realizes that "sustaining the silence means surrendering [her] very essence" (Averback, 1998, p.384).



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# The Path of a Virtual Book Study

By Anna Warner

These days, it feels as if we have won the lottery when it comes to professional texts. There are so many rich, high quality, professional texts out there to support us in our journey as life-long learners when it comes to literacy. Here lies the quandary: where do you begin and what do you choose that you feel can truly relate to what you do.

I found myself at this crossroads several years ago. Part of my job responsibilities were to provide professional development to teachers, as well as support them. However, I also wanted to share some of my favorite professional texts with them. Instead of the traditional six hour, sit and get workshop that is usually offered, I knew that I wanted to offer something more useful and practical. I also knew that times were changing. The truth hurts, but we (educators, society, students, etc.) are not reading. Teachers wear so many hats throughout the school year, they don't have time to process and read vast amounts of professional texts. As an educator, if we create alternative atmospheres (such as flexible seating, virtual learning, etc. ) for our students, we need to do the same for our teachers. In addition, I wanted to offer a training that would require reading, inspire, and spark discussion with educators from across districts.

My reflections and passion to support our teachers led me to the creation of the Virtual Book Study. The Virtual Book Study would give teachers the opportunity to read a professional text during

the summer and earn professional development hours. Sounds pretty simple, right? Well, of course, it was a bit more involved.

The first text I decided to use was *Write Like This* by Kelly Gallagher. Personally, I am a fan of Gallagher and his philosophies. The writing strategies he presented in this text would work in a wide range of classrooms. If the participants completed all requirements, then they could receive a total of 18 hours of professional development. The book study was set up in the following format:

- ⇒ Meet face-to-face for three hours.
  - ◇ This included background information of the author, completing a welcome assignment, resources, and how to use the technology involved in the course.
- ⇒ Use Google Classroom as a platform to answer questions about each chapter and to participate in discussions.
  - ◇ The participants were required to submit and respond a specific amount of times for each required section of the text.
- ⇒ Use Zoom as a platform to meet virtually during the course of the book study with all participants.
  - ◇ Zoom gave us a chance to personally connect with each other.
- ⇒ Each participant would submit a cumulative project at the end of the book study.
- ⇒ Each participant would complete a Google Survey on the effectiveness of the book study



The first Virtual Book Study had 12 participants from six Arkansas districts and Virtual Arkansas, the state's online supplemental course delivery system. We had teachers that participated as far northwest as Fort Smith, and I am also happy to say that all fully completed the requirements for the book study. For me, as the facilitator, the experience exceeded my expectations. I learned as much from the discussions with my fellow educators as I did from the text.

If there is one take away I can offer to others, it is the power in professional discussion and reflection related to what we are learning. Taking a step back and listening is powerful. Even though we were separated by miles, we were all connected by that one common thread: the desire to be better at our profession in order to help our students.

Fast forward to three years later. Since that time, I have hosted Virtual Book Studies with Penny Kittle's *Book Love*, Kylene Beers and Robert Probst's *Disruptive Thinking*, and *180 Days* by Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher. In addition to that, I have been fortunate to have each of these amazing educators provide trainings at our education service cooperative. The teachers that have been a part of our studies have had the opportunity to interact and

work with these authors face to face.

I have also started to use this digital venue as a way to venture out into other areas of professional growth, such as self-help and motivation. We have read *Kids Deserve It*, by Todd Nelson and Adam Welcome, and *Teach Like a Pirate*, by Dave Burgess.

Our technology platform has also changed. We have evolved from Google Classroom to using a variety of tools. We have used Snapchat for #BookSnaps, Flipgrid, and my personal favorite, Twitter. Twitter chats have been at the forefront of our studies the past few years. I also encourage our teachers to use Twitter as an online Professional Learning Community.

Education practices are always evolving, so it is imperative that we change our practices as we grow in our profession as well. Virtual Book Studies are a practical and fun way to learn together across our state and nation.

What books are we reading this summer? Are you interested in joining us?

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# From the Panel

## Words of Advice for Novice ELA Teachers



*Our panel for this issue is comprised of previous ACTELA Teacher of the Year recipients. We asked them to reflect on their personal journeys of learning and teaching in the English language arts classroom.*



### ***The Imperfection of Teaching***

By Stephanie Davis Lunsford

Being asked to write a brief article for novice teachers put me in a reflective state. I asked myself, “I’m a veteran teacher? Am I old? How many years have I been teaching? Oh yea, this is year twenty-one.” How time flies when we interact with young people on a daily basis. This reflection leads me further back to the twenty-three-year-old who walked into a seventh grade English classroom in 1999 to see an extremely young and naive professional - ok, I wouldn’t go that far: a young and naive - person who would one day become a professional. Henceforth, my advice to you is this: these will not be your best teaching years. Give yourself a break. When I think about those young people I subjected to my straight-out-of-college, by-the-book, my-way-or-the-highway kind of teaching, I am quite embarrassed. I wish I could go back, and as Brad Paisley sings, “Write a

Letter to Me.” Simply to say, “unclench your jaw; you’re not perfect nor does anyone expect you to be and your students aren’t perfect, quit expecting them to be.”

As young teachers, we go to our first jobs ready to make a difference in the lives of our students, and we are not prepared for what accompanies the business of school. It is only with years and years (and maybe even more years) of experience we figure out who we are as teachers. It takes time to learn to relax and admit to students we don’t have all the answers. And through this admittance, we don’t lose the respect of our students. We actually gain it because they can relate. They are trying to figure it out just like we are.

When we are able to connect with the scholars who walk through our classroom doors is when authentic teaching truly begins. Class discussions feel natural and safe; deadlines are extended when life is harder than school, and, as a teacher, that doesn’t make me weak. That makes me real to my students.

So when you don’t know the answer, say so and work toward finding that answer. When you don’t think you can get all of the papers graded by the time you initially said, say so. When you have no idea how to help that student who needs it the most, say so because there are veteran teachers who have been there and are ready to embrace you in all of the imperfection that is teaching and realize that you too, one day, will be able to offer that same sage advice.



## *Reflections from the Other Side*

By Darnell Rancifer

I have been a black male for about 27 years, 3 Months, and 24 days (practically my entire life), but I have only been a black male teacher for six years now. In my narrow world, my race and gender were not important. In the education world, my race and gender made me a part of the 1%. Does that make me a unicorn? Yes, yes it does.

It was never my intention to be a rarity in the field of education. When I was growing up, I wanted to be a doctor and, for a brief time, a lawyer. The adults would praise my answer and encourage me to try hard in school. It was not until high school where my teachers encouraged me to be a teacher that I entertained the idea. I was shy, socially awkward, and weak. At least that is how my peers felt about me.

In college, the signs were all there that a career in medicine was not for me. After showing promise in my AP courses, I just could not seem to get motivated enough to learn the material and continue. I quietly changed my major to English education, because I could read and write well. I began to blossom in my English courses and later in my education courses. My papers and my lessons were creative and fun. I shined brilliantly in my field experiences, and I thought that being a teacher would be a piece of cake. I was never told that these experiences were only a portion of what I needed to know to be a successful teacher, and I was in for a surprise my first-year teaching.

Of course, I was a tired college student, and I procrastinated to the very last minute to look for jobs. By June, I secured a job as an elementary writing teacher. Unfortunately, Arkansas was in the midst of big changes in education. They switched to Common Core, the Praxis III was a thing of the past, a new and scary teacher evaluation system was added, and a mentoring program added to a barely-functioning website was a nightmare. Also, textbooks were being phased out, and teachers were expected to make their own curriculum. I had no idea where to find resources.

However, I was excited to have my first job. I thought teaching would be a piece of cake, and I did

not plan anything. I thought that I could walk in class that day and improvise. This plan definitely worked in college. I would say my first day as a teacher was a disaster. The principal had to come into my room and help with the students' behavior.

I thought teaching was like teaching in the movies and TV shows. As long as my heart was in the right place and I wore nice JC Penney's clothes, I could change the world with no work—just a montage with a popular 80s song. My attitude never changed, and my students' behavior remained the same. I was so stuck that I wanted to quit teaching forever. When the end of the school year approached, I decided not to renew my contract and to find a job anywhere else. I felt like a failure, and I had no encouragement to continue as a teacher. So, I applied to various clothing stores, book stores, and grocery stores with no luck. The end of July meant I needed a job immediately, so I applied at a high school and got the job.

I had so much doubt and fear in my heart starting my second year as a teacher and at a high school. I struggled managing and planning for an elementary classroom, and I could not imagine how to run a classroom full of young adults. I was also told, from a well-respected teacher, that I would never be able to manage a class of high school students (that's not a fair assessment of a first-year teacher). Luckily, my best friend's mother is an excellent high school English teacher, so I called her. I asked her every question that I could think of, from classroom management to novel studies, and as she answered, I wrote down everything she said.

My second year of teaching was a better than my first, and I survived. It was the confidence boost that I needed to continue practicing and teaching. However, for me, teaching in those years was using the "Wash, Rinse, and Repeat" method. We would read a novel, answer comprehension questions, take a multiple-choice test, and start over. We did an art project or two, and that was my year. I felt dissatisfied, because my students were not becoming the analytical and critical thinkers that I, and the world, wanted them to be.

That summer, I started to research. I took graduate school more seriously, and in the process,

that taught me how to find authors and researchers to help support the vision that I had for my classroom. I learned that I was a socio-constructivist. I believed that my students' views and experience should be valued in my classroom, and I wanted to use their lens to help build a positive classroom culture. I met Kelly Gallagher. He inspired me to ditch those comprehension questions and the 5-paragraph essay for more real world and authentic assignments. As a newly-knighted literacy advocate, I pushed the district to order new novels to reflect the diverse population of the school.

I wanted to become a part of the community, and even though I lived forty miles away, I made sure that I was seen at football games, basketball games, various after school events, and dances. I started to learn about family histories and students in ways that I could not have imagined when I first started teaching. It definitely helped me to tailor my teaching to my students. I began to work closely with the literacy specialist at the Crowley's Ridge Cooperative, and I signed up to present book talks at a summer professional development. I started online book clubs to push diversity in literacy.

All good things must come to end. I was approaching the five-year mark, and I was feeling myself burning out. I had an important decision to make. Do I end my career at five years or do I continue? I decided that if I continued I wanted to change environments. I worked in rural

schools in northeast Arkansas my entire career, and I decided that I wanted to work in a larger school in Central Arkansas. It was never my intentions to become a middle school teacher, but here I am teaching seventh grade with a purpose and drive that I didn't have my first year.

I could never in my wildest dreams believe that I would be a teacher and be a teacher for this long. I never thought that I could grow as much as I have in just a few short years. I plan to spend my next few years inspiring new and future teachers to be successful in the profession and to not make the same mistakes that I did my first year. Every grade level has its unique challenges, and every year brings new problems and new solutions. As I look at how successful my former students are in their college life and jobs. I can tell you with certainty that it will not always be easy, pretty, or fun, but at the end of the day, I can guarantee that it will be worth it.



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