



GIVING VOICE TO UNHEARD STORIES: CHALLENGING THE MASTER NARRATIVE WITH GRADE 10 BOYS

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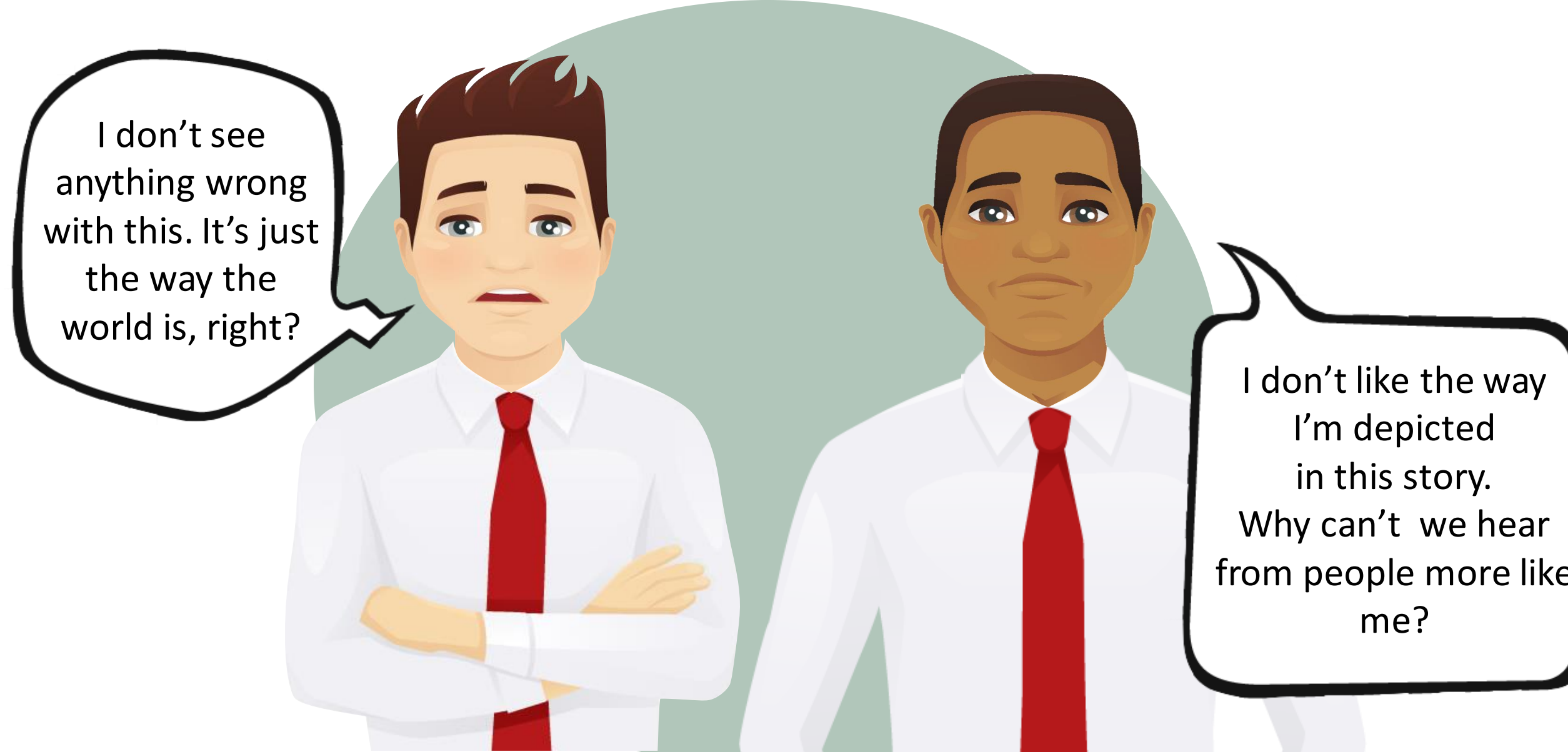
Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>
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Introduction

Inherent in the power of stories is a danger. Stories are the vehicles through which a culture tells its ideology and as such they function as a legitimization of existing power relations, knowledge, and norms. The literature curriculum in English has historically enforced "master narratives" that represent experiences common to white heterosexual males. The obvious danger is that the curriculum reinforces stereotypes of marginalised peoples and reduces the complexity of human experience to a single narrative.

The inspiration for our research grew out of a desire to find an authentic way in which to include marginalised voices in the English curriculum without perpetuating stereotypes or resorting to "tokenism." We wanted to empower our students to challenge master narratives and to express what they believe has been left unsaid in "single stories." By giving voice to unheard stories, we hoped to find a way to encourage our students to approach all texts with healthy scepticism and to "listen" for what has been left unsaid.



Data Collection & Analysis

The blend of structured and unstructured, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods gave us a spectrum of data that we could analyse as part of the research. Because action research favours qualitative methods, we paid careful attention to student voices when attempting to determine to what extent our project had been successful.

Data were collected by means of:

- a baseline assessment of the boys' critical literacy skills (this was repeated at the end of the project)
- field notes
- anecdotal observations
- focus group discussion
- Self-assessment worksheets

The Research Question

How might giving voice to unheard stories help Grade 10 boys challenge the master narrative and, in so doing, develop their critical thinking skills?

Research Context and Participants

St David's Marist Inanda is an independent Catholic boys' school situated in the heart of Inanda, an affluent suburb of Johannesburg. We worked with a racially diverse group of twenty Grade 10 boys, aged 15-16, with whom we had regular contact.

"Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

- African proverb

The Research Action

1. BASELINE ASSESSMENT

Whose story is this?

2. PRESENT THE MASTER NARRATIVE

We selected the 1996 film version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as our text because it does not directly challenge the racial or cultural identities of our South African students.

Who speaks?

3. DOCUMENT INITIAL REACTIONS

The majority of the boys were a passive audience and were "preferred readers" in that they responded to the characters in the film in the way in which the writer and director intended.

Who doesn't?

4. UNPACK THE TEXT

During discussions the boys were encouraged to ask basic questions about representation and voice. Later, we introduced more pointed discussion questions designed to interrogate the way in which power dynamics and texts transact: "Who speaks?", "Who listens?", and "Why?".

Who is heard?

5. GIVE VOICE TO UNHEARD STORIES

The boys were invited to give voice to the possible thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the characters from *The Crucible* through a variety of creative means such as journals, art, storyboards, poetry, videos, and social media pages. It was in the counter-storytelling stage that the students were now able to empathise with specific characters; it was no longer a purely intellectual exercise.

Who is not heard?

6. FOLLOW-UP ASSESSMENT

Who listens? And why?

Key Findings and Discussion

1. A tolerance for ambiguity

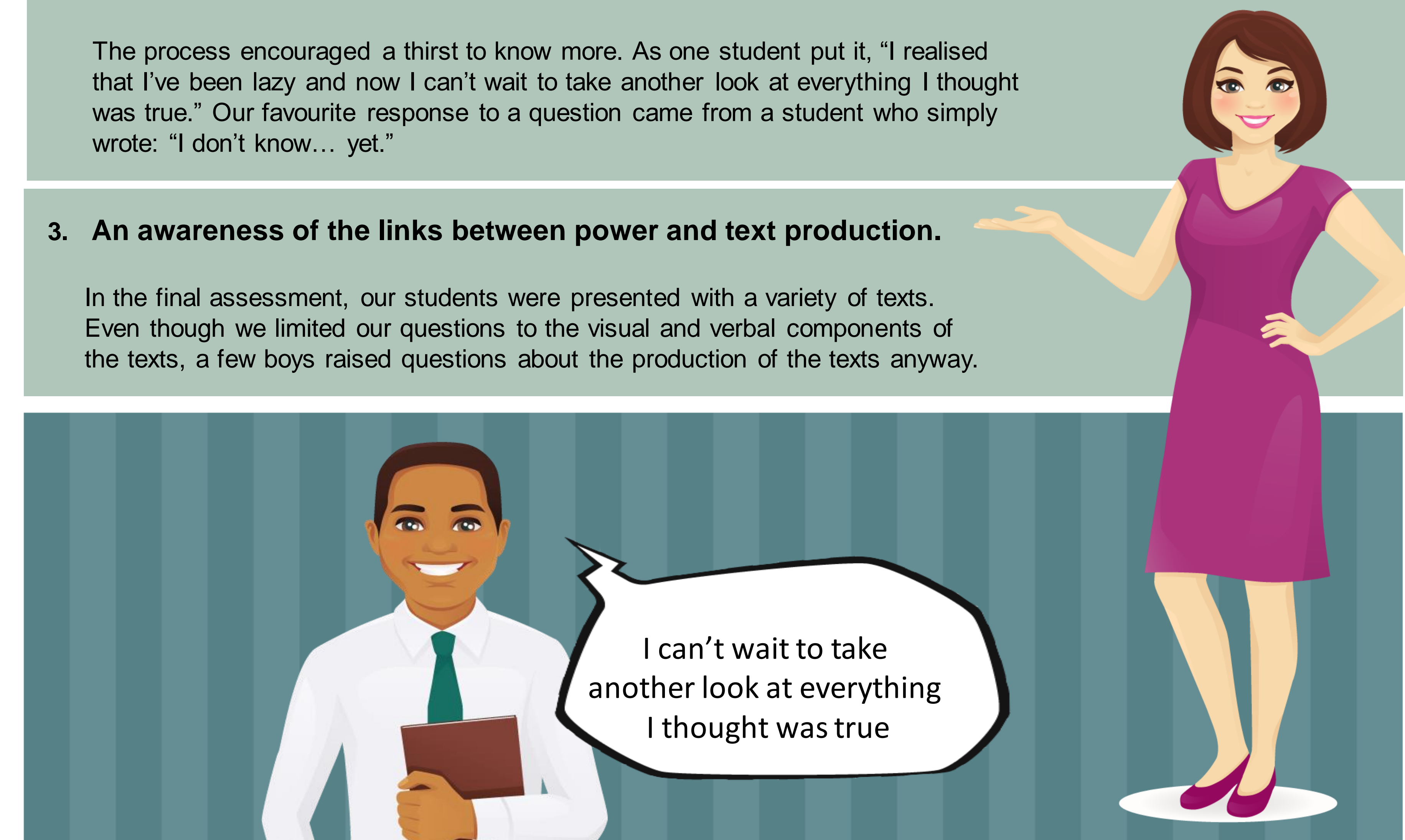
The boys were prepared to stay with a question, despite the discomfort of not knowing the answer. This tolerance for ambiguity was most noticeable in a subtle but meaningful change in the language that our students used when answering questions.

2. An increased intellectual curiosity

The process encouraged a thirst to know more. As one student put it, "I realised that I've been lazy and now I can't wait to take another look at everything I thought was true." Our favourite response to a question came from a student who simply wrote: "I don't know... yet."

3. An awareness of the links between power and text production.

In the final assessment, our students were presented with a variety of texts. Even though we limited our questions to the visual and verbal components of the texts, a few boys raised questions about the production of the texts anyway.



Conclusions

Making choices regarding the literature that we teach has become increasingly important. It is difficult to justify teaching an English literature curriculum that enforces the master narrative, while silencing other voices. While including marginalised voices is imperative, it is also inadequate. Counter-storytelling provides one possible way to move forward. By "listening" to what has been left unsaid in a text and giving it voice, boys are able to shift their engagement with master narratives and improve their overall critical literacy skills.

Key Readings

- Bissonnette, J. D., & Glazier, J. (2016). A counterstory of one's own: Using counterstorytelling to engage students with the British canon. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(6), 685-694.
- Ehst, E. S., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2014). Troubling the single story: Teaching international narrative through a critical literacy lens. *The ALAN Review*, 41(3), 24-30.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.

