ISSN 2577-0551

WOW STORIES

LITERATURE AS A MEANS TO FACILITATE PERSONAL RESPONSE AND INQUIRY

Volume II, Issue 2
July, 2009

Worlds of WORDS

ARIZONA College of Education

wowlit.org

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Literature as a Means to Facilitate Personal Response and Inquiry

WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom *is a regular on-line publication of WOW containing vignettes written by classroom educators about children's experiences reading and responding to literature in the classroom setting.*

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Introduction: Literature as a Means to Facilitate Personal Response and Inquiry

International and multicultural literature has the power to evoke strong personal connections that pull readers into the text to experience both familiar and new worlds. As teachers and librarians facilitate children's response to literature, readers see themselves reflected in the text and learn more about their own world and the world of others.

While some sort of initial response to literature is an automatic reaction to reading, sharing those responses with others or using them as a platform for inquiry and dialogue may not be as natural. How can teachers and librarians facilitate response to literature and encourage thoughtful discussion? In what ways do children respond to international and multicultural literature? In this issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* we present five vignettes that share how these educators brought international or multicultural literature into their classrooms and facilitated children's inquiry and response.

Teachers and librarians play a central role in bringing children together with international and multicultural literature and in creating spaces where personal connections and response are encouraged. To do so these teachers and librarians must themselves be comfortable with allowing children to develop personal interpretations. Our first vignette discusses how one group of teachers in Mauritius worked together to reframe their conception of inquiry so that students would be allowed to pursue individual interests through a text set. In the second vignette, these same authors share the difficulties they had getting students to respond to literature in a culture that does not value such forms of response.

The third vignette discusses students learning to respond to literature, as first graders explored multicultural literature and began to move beyond superficial connections. The fourth vignette also describes students who are new to responding to literature, when as Spanish Language Learners, they take on the task of reading folk tales from around the world and holding literature discussions in their new language. Our last vignette describes how literature about immigration evoked strong personal connections for a group of middle school English Language Learners.

As you read these vignettes, think about how you connect children and adolescents with literature in ways that promote intercultural understandings and consider sharing your innovative practices by submitting a vignette to *WOW Stories*. We are interested in descriptions of interactions with literature in classrooms and libraries from preschool through secondary levels. See our call for manuscripts and author guidelines for more information.

Janine Schall
Editor

Supporting Personal Inquiry within a Collaborative Experience

By Gloria Kauffman with Krish Boodhram, Armand Bronqueur, Bindoo Caullychurn, Kim Han, Elizabeth Caselton, Dini Lallah, and Laura Burgess

The children remove their shoes and quietly enter the classroom, smiling and chanting in unison,

"Good morning, Miss Gloria." Their class is one of eight classes from Years 3 to 6 (Grades 2 to 5 in the U.S.) that come to the literacy lab once a week for an hour. Our purpose is to engage in critical talk around picture books with an international focus. The school is situated in a small village against a mountain; the only International Baccalaureate Primary School on the island of Mauritius, off the east coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. The majority of the children are Mauritians coming from a range of cultural backgrounds that reflect the descendants of the island from India, Africa, China and France. I came to the school three years ago to work with curriculum and professional development. The literacy lab, as a form of professional development, is a personal inquiry for me as the staff developer, while the study group is professional development for teachers to pursue group and personal inquiries (Thomas, 2008).

In the literacy lab our focus is on using text sets as a way of opening up individual inquiry within a collaborative experience, so that each child and teacher finds his/her own passion within that shared classroom experience. Teachers in the school struggle with issues of how children can explore, as a whole class or as individuals, group and personal inquiries and create a collaborative community of learners. "Even though ours is an inquiry-based curriculum, inquiries are completely guided by teachers. Prior to starting a unit, teachers have already made up their minds about what they want children to inquire into. As a consequence, stock responses are encouraged and any deviations are frowned upon or children are steered right back on track," comments Krish. Inquiry coming from children is a huge risk for Mauritian teachers who have only experienced instruction delivered as lecture and as memorization of "facts" deemed important by the government mandated test. As part of the school focus on a curriculum of inquiry, we are examining critical thinking and inquiry through literature, in particular by having children explore their personal connections and inquiries through text sets of conceptually related books organized around a broad theme. Taking this leap of faith and trusting children as learners within a curriculum that is not fully understood by many teachers is a huge risk for all of us.

Our Professional Learning Context

As staff developer, teaching and learning are rooted in belief so these processes need to be supported by teachers coming to understand the relationship between belief, theory, and practice (Short & Burke, 1991). We meet as teachers every Wednesday after school in a study group to discuss a range of topics. We have focused on improving our teaching practices, more specifically on how to push children's thinking more deeply about issues that are important in their lives and the world. My past research working with children in literature discussions led me to share ideas about how we could introduce literature to children to develop critical thought.

Since my role in this school is to coordinate curriculum development and to help teachers improve their teaching practices, the study group and literacy lab as a professional development were an

option open to all teachers. The literacy lab offers an opportunity for teachers to observe putting theory into practice with me leading each lesson created from our study group discussions. I coordinate the curriculum in the lab, teachers attend the sessions and take field notes, and then all of us share and discuss those observations in study group. "The literacy lab and the study group have brought to me the 'thinking together' part. Through observations in the lit lab, writing it up, discussing issues in study group, I've been able to reflect and take it back to my teaching and practice," shares Dini.

The literacy lab allows us to enact our professional study with children and move from theory into practice. Teachers who come to the lab are in the study group and bring their classes to the lab one hour a week for lessons that grow directly out of the discussions in study group. Our initial focus was on how to help children identify and talk about issues in picture books grouped together to form a text set (Short & Harste with Burke, 1996), a set of conceptually related books around a theme, in this case, the multiple journeys we experience in our lives and the lessons learned from these journeys.

We planned the curricular experiences and engagements so that we could get to know the children in multiple ways. Our curricular goals for the first few sessions in the lab were to gather preliminary information on how students viewed the concept of journeys and themselves as learners and the ways in which they talked about these experiences with their peers. We created a series of engagements to inform us of children's attitudes and learning experiences about journeys, and then their attitudes and learning experiences about making connections and sharing those connections with their peers. "On the whole I must say that the children's responses were beyond my expectation as their answers were very deep and the different strategies used contributed to their understanding and at other times energized the sessions," reflects Armand. Through the process of experiencing these planned engagements, we came to understand children's thinking and the tensions of building trust and sharing with others.

The curricular engagements were planned so that each experience built off of the next, adding knowledge about the concept of journeys by making connections and coming to understand a process of how to share those experiences with others. Along with multiple experiences we had multiple strategies to support children in their understandings and growth as critical readers and thinkers.

We started this nine-week action research by discussing literature related to the theme of "Journey" and what it means to engage in literature discussions with children. The broad concept of Journey is open-ended and a means of encouraging connections to self and generating ideas. It is not meant to be a unit of study with certain concepts to master or answers to find. The broad concept provides a frame within which children can move toward inquiry, posing their own

questions, and finding individual answers to those questions (Short, Schroeder, Laird, Kauffman, Ferguson, & Crawford, 1996).

As a teacher study group we brainstormed and webbed out journeys to come to an understanding of the depth and breadth of the concept and to realize that each of us would pose our own questions and could find our own answers, and that these would be different for each member of the group. We needed to experience this process ourselves because the teachers' own school experiences as children and adults had been limited to lecture with no experiences of discussing ideas with their classmates or their professors. Dini states, "Being able to discuss ideas based on observation and practice is not something most of us would have an opportunity to do in the normal course of the day."

"The struggle is we have to collaborate. It is not easy to find agreement when each one has his/her own perception of the topic," states Bindoo. Teachers struggled with the idea that this broad concept would allow each individual to explore a wide range of interests and yet be linked together to focus our discussions and would enable us to plan curriculum that related to all teachers and students.

Planning Curriculum to Enact Our Beliefs

The first session with children started the same way as with the teacher study group, webbing "What are journeys?" All eight classes had the opportunity to talk and web out their ideas of journeys. Not surprisingly, children came up with similar ideas as teachers. Children brainstormed journeys as:

- Going to another place.
- A special day.
- Somewhere you've never gone before.
- Something beautiful, fun, or exciting.
- Maybe spending a day at a friend's place or grandmother's place.
- The time from sun to night.
- It could be about nature.
- Or a change, an idea.
- You walk, go by car or plane.
- Or have no destination.
- Journey might be travel, a book, your mind, something to remember.
- How you live, a visit, a holiday, a trip.
- A way for better living.
- It might be immigration, to discover, a job.

- Doing research.
- Having an adventure.
- It's something new.
- An advantage.

To get us started with Journeys, I read aloud the picture book *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney (1985), the story of a woman with three goals in her life -- to see foreign countries, to live by the sea when she retires, and to make the world more beautiful. The story covers her life from a young child to an elderly woman and shares her journeys throughout her life time. After the read aloud, children were asked to web out the journeys of the main character. "Gloria did not accept or reject their answers. Instead, she challenged their thinking and the children were responsive to this strategy. This helped me understand how to conduct an inquiry and I must admit that this attitude is quite hard for me, who cannot remain silent for long," noted Armand.

The journeys the children identified for *Miss Rumphius* included: Family, Migration, Travel (visiting different countries), Her Jobs (the processes she used within these jobs, such as painting as an artist), Her Mission (to make the world more beautiful), Visiting Cities, Library Work (reading about different places), Thinking, Unforgettable Moments, Time, Pollination (wind/birds to carry the seeds) and the Growing of Plants.

Each child chose one journey from their class web and created a recording device to express one of Miss Rumphius' journeys. Ryan chose to draw a sketch of Miss Rumphius' house by the sea as an end to her traveling journey and a beginning of her new journey into retirement. He commented about our process, saying, "At the beginning of the session, it seemed easy. Gradually, it got harder. Listing down the journeys of the old lady when she was young was just the start. We had to think of something to do like story maps, time lines, sketches, graphs, or cartoons with no one in the class using the same recording device."

Children used a range of recording devices, such as a graph to show the journey of love, a written conversation to show the journey of helping, a comparison chart of all the hot and cold places Miss Rumphius visited and lived, a treasure map of her walking, and a list of all the places she visited. Small groups of children drew their recording devices on the same large sheet of chart paper to create a graffiti board of Miss Rumphius' journeys throughout her life.

Using the journey webs from the study group and each class of children, we read through and categorized the ideas into themes. Once we had organized the ideas into categories, we discussed the categories to come to a common understanding of each category. "As a result of experiencing this kind of process, my teaching practice with EAL has improved to include more meaningful engagements, so I can focus on more depth in children's thinking and more inquiry-based learning," shares Dini. Through our discussion we named each category as a theme.

- beginnings of journeys,
- multiple perspectives about journeys,
- overcoming obstacles and fears,
- remembering journeys,
- cultures meeting cultures,
- journeys as dreams and hopes.

Focusing on these broad themes we could then explore each theme through conceptually related books grouped as text sets, each containing a variety of picture books, multiple genres and cultures and varied reading levels.

Exploring Browsing and Text Sets

Reading aloud and discussing picture books as a whole class was a powerful strategy to create community within the classes, focus our study, create shared understandings, and prepare ourselves for literature discussions in small groups. "What was lacking is teachers having a repertoire of strategies to scaffold children thinking more profoundly about texts and to articulate their thought processes more succinctly," reflects Krish. After each read aloud, we discussed the different types of journeys in that book. Our whole class discussions helped children be less confused or unsure about how to talk about books when they moved to small literature discussion groups. They had experienced talking together and were aware of the tensions created in groups, especially when not everyone participates or comes to the group ready to share ideas, personal connections or opinions. "To close the session Gloria gave an idea of what the next session would be about -- our own lives. Then she sent the children back to class. This is a interesting strategy as it gives the children the opportunity to start thinking about the next step as well as it allows them to notice and make connections to what they will do next," says Armand.

Each read aloud related to one of the themes and was a way to gain an understanding of each text set in the study of Journeys. *Miss Rumphius* introduced the concept of multiple journeys and became the touchstone book we returned to often in our discussions and at the end of the study. This book connected to all of our text sets as well as to each of our lives -- *Luke's Way of Looking* (Wheatley, 2001) emphasized the need for multiple perspectives, *The Pink Refrigerator* (Egan,

2007) made real the need to overcome obstacles and fear while *Five Little Fiends* (Dyer, 2002) shaped understandings of new beginnings and perspectives. "My struggle is to have more strategies in order to think of a year-long plan to build on children's interests, using wider ranges of text and helping children internalize their strategies for more profound thinking," states Krish. I chose books for the read alouds that helped build multiple concepts about journeys and so we added to the journey webs for each class after the read alouds.

Creating text sets takes time. To do so, one must locate 8-12 picture books on each theme and make sure each theme has a variety of genres to capture the interests of children as well as to meet their reading abilities. Each theme also needs books with multiple perspectives and cultural views, enabling readers to find connections to their own lives, have their preconceived ideas challenged, and come to a new understanding of the broader world.

Once the text sets were created, we wanted the children to browse them and make a choice as to which set they wanted to spend their time reading and discussing. I talked to each class about choices and reasons for deciding on a set to read and discuss. I emphasized that they should think about their connections to the books, the appeal of the writing and illustrations to them, whether they could talk about the ideas in the book, and their interest in the theme. I warned them that choices based on whether or not their best friends were in the group could lead to not wanting to read or discuss the books because of lacking a personal connection or interest in the books.

The children did not have much experience handling books or talking about books and so I knew I would have to teach them how to browse. "At school, books are chosen by the teacher and there is not a wide variety. The same books remain in the class for the entire semester," states Bindoo. Students were used to reading to gather facts and writing those facts in copy books. In order for children to choose a text set and spend time reading and discussing books, I started the session with the question, "What is browsing?" Each class brainstormed their ideas:

Preiyanka: Is it searching?
Chloe: Looking into different books.
Shuaib: When you look for a book and you're searching something to read aloud.
Kartik: Take a book and look through it to see if it's what you're looking for.
Keshinee: Exploring for books and...
Rishab: Analyzing facts? The main points?
Kreetish: You're looking at the pictures. You might read a bit.

Each table had a set of text sets in a basket clearly marked with the name of the theme. In groups of four, children stood at a table and chose a book from the basket. They were asked to hold the book and read the title, the end pages, and the first page to get a sense of the author's voice. I also

suggested that they flip through the book to view the illustrations in order to predict the story. They were reminded to check the author's and illustrator's name to see if they had read this author or recognized the illustrator. Once they had browsed one book, I asked them to move to another book in the basket. After five minutes, the group of four moved onto another table and repeated the process of browsing that basket of books. Kids caught on right away but it was hard for some to stand and not sit at the tables to browse. I also had to teach them how to put books back into the baskets with spines facing the ceiling and without damaging the covers.

Once all of the theme baskets of text sets had been browsed, children had to make a choice of which text set to read and discuss. As children made their selections, they were asked to reflect on why they had chosen the set in a quick write. Once the groups were selected, children sat with their group and each read at least one book to share with the group at the next session.

I encouraged children to read these picture books in multiple ways to encourage community building, thinking and conversation, I suggested they could read as partners or in groups of three, read and talk about what they were reading after a few pages, or read alone and then share. To build community and create a safe environment for sharing ideas, children were invited to move to different parts of the room to read on the risers, pillows or comfortable sitting areas. The most important aspect of getting ready for a discussion is being able to understand what is read and so it was important to support the range of reading abilities in each group.

Exploring Personal Inquiries with Text Sets

To understand how the groups functioned and supported individual inquiries, I want to share some of interactions from the text set group that was exploring Overcoming Obstacles and Fears as a form of journey. Some of the books in this text set included *Scaredy Squirrel* (Watts, 2006), *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1997), *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001), *Teammates* (Golenbrock, 1992), *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (de Paola, 1979), *Summer Wheels* (Bunting, 1996), *The Name Jar* (Choi, 1993), and *The Ghost-Eye Tree* (Martin, 1988).

The group of children looking at obstacles and fears each joined the group for different reasons. Keshinee had lost her father several weeks earlier and wanted to think about dealing with loss due to death. Cardine felt she did not have any fears and so wanted to understand people who did have fears. Andy was struggling through understanding divorce, Michelle was interested in issues of prejudice and racism, and Zain was dealing with being afraid to take risks.

These five children read and discussed the books, having heated discussions and supporting each other in exploring their individual issues. For example, after Zain shared *Scaredy Squirrel* (Watt, 2006) with his group, they suggested that he try to go places he had never been and venture out alone without his family, such as walking along the beach alone or going for a hike in the forest. Zain was open to the discussion and said he would try the suggestions. The group then moved on to helping Zain create a survival pack for his risk-taking adventures patterned after Scaredy Squirrel's survival pack.

Michelle, who had moved from Ireland to Mauritius, opened up discussions about racism by confronting Cardine, whose mother is Indian and father is German, about Cardine's treatment towards her when they were five-year-olds. She told Cardine she felt she had been excluded from play groups and made fun of because she had white skin, freckles and red hair while all the other children had brown skin, black hair and brown eyes. Cardine said that she had read books about how white people didn't like people with brown skin and so assumed that Michelle would be prejudiced towards her. She shared how she believed what she had read. Zain asked her how she could believe what is written in books. The group teased Cardine, saying, "Well, she believes in Cinderella." Cardine stated that they had been all taught to believe everything they read in school. The discussion was open and healthy with Cardine asking if anyone thought she still showed signs of being prejudiced. Cardine apologized to Michelle and asked her if she may have also been prejudiced because of her skin color, but Michelle said her best friend was a boy from Africa so color was not an issue for her. Andy, an American, talked about the reality that he still saw prejudice in the classroom toward anyone who didn't speak French or Creole, the common languages of the island. This discussion led the group to decide to look into whether kids who only speak English are discriminated against and excluded from play.

Andy and Keshinee had their own individual inquiries but were not ready to talk about them. They openly shared that they would continue to read and think about death and divorce but were not ready to talk to others about their situations. The group supported them and moved back to talking and laughing at the possibilities of helping Zain with his survival pack and possible adventures.

The Overcoming Obstacles and Fear group shared an inquiry into fear and into reasons for not including children in play groups, but they also each had their own personal inquiries to pursue. "I wonder how we can connect what we do in lab to what is happening in class. My big question is

that journeys and the text sets bring forward much of our personal emotions and I must admit that I am not at ease with this aspect. So, if children study content-based themes, are emotions associated with these themes? If we bring to the front our emotional beings instead of our intellectual beings, how do we as teachers handle this?" asked Armand. The power of a small group discussion around a text set is that children are in a collaborative context where they can think together, and still they have their own personal space where they can grow as learners to pursue their personal inquiries.

Final Reflections

The use of a broad concept and the text sets provided a learning context that encouraged critical thinking about issues important to each individual but within a shared focus. The literacy lab provided this collaborative context for children just as the study group provided a collaborative context for each teacher where they could ask questions and pursue personal inquiries. "In our weekly study group we have grown to value the trust built over time. It's the confidentiality which binds the group and allows a certain freedom to share personal connections, to look for personal connections, to ask each other for ideas and share our failures," remarks Laura. For some teachers these inquiries focused on new ways to talk with children, the significance of mother tongue for personal stories, and teaching as a conversation rather than a lecture. "Study group has given me the confidence to explore new ideas, put into place practice based on my beliefs that will benefit children. One of those beliefs is to value mother tongue and work collaboratively with class teachers to find personalized strategies for each EAL child," emphasizes Dini. Others focused on how learning takes place when children are ready to take on challenges even though teachers might not completely understand a particular kind of a learning environment. "I feel my professional experience is at stake. It seemed that I was overlooking kid's interests and I was just delivering what I wanted kids to learn. I thought I knew what was best for my kids without hearing their voices. As a child, I had just listened to my teachers and never had a voice," writes Bindoo.

As a study group, we want to build on our learning by focusing on the use of a variety of organizational tools for generating ideas as well as responding to ideas. We want to encourage children to think using talk and written responses, organize thoughts on webs, lists and time lines, draw scenes, and sketch their thinking about issues. "When children are freed from thinking to search for the 'right answer' and begin to think for themselves, then they will want to connect their thinking and communicate," said Elizabeth. Through using multiple tools for thinking and responding we hope to send the message that learning occurs through multiple ways of knowing and that these tools can be powerful ways to continue their personal inquiries within class-based units or themes.

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Krish Boodhram is a year 5 (grade 4) classroom teacher; **Armand Bronqueur** was a year 5 (grade 4) classroom teacher but currently teaching year 4 (grade 3); **Laura Ponder Burgess** is a parent volunteer and resident horticulturist;**Elizabeth Caselton** is a drama and movement teacher; **Bindoo Caullychurn** is a year 5 (grade 4) classroom teacher; **Dini Lallah** is the English as an Additional Language teacher for years 3-6 (grades 2-5); and **Kim Han Wai Sang** was the French teacher for year 3 (grade 2) but currently is teaching French in year 4 (grade 3). All are with the Clavis International Primary School in Mauritius.

The Struggle to Connect

By Gloria Kauffman with Krish Boodhram, Armand Bronqueur, Bindoo Caullychurn, Kim Han, Elizabeth Caselton, Dini Lallah, and Laura Burgess

As I read aloud *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1985), the children listened intently with huge smiles, clearly enjoying the book. I closed the book, waiting for their responses and connections, but only heard silence. I asked if they liked the book and received nods and polite statements. I tried again, "What did you think of the story?" and received a few more brief statements. Few children responded without further prompting from me.

After receiving this same response from eight classes of students who came to my literacy lab in a primary school in Mauritius, I knew we had a problem. I began the literacy lab fully expecting children to be able to make personal connections to our read-alouds. The routine of each hour-long session was that I read aloud a picture book to the entire class, threw out the question "What do you think about the story?" to initiate a short whole group sharing about the book, and then sent the children off to continue responding in drawing or writing before engaging in further discussion of the book in small groups.

I struggled with what to do when children do not connect with text. I realized that the children in this school did not have a history of being read to and discussing books or having many books in their classrooms for wide reading. Many of the books in the library were informational texts that related to class units or leveled readers from an old British reading series. Krish states, "Reading is hardly encouraged in classrooms. Children read mostly textbooks or comprehension texts and answer pre-set questions. That type of engagement does not allow children to explore their own thoughts or non-literal meanings in text." Culturally I was aware that books were not read in most Mauritian homes as enjoyment but rather as words to memorize or facts to extract and copy for research and language assignments. "It was not part of my family culture to have books read to us as children. Literature books were read at school only for exam purposes, not really for pleasure," shares Kim. Despite the diversity of the children's backgrounds, ranging from Indian, French, Chinese, and African heritages that reflected the history of the island, they shared a similar instructional history in schools with a traditional lecture approach of reading and memorizing facts from textbooks.

Children were familiar with providing retellings, either as written pieces or in response to oral questions, after reading. They knew how to write summaries, fill out worksheets, and answer questions posed by their teachers. When asked to talk, they dutifully took turns. Each would make a statement that was often a retelling of something from the book, and then wait for the next person to make a statement. After taking their turn, they had fulfilled their part of the task and did not see themselves as responsible for listening to their peers or paying attention to the content or others in the group. Laura's fieldnotes of her observations in the lab state, "I take notes while

Samantha says, 'Adrien, you start.' Adrien reads out his reflection while the others wait and then rotate around the table reading their own reflection out loud. Each child takes a turn reading with no one really listening to the one reading their reflection and so there is no building onto another's thoughts."

I am the staff developer and curriculum coordinator in an International Baccalaureate primary school on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. As part of our professional development, I run a literacy lab where teachers and their students, Years 3 to 6 (Grades 2-5 in the U.S.), spend time learning how to dialogue about personal and cultural issues with children's literature from around the world. Each class comes once a week for an hour to the literacy lab and then teachers meet once a week for three hours in a study group after school to discuss our observations, questions and understandings. We have been discussing and preparing engagements to encourage dialogue about issues relevant in children's lives as well as to figure out how to move children from passive to critical readers who are more aware of the world.

Our read aloud for the second week of lab was *Luke's Way of Looking* (Wheatley, 2001). This story immediately pulled children into sitting alongside Luke in his art class. Luke is yelled at and demoralized by his teacher because he will not draw like the other boys or follow the teacher's example. For his classmates and his teacher, the world is black and gray, but for Luke the world is full of vibrant colors, patterns, shapes and movement. He decides not to go back to school but instead takes the bus to an unknown destination, eventually finding himself in an art museum, where he finds others who think and see the world as he does. When he does go back to school and the stifling art assignments, Luke decides to paint what is in his heart even if his teacher does not understand.

As I closed the book, instead of connections once again only silent faces stared at me. I asked if they liked the book and received nods and statements that Luke was different and did not do what he was told. A few children raised their hands, as a yes, when I asked them if they had ever been yelled at for not doing the "right" thing, but the discussion went no further. Because we had been looking at different kinds of journeys, I then asked students to create their own personal journey maps after listening to this book, hoping this response engagement would encourage them to recognize and talk about personal connections to literature.

My beliefs and assumptions about literature and response to literature grow out of Rosenblatt's (1938) theory of reader response and her focus on the importance of readers making connections in order to create their interpretations of a text. As a classroom teacher, I always provided students with large amounts of reading and talk time around high quality children's literature and encouraged the talk by asking children to first draw or sketch their ideas. I wanted students to have that "lived through" experience with literature and to have multiple opportunities to construct

meaning as they read. I encouraged them to relate to literature by making connections to their own lives and the world, and not to think about reading as a task of extracting details and spewing back facts and information that were irrelevant to them as readers and human beings.

Given these beliefs, my goal in the literacy lab was for children to move from passive readers to critical thinkers. I was faced with a huge hurdle of how to help children make that first initial sharing response to literature and eventually move from talk into dialogue around relevant and significant issues. Rosenblatt (1938) argues that we need to attend to our inner state as readers, responding first from an aesthetic stance, sharing our feelings and connections to a book without fear of judgment or the "wrong" answer. This first response is necessary to become aware of ourselves and others as thinkers who have ideas and opinions that matter. Taking on an aesthetic stance provides space for thinking aloud and sharing thoughts that have the potential to create new understandings.

This initial response time is not enough for us to become critical thinkers. We need time and support to develop our discussion and opinions by critically examining our thinking with other readers and then reflecting and analyzing that thinking and those responses. Readers eventually need to take responsibility for their views and thinking through considering multiple perspectives that go beyond their initial responses. Rosenblatt also discusses intertextuality and the need for readers to make connections between texts. She states that we construct new understandings when we make new connections between a previously read text and the text we are discussing.

We are an English-medium school so all instruction is in English even though the majority of children have French and Creole as their mother tongues. Each lab session was held in English but children were encouraged to speak in French if they felt that would help them express their ideas. Most of our classroom teachers are trilingual, speaking French, Creole and English and so children are easily understood. Elizabeth notes, however, that, "Although there is no doubt that many of the Mauritian students feel more comfortable speaking in their first language, the difficulty to connect and respond runs much deeper than just language." Laura continues, "This language issue affects the vast majority of students here, not a small minority. Teachers are constantly reflecting on where is the evidence of thinking vs. what language is spoken or do children need to be taught better communication skills."

Kim always held the discussions in French with her students and recorded the following conversation.

Ryan: Et où tu vas partir? [Where would you go?]
Adnan: Peut-etre, c'est à toi. [Maybe..., it's your turn.]
Ryan: Moi, je veux savoir comment faire une aventure, comment visiter les autres pays. [I would

like to know how to start a Journey and how to visit other countries.]
Kate: J'ai choisi cette table pour savoir comment commencer une aventure, quand j'ai besoin d'écrire dessus. [I have chosen this table to know how to start a Journey and when it will be time for me to write about it.]
Ishika: Miss, on dit plus??? Moi j'ai choisi cette table. Ici c'est plus difficile et je vais apprendre beaucoup. [Miss, do I need to say more? I have decided to be at this table. Here it is more difficult and I will learn more.]

"There is a form of blockage which starts much before the students even think about speaking," shares Elizabeth, connecting to experiences with students in her drama classes. Dini's notes state that Darren and Sheeana were speaking in English. "When they begin to talk about the book, even though it is retelling, Darren seems to have difficulty explaining things in English. He switches to French. Sheeana switches to French too and seems more comfortable. If Darren and Sheeana are having difficulty retelling in English, it is not likely that they will be able to talk about journeys from the book in English. It may be above their level of understanding. The criteria here is not accuracy in language, it is fluency of thought. The ideas and thinking processes are more important than the language the children are speaking in. It is acceptable for children to speak in the language in which they feel most comfortable and are proficient in so long as they can communicate their ideas. We have to remember that children are learning language as well as learning concepts. These are happening at the same time. We may be able to reduce the disparity between first and second language speakers by making children more at ease so they express themselves in their mother tongue in situations where we are not working on accuracy." We wanted children to feel more confident with any language and be able to pull from a range of thoughts to express their ideas.

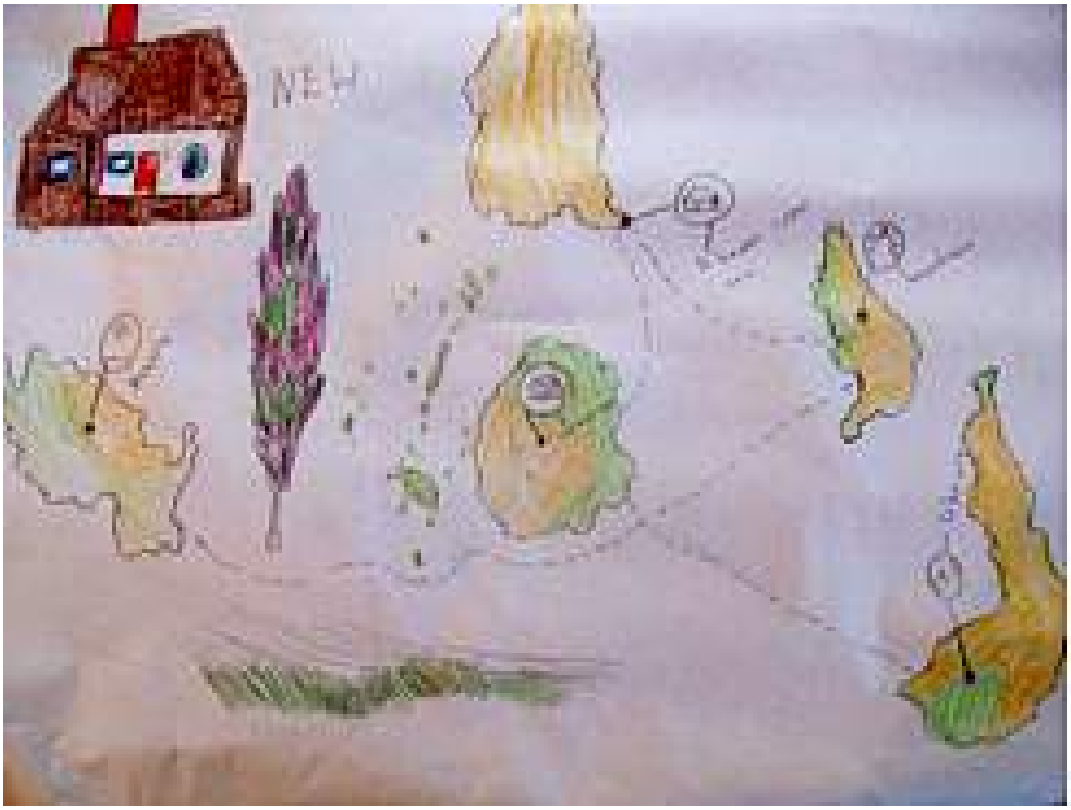
Once the children had brainstormed journeys, listed their personal journeys and created journey maps, as a study group we created sets of books from the themes about journeys that emerged from all eight class webs and discussions of the children. Our six themes were Beginnings of Journeys, Multiple Perspectives about Journeys, Overcoming Obstacles and Fears, Remembering Journeys, Cultures Meeting Cultures, and Journeys as Dreams and Hopes. Focusing on these broad themes we could then explore each theme through conceptually related books grouped as text sets, each containing a variety of picture books of different genres and reading levels.

After browsing and being introduced to the sets, children signed up for a theme to read and discuss in depth each time they came to the lab. The cultures meeting cultures group read such books as: *A Day's Work* (Bunting, 1994), *Amelia's Road* (Altman, 1993) *A Handful of Seeds* (Hughes, 1993), *The Island of the Skog* (Kellogg, 1973), *War and Peas* (Forman, 2002), *The Conquerors* (McKee, 2004), *Tusk Tusk* (McKee, 1978), *Dia's Story Cloth* (Cha, 1996), *Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport* (Sharmat, 1980), *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998),

Stellaluna (Cannon, 1993), *Widget* (McFarland, 2001), *Amber on the Mountain* (Johnston, 1994), *Building a Bridge* (Begaye, 1993), and *If the World Were A Village* (Smith, 2002).

For several weeks children read the books and shared in their small groups by retelling or webbing out the journeys and issues from their books. The talk in each group appeared to be the same each week. Someone in the group would decide who would start and then each child made a statement about the book, usually a retelling, until all members took their turn.

Teacher: Maybe talk about other journeys now.
Naomi to Anjulie: Now your turn.
Anjulie: She went to the library, to work.
Navnish: How many places?
Naomi: She was sick.
Rishab: She went to a hotel near a beach.
Naomi: Mountains.
Navnish and Naomi: Mountain, seaside, island.



Yash: It's like an objective map. What her objectives were. First it's an island as she wanted to go there.

Teachers reflected and found that children were having this same difficulty of expressing ideas in their homeroom classes. "In my experience as a multilingual teacher I can state freely that students have difficulty in sharing their thoughts, wonderings, imaginings and opinions in whichever language they speak," shares Elizabeth.

I knew the children needed to move their talk from explaining something about the book to exploring the ideas in the book. Taking one book from their theme sets I asked them to talk in their groups by having each person share one personal connection to the book. Time and time again each class remained silent. I repeated the instructions and again there was silence. I pulled the class together in the rug area to give some examples of connections. I asked my parent helper to share a personal connection and then the classroom teacher shared a connection after I shared mine. The children still remained silent.

Taking a moment to reflect and to encourage them to share connections, I asked them to think about what would be the worst thing that could happen if they shared a personal story. Slowly a hand went up and, in a quiet voice, Tommy stated, "You might get laughed at." We continued to list all the ways one could be made fun of for sharing personally -- the story isn't funny and yet people laugh, the story might not seem important to anyone but you, no one in the group looks at you and listens while you tell the story, or the group talks or reads a book while you are telling the story.

Children from each class opened up and created long lists of what might happen if they revealed anything personal about themselves. They were afraid. We finally agreed to take the risk and try to tell each other personal stories but first we created a few essential agreements to protect ourselves:

- We will really listen to each other tell a story no matter how long.
- We will not laugh at each other unless it is a funny story.
- We will not repeat the stories outside of this class.

Children then moved back to their small groups with the request that they tell personal stories about one of the books that each had read. The noise level rose and the room came alive with giggles, laughter and smiles. As soon as children began to share their personal stories they immediately started speaking in French. I stopped the class and asked if the adult note takers could sit in their groups to hear the stories and the entire class yelled, "NO." So we watched from the side lines and enjoyed the freedom of children finally opening up and sharing a small part of their lives. Dini points out, "Over the last four to six generations following immigration, stories in Creole and Bhojpuri have been lost. They were oral stories told through Sega song and music but due to the attitude towards these languages, as being that of slaves and servants, the stories have not been passed on."

The following week, we continued with sharing personal stories related to the books but also started thinking about how we could build understanding from the personal stories to the issues in the books within each theme set. Children tried listening to group members and following each other's line of thinking in order to build on the ideas shared but it became apparent that we needed more experience with extending ideas through talk and being more flexible in trying out half-formed thoughts.

Children were still proceeding straight to making fully organized final draft statements and bypassing using language to think with others. In reflecting on the children's talk, I realized that the problem was much more than the inability to make connections. Barnes (1976) states that "language is not the same as thought, but it allows us to reflect upon our thoughts" (p. 10). I realized that the children needed to increase their interactions and genuinely extend their work together by learning to talk to understand. Kim shares, "In my experience we use language mainly to communicate with our friends and relatives. We explain and recount, but we do not use language to give our opinions, to think. This was repressed at school because we are task oriented and exams were more important. Speaking French in my literacy lab group did not help. I was faced with the same difficulty of children struggling to push their thinking into more than just retelling."

In looking back at my previous teaching experiences with children, I realized that I usually began a

literature discussion with time for children to share what they thought about a story and what they liked and didn't like. Many times there wasn't a focused topic but rather the talk meandered from topic to topic. Barnes (1976) writes about this as "exploratory talk." He describes exploratory talk as "groping towards a meaning" that includes hesitations, rephrasings, false starts and changes of direction. During this type of talk, learners take an active part in their learning and sharing their current experiences and understandings as well as personal views. This is an opportunity for their talk to be tested against existing views, to see how things are in the world, and an opportunity to think aloud and take responsibility for formulating hypotheses and then evaluating opinions through the group discussion.

Looking back, I realize that there wasn't much exploratory talk in the literacy lab from any of the eight classes of children. Even though each class shared some talk together before breaking into small groups to brainstorm possible topics and issues to discuss and to respond through story maps, sketches, or free writes, they were not engaging in exploratory talk. They were talking to each other at a presentational level.

Barnes (1976) describes presentational talk as "interactions which establish each participant as a unique and separate identity" (p. 110). If we perceive others as threatening critics, ready to judge us and show up our inadequacies, we concentrate on the external acceptability of what we say. When we are in an unthreatening environment, we are more likely to share our views with an openness to collaborate with others. In the lab students were taking turns and stating facts, retelling part of the text, remaining silent, or looking around, rather than actively listening to each other, probably worrying about what the group might think of them.

In rereading our transcripts, I noticed that even when children shared their favorite parts of the story, the talk sounded like a retelling, a sharing of facts from a book, but not an opinion or response to the book or the illustrations. Children were not engaged in hesitant responses to the text as a way of working out meaning as they shared, but responding as if there was a right answer. Turn taking and making a comment or statement was new to the children so they also did not refer to other books, TV, movies, games, or their own experiences in order to make sense of the books they were reading or to connect to the ideas and issues in those books.

The lack of exploratory talk was probably due to a range of factors. One is that children did not know each other well personally and had not negotiated equal status and mutual trust to encourage thinking aloud and risk inexplicitness, confusion or dead ends because they could not trust the tolerance of others. The lack of comfort with sitting in mixed gender groups also influenced their dependency on presentational talk. Because of schooling history and cultural backgrounds, presentational talk was more valued than sharing and thinking with each other. It didn't feel safe to engage in exploratory talk in a school context. Armand reflected, "These were difficult sessions for

children as well as for teachers. We had to really stretch our thinking to truly be able to participate fully in the different sharings. At the end of each lesson, I can honestly say that we were mentally tired but it was worth it."

Children had not had experiences with sharing personal stories or engaging in exploratory talk to work at constructing understanding with each other. Even when they began to feel more at ease in sharing a personal story, the talk was still not exploratory. Each child took a turn telling a story, making comments, but not really listening or connecting the story to issues in their books or to other children's experiences as a way to understand the issues.

Our analysis of the children's talk has helped us realize that we need to continue our focus on exploratory talk in the lab through encouraging free responses after each read aloud both orally and through multiple response strategies, such as sketches, maps, charts, and free writes. Our class charts will record our personal connections but with an emphasis on how these stories help us understand the issues that pose problems and questions that we find significant. We will have to practice following each other's line of thinking and being willing to tolerate half-formed ideas as we make meaning, find our voices and develop opinions that can be valued by our peers. Exploratory talk will allow children to take control and responsibility for their own thinking as they make sense of the world rather than just accepting the world imposed on their thinking.

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Forging Connections: First Graders' Responses to Multicultural Literature

By Karin Wright

As I work toward becoming a classroom teacher, I aspire to develop thought-provoking and meaningful curriculum, while also establishing a classroom climate that invites discussion and appreciation of diverse cultures. I aim to establish what Sleeter and Grant (1987) call "an education that is multicultural" for my future students, rather than presenting surface-level, isolated units of study about various cultures (Fox & Short, 2003). As a starting point for this quest, I visited a friend's first grade classroom primarily to observe, but also to cultivate her students' responses to multicultural texts. Using this group of first graders as a representative sample, I hoped to obtain baseline data to use when developing multicultural literature response engagements for my future classroom. I intended to provide the students with opportunities to encounter and respond to multicultural literature, and simply observe the results. As a visiting teacher with only limited time in the classroom, I planned to take on the role of observer rather than active teacher during each

session, however, over the course of the project, my purpose changed somewhat so that I became more concerned with developing the students' connection-making abilities.

As I began this project, I expected the students to skip over elements of culture within the texts, focusing instead on the similarities between characters and events in the stories and their own lives. This prediction stems from my experiences with first grade students who struggle to stretch their thinking beyond the familiar. In contrast, I also wondered whether students might focus only on the differences between the cultural representation in the texts and their own cultural experiences, missing elements of common humanity altogether. This prediction is related to the students' young age and their assumed lack of experience with multiple cultures.

Context

I visited a neighborhood elementary school with approximately 450 kindergarten through fifth grade students in Tucson, Arizona. The school serves a community of middle and working class families, of primarily white European-American and Latino backgrounds, with a smaller percentage of students of Asian American, Native American and African American heritage. Of the 22 first graders with whom I worked, 13 are white, European-American students, eight are Latino students, and one is an African-American student. I conducted five weekly 60 to 90 minute sessions that consisted of a read-aloud followed by a response technique and a brief discussion. Each period was formatted as either a single whole group engagement, or multiple small group sessions. To evoke a variety of student responses, I put together a text set of four books that relate to the theme of cultural identity. According to Griffith (2008), "Text sets establish a framework for kids to expect connections to their own lives and to other literature and to develop strategies for making those connections." By framing my inquiry as a text set study, I hoped to encourage the students to forge connections both between the texts and their own experiences, and among the texts themselves to build deeper understandings of the stories and their conceptions of the world.

Two of the books, *I Love Saturdays y domingos* (Ada, 2002) and *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería* (Colato Laínez, 2005), focus on Latino culture, while the other two, *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2005) and *My Name is Yoon* (Recorvits, 2003), describe Korean-American experiences. I chose these texts to encourage the students to build both obvious and less apparent relationships between stories. Additionally, I aimed to connect to the many Latino students in the class through the Latino texts, and also explore unfamiliar cultural experiences for all the students in the Korean-American books.

The students engaged in both graffiti boards, where groups of four or five students recorded their in-process thinking as I read aloud (Short & Harste, 1996), and in free response to write and/or draw their reactions and connections after each reading. The combination of small and large

groups was intended to elicit different responses in different settings.

During the final two sessions, the students and I developed a chart to tie together the entire experience and to visually establish connections between the four texts. Griffith (2008) explains that students need "more than talk to explore the connections across books." By listing the main points of each story, students were able to see similarities between all four books. In this way, "the text set encouraged [the students] to not look at literature in isolation but instead always in connection with other literature and their lives" (Griffith, 2008). Once this chart was complete, the students and I discussed major ideas that ran across all of the books to ultimately decide upon an over-arching theme for the text set. This pulled together all of our reading, thinking and discussing.

Children's Responses to the Literature

***Responding to* I Love Saturdays y domingos**

I read aloud *I Love Saturdays y domingos* (Ada, 2002) to the entire class and explained that the students would write and/or draw their thinking after enjoying the book. As I read, a few students commented on the use of Spanish in the text, saying that they knew some of the words and observing that the story was not entirely in English. After the reading, Ricky (note: all student names are pseudonyms), a Latino child, remarked that he is familiar with the Happy Birthday song in Spanish that is presented in the text because his family sings it. His classmates showed genuine interest in hearing the song, but Ricky appeared too shy to sing out loud.

The students then spent 20 minutes completing their responses on a blank piece of paper, and I asked each child to explain his or her ideas. Of the 19 participants that day, only two commented on a specific cultural aspect of language. One of those students was Ricky, who made a personal connection between the Happy Birthday song and the use of Spanish throughout the story to his own family experiences, saying, "This story made me think of the happy birthday song and it was Spanish and I know Spanish so does my grandma and grandpa and I love them." Ricky connected to the language within the text, and his relationship with his grandparents from the main theme of the text. In this way, he was able to identify with the book from a specific cultural perspective and also connect to the universal concept of family bonds.

The majority of the students made connections between the plot of the text and their own experiences by commenting on family relationships, birthday celebrations, family events, and feelings of happiness. While these children successfully established text-to-self connections, none of them commented on the cultural elements of the main character's family, experiences and identity. It appeared that the children were supporting my first prediction by focusing on universal human characteristics, rather than elements of unique cultures.

Two students responded to specific parts of the book: an illustration and the title. Robby drew and

labeled when the main character is in her Abuelita's garden with the dog. This was a minor event in the story and when asked to explain his thinking, Robby simply replied, "I liked this part." Casey focused on the Spanish word *domingos* in the book title. He stated that this word reminds him of the word "donuts" through his writing and illustration. Though his understanding was a bit off-track, it is clear that Casey was attending to unfamiliar language and trying to make connections to words and concepts with which he is familiar.

After the first session, I noticed that the students were having some success with making connections to the story, however, the classroom teacher commented that the session made her aware of the need to provide her students with more opportunities for literature response. This comment, combined with my observations that many children made surface-level connections to the story, caused my focus to shift from pure observation of students' responses to multicultural texts, to the development of students' connections to texts more generally.

Responding to **The Name Jar**

In using the graffiti board technique, I worked with part of the class in three separate groups of four children. The students were to record their ideas while listening to *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001), instead of waiting until the end of the story. In each of the small groups, a few children seemed unsure about responding during the read-aloud due to their lack of experience with this engagement. I assured the students that they should start responding as soon as an idea arose. Most of the children seemed excited about having ownership over the process, but a few still chose to wait until after the reading to begin their responses.

Each child described his or her response and answered questions to clarify their thinking. Of the 12 students I worked with on this day five made connections between the school experiences of the main character Unhei, and their own. The first graders identified with Unhei's anxiety over going to a new school and making new friends, both universal childhood themes.

Three of the students commented on a major theme in the story -- Unhei's name. Mary wrote, "It makes me think of my name." When asked to elaborate, she explained that Unhei does not like her name in the story, but she (Mary) likes her name because it is special. Katie wrote, "I think Unhei is a nice name. I'm glad that she kept her name." Similarly, Nathan drew several children saying their names to another child and explained that everyone has their own, different name. These responses relate to the larger theme of cultural identity. The students connected with the idea that a person's name is a part of what makes them unique and that names should be celebrated. Robby, Cara and Michelle illustrated the characters in the story, showing Unhei, her family members and her classmates. When asked to elaborate, they each explained that they drew the important people in the story.

I felt more confident that the students were increasing their understanding of connecting to texts and thinking more deeply about stories. The responses from Robby, Cara and Michelle showed that the students needed more practice to move beyond surface-level summaries and to begin thinking about the issues embedded in the stories.

Responding to My Name is Yoon

After introducing the first graders to texts that depict two very different cultures, I decided to support their connection-building by reading a book with more obvious similarities to the previously read *The Name Jar*. Before reading *My Name is Yoon* (Recorvits, 2003) to the whole group, I encouraged the class to think about their connections and wonderings as I read. In stark contrast to our first experience with free response, in which many children did not seem to know how to begin, the class appeared eager to respond. Again, the students spent 20 minutes working and I asked each child to describe his or her ideas once they finished. Of the 21 participants that day, eight made direct connections between *My Name is Yoon* and *The Name Jar*. These students commented on the similar pronunciations of Yoon and Unhei, the two characters' similar appearances, their mutual desire to return to Korea, and their shared struggles to make friends in a new place. Three other students focused only on issues within *My Name is Yoon*, discussing Yoon's difficulties with making friends, fitting in and feeling comfortable with herself. For example, Shawn wrote, "Yoon wanted to not be herself. Yoon wanted to be different things like a cat or a cupcake. Yoon has to be herself no matter what." These two sets of responses demonstrate the students' thinking about the over-arching themes of the two texts and their similarities.

Four students made specific personal connections to the story. Ricky wrote, "This book made me think of when I was a little kid and I did not want to write my name because it all was scribbled." Chloe commented that the story reminded her of the first day of school, while Emma connected Yoon's experience of making a new friend to her own experience with her best friend, Chrissy. These children were able to identify with the characters and events in the book and view the story through the lens of their personal experiences. Three other students made connections to the text, but in a rather superficial way that did not address the underlying issues. Alex wrote, "Yoon made me hungry because she wanted to be a cupcake." Casey commented that "the girl's name looks like spoon."

Casey also wrote that "the people look Japanese." When asked why he thought so, Casey explained, "They just do their hair and eyes and stuff."

Casey's Free Response to My Name is Yoon

I prompted him to rethink this comment by asking where Yoon's family originally came from. Casey recalled that they came from Korea, but was unable to make the connection that Yoon and her family are Korean, rather than "looking Japanese." This was a cultural misconception that is likely due to Casey's young age and lack of experience. It is also an instance when a reader's initial understandings of a book are influenced by the previous knowledge they bring to the reading (Moreillon, 2003). Because Casey had a previously held conception of the physical attributes of Asian and Asian-American people, he was unable to see the relationship between Yoon's homeland and her cultural identity. Despite this misconception, it was interesting that Casey was the first child to attempt to label the characters as part of a particular cultural group. Up to this point, no other student had used such language. Finally, three students responded by writing about and drawing events and characters from the story. These students remained on the surface with their responses by replicating parts of the text.

The variety of responses to *My Name is Yoon* demonstrated the students' continuing development. Because several students connected two of the books, I was reassured that the class would engage in discussions about the similarities between all four books later on. At this point, there were still a few children whose ideas remained on a superficial level, but I felt encouraged that the majority of the students were pushing their ideas deeper to explore larger themes such as friendship, family, identity and a sense of belonging. Though there were still few references to the cultural elements of the stories, I realized I was no longer focused solely on exploring familiar and unfamiliar cultures with the students, but rather engaging the children in deep thinking about the books.

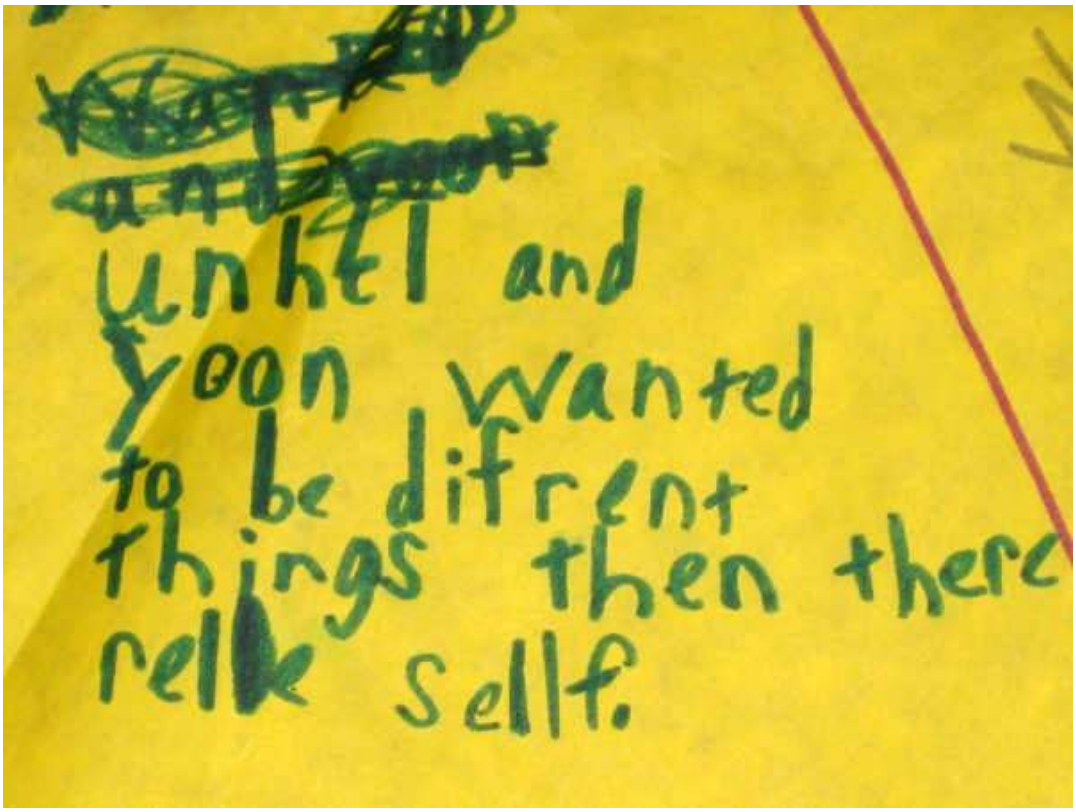
Continuing Responses to **The Name Jar**

In our fourth session, the remaining two groups (of five children each) participated in the graffiti board technique with *The Name Jar*. None of the students appeared reluctant to participate as some of the previous groups had. I attributed this to the students' growing experience with literature response. Most students got right to work as I read, though a few children needed time to finish their ideas after the read-aloud. Again, each child shared his or her thinking at the end.

Of the ten participants, four students made personal connections to the story. Referring to the

Korean nickname that Unhei gives to her friend, Christopher wrote, "It made me think of my friends because Chinku, that means friend." These students continued to relate the experiences of the characters with their own to build a greater understanding of the events of the story.

Seven students made text-to-text connections between *The Name Jar* and *My Name is Yoon*, just as their classmates had during the last session. The children were able to see both obvious and obscure similarities between the texts. Like the previous groups, the students commented on the similar sounding character names, and the girls' similar appearances. Chrissy, Aaron and Mike all noted that the two girls were both from Korea, wanted to go back to their homeland and made new friends in the U.S. These observations demonstrated the students' ability to relate different texts to one another and to uncover broad themes that they have in common. Shawn made a thoughtful conclusion when he wrote, "Unhei and Yoon wanted to be different things than their real self." Shawn explained that both girls did not like their name and wanted to leave America to go back to Korea. He cited Yoon's wish to be a cat, a bird and a cupcake and Unhei's desire to change her name. This response was the most exciting to witness up to that point. It was clear that Shawn had been thinking deeply about each girl's experiences and the meaning those experiences held for the characters. Not only was he able to recall several examples to support his idea, but he was able to pull together his thinking into a meaningful statement.

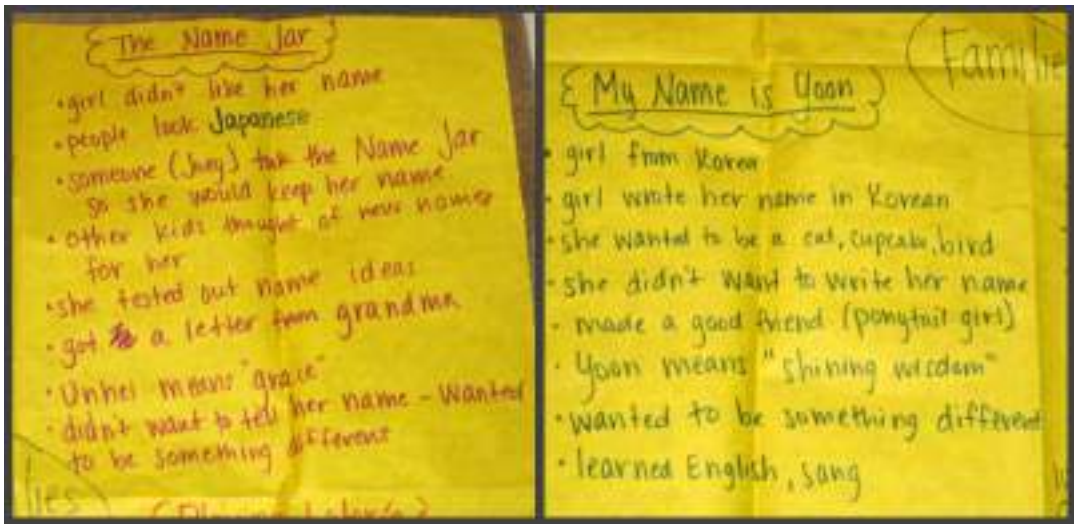


Shawn's Graffiti Board Response demonstrates his developing ability to forge deep connections between texts

Once again, Casey wrote that "the people look Japanese" and added that their writing looks

Egyptian. When asked to explain, Casey reiterated that the girls "look Japanese" because of their hair, clothing and eyes. He explained that Unhei's name stamp has symbols instead of letters like "our writing." I realized that Casey was, in fact, attending to cultural elements in the books, but they were surface-level and not especially significant to the overall meaning of the stories. Certainly, I was pleased that he was noticing ways in which the characters lives are different from his own, but I felt that by focusing solely on these concrete aspects of the stories, he was missing the deeper emotions and ideas. I made it my goal to encourage more student responses like Shawn's thoughtful consideration of underlying themes rather than eliciting responses like Casey's, which focused mostly on the details.

After the small group sessions, the entire class began pulling together our thinking about all of the books so far. We developed a chart highlighting the main ideas of each text. Initially, this engagement served to remind the students about each story, however as we discussed each text, students took notice of connections between the texts. By the time we got to *My Name is Yoon*, students were commenting that "both of the books have girls from Korea," and "both of the girls wanted to be something different, so that should go in both boxes."



Students pulled together their thinking across texts on comparison charts

These remarks demonstrated that the children were beginning to think about connections across all the books though they struggled somewhat with relating *I Love Saturdays y domingos* to the other two titles. I planned to present a final text that would support the students' connections to *I Love Saturdays y domingos* and allow the children to see similarities across the entire text set.

Responding to **Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería**

In our final session I read *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería* (Colato Laínez, 2005) to the whole group in order to revisit Latino culture and re-connect to our first text. To encourage students to think about their ideas during the read-aloud in preparation for the response time, the children were told that they had only five minutes to respond once the story was over. As I read *Playing*

Lotería/El juego de la lotería, several students noted the use of Spanish within the text and its relation to *I Love Saturdays y domingos*. As opposed to previous sessions when only a few students made verbal connections during the read-aloud, this time nearly all of the children exclaimed things like "The game is like Bingo!" and "He's learning Spanish!" The students were comfortable with the process of making connections to stories and stretching their thinking beyond the printed text.

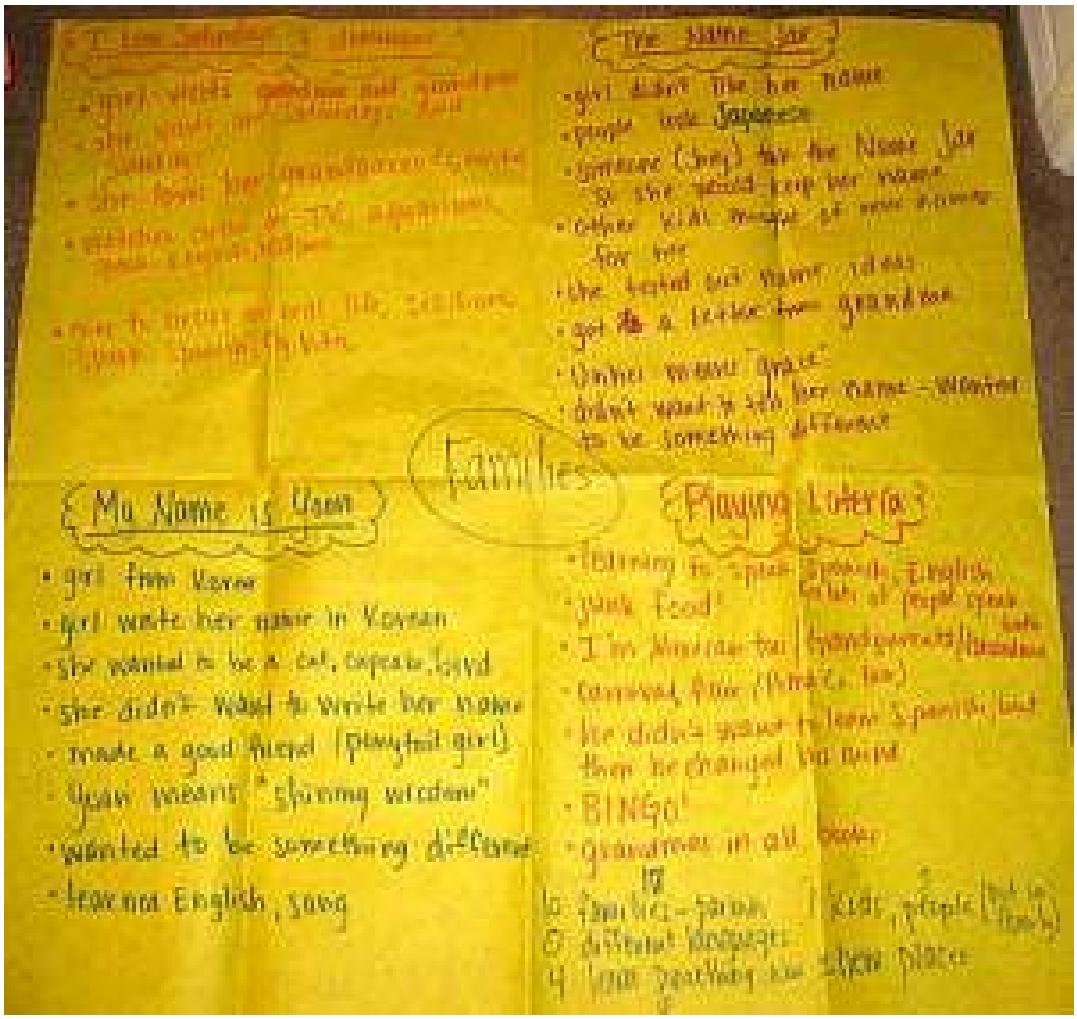
After the read-aloud, the children had 30 seconds to gather their thoughts. I set a timer and they worked enthusiastically to record their ideas within the allotted five minutes. The students had one minute to share their thinking with a neighbor before I collected the responses. Of the 22 students, 12 made personal connections to the story. Six of these connected to the story's setting by depicting students' visits to fairs or carnivals. When asked to explain, most of these children described what fun they had at the fair, just like the boy in the story. Three children compared the lotería game to Bingo or another familiar game. The remaining three students connected the boy's relationship with his grandmother to their own relationships with grandparents. The three topics of fairs, games and grandparents are universal concepts with which the children could identify, even though the fair and lotería game in the story are specific to Mexican culture and the grandmother asserts her cultural identity throughout the book.

Four students found similarities between *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería* and *I Love Saturdays y domingos*. Each of these connections focused on the use of Spanish in both texts and did not address the grandparent-grandchild relationship emphasized in each story. Two students wrote specifically about the interaction between the boy and his grandmother in terms of learning a language. Shawn wrote, "The boy taught his Abuela English and his Abuela taught him Spanish." These students concentrated on the exchange between the English-speaking child and his Spanish-speaking grandmother and the way that their relationship helped them to share their cultural identities with one another.

Four Latino students made connections between their own cultural identities and the text. Chrissy wrote, "I'm Mexican too!" Ricky revisited his previous comments about his grandparents' use of Spanish at home. "My grandma and my grandpa speak Spanish and I can understand them and so can my brothers and my mom and dad." Andrew wrote, "I have the game lotería. My grandma taught me Spanish. Now I speak a little of Spanish." Nathan explained that once he played a game similar to lotería with his family. All of these children were able to closely identify with the characters, events and culture presented in the story. Based on both their recorded and verbal responses, it is clear that these students felt proud to have a specific, personal connection to the book and to be able to share it. In these instances, the use of multicultural literature allowed the students to see their own cultural background reflected in a positive way within the classroom context. Other non-Latino students were interested in learning more about lotería, and turned to

their classmates with firsthand knowledge of the game for more information. This made the Latino students feel valued as their cultural experiences were celebrated.

To conclude our final session, the students and I completed our chart and discussed the entire text set. When generating main ideas from *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería*, the students focused on text-to-text and text-to-self connections, as opposed to simply retelling the events of the story. Students noticed connections between *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería* and *I Love Saturdays y domingos*, and the discussion developed as students noticed similarities between books that were less obviously related. They discovered that *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería*, *The Name Jar* and *My Name is Yoon* all address the issue of learning something new and that all three books have characters who want to do something different and then change their minds in the end. They also noted that *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería*, *The Name Jar* and *I Love Saturdays y domingos* all highlight grandchild-grandparent relationships.



Class-generated chart highlighting major ideas and connections from the text set

After the discussion, the students brainstormed the following list of titles for the collection of books:

- Families
  Different Languages
  Learn Something New
  Kids/People
  New Places

We discussed each option to better understand how it reflects the "big ideas" of all the books. The list was reduced to "Families" and "Learn Something New" and then it was decided that the title of "Families" would be given to the entire text set.

Conclusions

Through this inquiry, I realized that not only must teachers introduce students to a multitude of cultures through literature, but we must also provide daily opportunities for thoughtful reflection about books. Because these first grade students did not have much previous experience with literature response, developing those habits and thought-processes became my primary objective.

My initial prediction was confirmed in that the majority of student responses focused on personal connections to the texts without regard for cultural issues, however, I came to see that young students can produce complex responses containing multiple layers of connections and thoughts about larger issues. I have always believed that primary students' capabilities far exceed most adult expectations, and yet, I now realize that I expected the students to generate very simple ideas. As I reflected on each session, I often found it difficult to categorize the responses. With practice, the students expanded their thinking to frequently include personal and intertextual connections, and comments about deeper issues all within the same response. These multidimensional responses provided a great deal of insight into the students' thought-processes and allowed me to track the development of their thinking over time.

Conducting this study made clear that it is not enough for a classroom teacher to expose students to a book and then leave it behind. While this may present an enjoyable experience for everyone involved, without the exploration of ideas within, between and beyond texts, students miss out on challenging and motivating processes that enable them to grow into more thoughtful and critical readers and thinkers.

Though my focus shifted from specific reactions to multicultural issues to the broader issue of literature responses, this inquiry has underscored the importance of developing an education that is multicultural from every angle. The students and I did not spend much time discussing the specific cultures within each text, but the issues remained visible and added to the students' high interest level and consideration of large ideas. I feel even more strongly that all students have the right to a multicultural education that invites in-depth examination of both broad, universal

themes and more specific cultural concerns. This establishes a safe and welcoming space in which students can explore challenging and complex issues together, to develop their understanding of literature and the world around them.

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Ok, ¿quién quiere seguir? [Ok, who wants to go?]: Engaging Students in Literature Discussions in their Second Language

By María V. Acevedo with Cheryl Gerken

Although some teachers fear that having students read and talk about texts while they are learning a new language could lead to a lack of comprehension and engagement, literature discussion about these texts is an authentic language experience. When students make personal connections and build meaning from texts during a literature discussion, they can question what does not make sense in their second language and develop authentic inquiries and explorations. While reading *La mulata de Córdoba* in Spanish, Eitan, a native English speaker, accessed his background knowledge regarding Cordoba's geography to enrich his connection as he talked about the main character. *Se parece como un poquito africana porque Córdoba es, amh, sabes como España,*

amh, es como así (utiliza gestos) y luego hay ese "tip" que casi está a África [She looks a little bit like African because Cordoba is, amh, you know like Spain, amh, is like this (uses gestures) and there is that tip which is almost in Africa]. Then he shared a personal connection. *Pues yo fui ahí una vez y Córdoba es ahí y muchas personas de África vienen de ahí, así que… y al otro lado es "Morocco" y cree que ella era una inmigrante de "Morocco"* [Well I went there once and Cordoba is there and many people go there from Africa, so… and to the other side is Morocco and I think she was an inmigrant from Morocco]. Eitan is a risk taker in his Spanish class. Although not a proficient Spanish reader and speaker, he made connections that explained the story and its characters to himself and his peers in his second language.

Several educational approaches support building ideas through discussions with others and that the ideas that emerge from dialogue can change the world. A purposeful dialogue that allows the development of such important thoughts is present in classrooms that are supported by a constructivist curriculum using literature as a vehicle for further explorations. As Nichols (2006) argues, "When our children learn inside a constructivist curriculum that draws on talk as a tool, they are constantly challenged to think and give voice to their thinking as they negotiate and construct meaning" (p. 12). By talking meaningfully with peers and teachers about different topics, children expand their understanding with ideas that they may have not been able to construct on their own. This perspective places being literate beyond the basic conceptions of being able to read and write to include analyzing the elements of different texts and genres and connecting ideas to other texts or background experiences. Being literate includes critical and reflective thinking about the readings, about students' learning processes, and about the implications for their lives and for their world, as they become agents of change.

Should conversations about texts only be in the students' first language? Should teachers wait for students to be proficient in a language before engaging them in meaningful dialogue about the readings? Could a second language discussion allow children to acquire a language as they explore the issues in the texts? What struggles might teachers find when children engage in discussions in a new language? Freeman and Freeman (2000) say acquisition is a subconscious process that occurs in informal situations, however, acquisition also occurs in classrooms in which teachers create interesting lessons that involve students in authentic language use. People acquire language in natural communication contexts that require comprehension and building meaningful messages. The natural need for understanding and being understood leads students to produce their discourse by trying out the new language they are acquiring and learning.

The context of the school

To explore these questions, I observed a classroom within a Dual Language Spanish immersion program, where fourth and fifth grade students are exposed to 70 percent Spanish and 30 percent

English. Many students are from Latino families, but their first language is English, and they are in this school to learn Spanish as a second language. In August, December, and at the end of the school year, teachers measure Spanish reading levels using Developmental Reading Assessment tests (DRAs) with first through fifth grades to determine if students will move to a higher Spanish level. Three times a week for an hour and fifteen minutes the students change classrooms and go to their respective levels for literacy instruction in Spanish. Students with similar Spanish language abilities are grouped homogeneously across different grade levels.

I observed students at the highest level of the program for a month. The group consisted of fourth and fifth graders. The class took place in the school's library, where the librarian was the teacher. I observed how she used literature circles to enable deeper discussions as a way to help children build meaning from the books they read. The teacher focused on using literature discussions as an instrument to develop a second language by exposing the children to continuous oral language along with reading and writing.

The children worked on the semester's final project, an individual oral presentation about a country they had chosen earlier. Each child read a text set of folktales related to the country he/she was exploring to think deeply about that culture. They compared their readings and perspectives with their peers and engaged in Spanish-language conversations. Each literature group had children who read books representing different continents. The observed group consisted of one boy, Eitan, and three girls, Julia, Michal and Liav [pseudonyms]. Their folktales were from Russia (Julia), Spain (Eitan), Afghanistan (Liav) and Congo (Michal). Because it was difficult to find Spanish-language folktales from countries around the world students read a heterogeneous text set with books set on the continent, but not necessarily from the specific countries they selected.

Each small group completed a graffiti board, which consists of a big piece of paper where each child draws or writes their first thoughts and reactions after reading a text, as a response to three of the texts they read about a country. In their first literature discussion they shared the graffiti board along with their reading logs where they keep informal responses to periodic readings and their literature journals which included forms prepared by the teacher to develop specific literacy strategies. The teacher told the students that they would share their books and their thoughts about these books with each other.

Literature discussion as a meaningful context for language acquisition

Meaningful contexts to acquire a second language can be found wherever learners build meaning by interacting with a text or with other people in that language. During a literature circle, students and teachers share their ideas, understandings and wonderings about the readings in an informal setting. The participants collaborate to develop stronger ideas that will enhance their initial and

individual conceptions. They use the different aspects of language -- semantics, syntactics, pragmatics, phonology, and morphology -- as well as their background knowledge to construct utterances in their second language.

The Spanish-language discussion that I observed showed the children's accomplishments while they applied these aspects of language along with other strategies like code switching to complete coherent utterances about their connections and their evaluations of the characters' actions. For example, Eitan commented about one of the characters, *Cuento suena como una leyenda y es un poquito como "harsh" porque quieren quemar a ella* [The story sounds like a legend and it's a little bit harsh because they want to burn her].

One of the goals of the literature discussion is to encourage students to think about the implications of the text in their world. By talking about big issues in the literature children can understand themselves and become agents of change in their societies.

Michal: Tenía (el libro) buena lección y la lección es que no debes ser mal a nadie, no importa quién es [(The text) had a good lesson, and the lesson is that you should not do harm to nobody, no matter who it is].
Liav: Oh.
Eitan: Pero, ¿si hacen como un "Highjacker"? [But, if they do like a highjacker?]

These Spanish-language learners confirmed that deep discussions are possible in a second language with non-proficient speakers. My transcript analysis of their discussions revealed that they talked about personal and intertextual connections, inferences, literary elements of the text, the author, and even about metacognition by evaluating their own speech. They took a metafacilitator stance by assuming the role of the teacher and kept the dialogue alive by asking for clarification, expanding on their peers' comments and recapitulating when necessary. They took responsibility for their contributions and learning process and showed that proficiency can be acquired through engagement in real conversations. When these engagements take place in the classroom, teachers can expose students to a variety of useful strategies that will help them become bilingual.

Factors influencing literature circles in a second language

Although the discussions were successful in supporting immersion in the second language, I identified factors that could enhance or weaken the learning process.

Time structure. Eitan: *¡No no, porque no tenemos mucho tiempo!* [No no, 'cause we don't have much time!] The children constantly struggled with having enough time to complete their conversations and work. For example, some of the children kept drawing on the graffiti board after

the teacher told them to stop because the time provided was not enough. After the first ten minutes of sharing their books, they began to progressively use gestures to indicate to their peers the need to increase their discourse's speed.

Eitan to Michal: *Sólo tenemos como 30 segundos, ok* [We only have like 30 seconds, ok.]
Michal: *Y este libro que se llama* El naranjo que no daba naranjas. *No tiene un buen mensaje como* Las bellas hijas de Mufaro *porque no más es el niño esperando por las naranjas* [And this book called *El naranjo que no daba naranjas*. It doesn't have a good message like *Las bellas hijas de Mufaro* because it is just a boy waiting for oranges].

The time factor provoked stress and distraction. The students limited their sharing to basic information that they could produce in Spanish. Second language learners need a lot of time to transfer their metacognitive knowledge about their first language to the one they are acquiring to discuss and understand second language texts. Activities like sharing a graffiti board or literature logs can help children begin to think and talk in their second language while using their peers as a primary support, but they need more time to struggle through their use of the language.

Dealing with internal problems during the discussion. During this literature circle the teacher decided to stay outside the discussion and I remained a distant observer. The students decided the order to talk, not by raising hands but by asking questions. **Liav**: *¿Quién quiere empezar?* [Who wants to start?] This democratic strategy shows respect and equality of roles and enables voluntary participation. As soon as the discussion started the natural sequence (turn taking) of a dialogue became my interest, especially how the students knew when it was their time to talk. If the students were at snack period they would not have trouble taking turns in a natural conversation, but after years of raising their hands to contribute to the class, they were learning to take turns again. This might be the reason for their continuous interruptions; they might have being expecting a teacher to guide the participation and call-out those who were interrupting. The children used higher intonations to regulate their classmate's ineffective behavior. **Eitan**: *¡Liav!* They did manage to keep track of the conversation and answer and clarify their peers' inquiries.

Santman (2005) says, "Kids need explicit lessons in the language they can use to stretch their minds" (p. 126). The presence of the teacher in the first literature discussions could be used to identify the teachable moments and model the language that enables participation, appropriate turn-taking and the emergence of ideas, effective attitudes, proper behavior and efficient techniques to solve issues. The students struggled in these discussions with turn-taking in ways that interrupted their talk and the ideas.

When students are familiar with the purpose and procedures of an activity, they can participate effectively. Small and whole group discussions with the teacher before and after the literature

discussions about the expectations and outcomes can help students to recognize aspects they could improve in the future, such as dealing with classmates who need help to focus on the discussion or applying strategies when they encounter language challenges. They can also help the students develop new strategies in the language they are learning.

Children using an efferent stance. The transcript indicated that many students took on an efferent stance to talk about the books, where they focused on what they were learning or taking away from the text rather than immersing themselves in the story world (Rosenblatt, 1938). This inclination could represent a strategy to make sense of their text in the second language. They used the efferent stance in two particular circumstances. One of these was when reading unknown or confusing words. They were aware of the phonological aspect of the words and discussed the correct written form to attach to the appropriate meanings in English or Spanish.

Michal: *No es como "planes"* [It's not like planes].
Liav: *No, como los "african plains"* [No, like the african plains].
Eitan: *Oh, los "plains" como p/l/a/n (deletreando)* [Oh, the plains, like p/l/a/n (spelling)].

The students each shared three words from the books that were unknown to them. They spelled some of the words to understand their definition and translation. This action shows the importance of acquiring and developing vocabulary to become a bilingual speaker, and their awareness of comprehending the second language.

The children each read different books, most of which were unfamiliar. When children are reading text sets their first literature discussion tends to be retellings and summaries because it is the way they find appropriate to present their books and make everyone part of their own experience. Harste, Short and Burke (1996) claim, "The group meets to share their books with each other through brief retellings so that others can get a sense of what the book was about, particularly in relation to the topic of their set. Sometimes the group members spontaneously begin making comparisons across the books and other times the group stays with retellings" (p.541). The fact that they were using a text set of folktales was the second circumstance that seemed to generate the use of an efferent response to understand and translate the readings for themselves and their peers.

The children's talk also addressed the literary components that they were using as part of the process of understanding and engaging in the readings. They talked about the characters and their physical characteristics to create a mental picture that would help them comprehend the story. They described and questioned the settings where the stories took place and analyzed the quality of the illustrations with the phrase, **Liav**: *Y no creo que las ilustraciones son tan buenas* [And I don't think the illustrations are that good]. They discussed the story's message, its lesson and whether the author's writing style made sense or not. These findings revealed that the students used an

efferent stance to engage in a known structure of discussion that allowed them to feel comfortable when using their second language.

The next steps for these children will be to engage in Spanish-language discussion to analyze their responses and connections as well as the issues that they want to explore about their books. Allowing children to share their efferent responses in a second language and helping them build a collective and stronger understanding about the book with their peers will facilitate subsequent deeper interpretations and ideas in the texts. The children will feel more secure knowing that their peers could assist them in their process of acquiring and practicing the new language. Talking about books in a second language may lead to a more efferent stance initially, which means that they need more extended experiences in these discussions to gradually move to a more aesthetic stance. They will probably not as quickly assume an aesthetic stance as would occur when discussing books in their first language because they first need to struggle to understand the story in their second language.

Conclusion

Teachers must trust their students' natural abilities to construct meaning about their world in many languages, including those in which they are not proficient. By providing students with purposeful interactions they can acquire their second language. These children engaged naturally in the literature discussion even though they had not regularly participated in discussions. Their discussion, even with these limiting factors, revealed that they were able to develop a dialogue and collaborate in understanding the texts in Spanish. As teachers we need to consider their need for more time when discussing in their second language and for demonstrations of how to manage their talk as well as find ways to encourage their movement from an efferent to a more aesthetic stance.

The role of the teacher should be to guide these abilities within a reflective and critical perspective that enables the acquisition of other languages. Although, their talk was not highly critical in reflecting on the implications of the texts to their world, by engaging in multiple literature discussions and immersion in second language contexts, they can move toward deep level conversations about social issues and change.

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Immigration Stories: Students Write about Their Journeys to America

By Ragina Shearer

Growing up in the seventies, I was constantly frustrated in my Grade 6-12 "Reading" classes, because we never read. Day after day we worked on skill after skill, and when it appeared we were actually going to read something, it was "Round Robin" style. Awaiting my turn to read, I remember listening to students struggle over the words or to the timid voices of students whose voices I could barely hear. Consequently, I usually lost interest in the story. I do not remember the teacher reading aloud to us or even introducing stories that were stimulating or challenging. Fortunately, I was an avid reader on my own and knew the excitement and pleasure that could be found in literature.

When I became a teacher eighteen years ago, I knew that one of my top priorities would be to share my love for reading with my students. As a teacher of various grade levels, I have taken my students on many literary adventures. I have found reading aloud to my class to be a valuable asset across content, genre, and grade levels. Currently, I teach reading and language arts in a middle school to sixth and eighth grade English Language Learners (ELLs). My students are primarily Latino, mostly from Mexico, another from Honduras and one from Austria. Together we share in the excitement when I read aloud from culturally relevant literature. They bubble over with

excitement, always eager to tell their own stories and to share from their personal experiences.

Recently, I read two picture books to different groups of students, both on the topic of immigration. The first one was *Ziba Came on a Boat* by Liz Lofthouse (2007). The book never directly states the location of the girl's home that she is leaving nor the new home where she is going, however, it is implied through the descriptions in her words and the beautiful illustrations that her home was in the Middle East, specifically Afghanistan, and that she is going to Australia, the home of both the author and illustrator of the book. The entire story is set on the boat. At the beginning of the story, Ziba is remembering the home she has left behind. Thoughts of both of her parents blend into the array of memories of her homeland. Even though her memories are fond, she also remembers the gunfire and the fearful night of her escape along with her mother. Her father did not flee with Ziba and her mother and he is not on the boat. No reason is given in the book, so the reader must make his own inference about the father's disappearance. Through her mother's inspiring hope of freedom, Ziba shares her dreams about the new world and new home she will have soon.

I read this book to my class of sixth grade ELLs. Throughout the book as I read about Ziba's memories, I prompted my students to share memories they had of the home they left before coming to the U.S. They eagerly raised their hands and bounced in their seats awaiting their turn. One by one they shared comments about the home and family they left behind. I heard comments such as, "When we left my grandmother cried," "My cousins and I use to walk to the Ortega's store everyday to buy candy," "I miss having my cousins to play with," "My mom and grandpa and I use to eat tacos at a store on our street," "My grandmother use to sing to me all the time and we would watch the stars together." One boy with tears in his eyes stated that he had to leave his dog, Barney, in Mexico. They were all so eager to share their memories, and I assured them that they would have a chance to share all of these interesting memories in stories we were about to write. In one of the written stories, Maria wrote,

> *My important memory was when I was little. I lived in Melchor Musquis Cahuila. I remember when I went to my grandmother's house and my aunt's ranch. I remember swimming at the lake with daddy and riding in the back of the truck. I miss my grandpa, my aunts and uncles, my cousins. But I'm here with my family. We were not together, but now we are. We are whole again. I have new friends, new cousins and a new life everyone so nice. Why who knows who cares my dad has a great job. Before he came he work in grandpa's backyard. My mom work in Mexico, but here she doesn't work she cleans and care us. We learn new stuff. I will never forget my grandma and grandpa. I will like to see them again.*

Jose used his writing to connect to the war Ziba was escaping by telling us his grandfather's story

about escaping from a war in El Salvador. Jose shared with us that his grandfather used to tell him that was how his family first came to Mexico.

Later, as we read about Ziba approaching her future home, I asked my students to share what they remembered about their thoughts of arriving in this country. Once again hands went up and students shared their expectations and their fears. Thomas said, “It took way too long to get here.” Maricela said she liked her old house and she was afraid she would not like the new one, but she assured us she does. Many agreed they were afraid people would be mean, talk weird, not like them, and they were worried about school. Isabel commented that once she came to school she was not afraid anymore because the teachers and students were nice and helpful. Other students joined in with comments about how they liked the food in the cafeteria and how there was always someone who could help them and fun things to do.

On each occasion my students eagerly shared memories that appeared to be still vivid to them. When we finished reading the book and sharing in discussions, the students each created a replica of Ziba’s boat out of Manila paper. We discussed the fact that many, if not all of them, may never have been on a boat like this, but all of them had left a home, a country, and possibly some family members. I asked the students to think about the memories that were special to them about the place they left behind and on one side of the boat to write a story about those special memories of the home they left. Finally, I engaged the students once again in thinking about their hopes, dreams, and fears of the new home as they were coming to the U.S. After a short discussion, I instructed the students to turn on the opposite side of the boat and write a second story, this time about their hopes, dreams, and fears of their new home, before they arrived here. One student, Erica, a soft spoken and quiet girl, wrote about her fears, reflecting conversations she had heard from her parents and other adults.

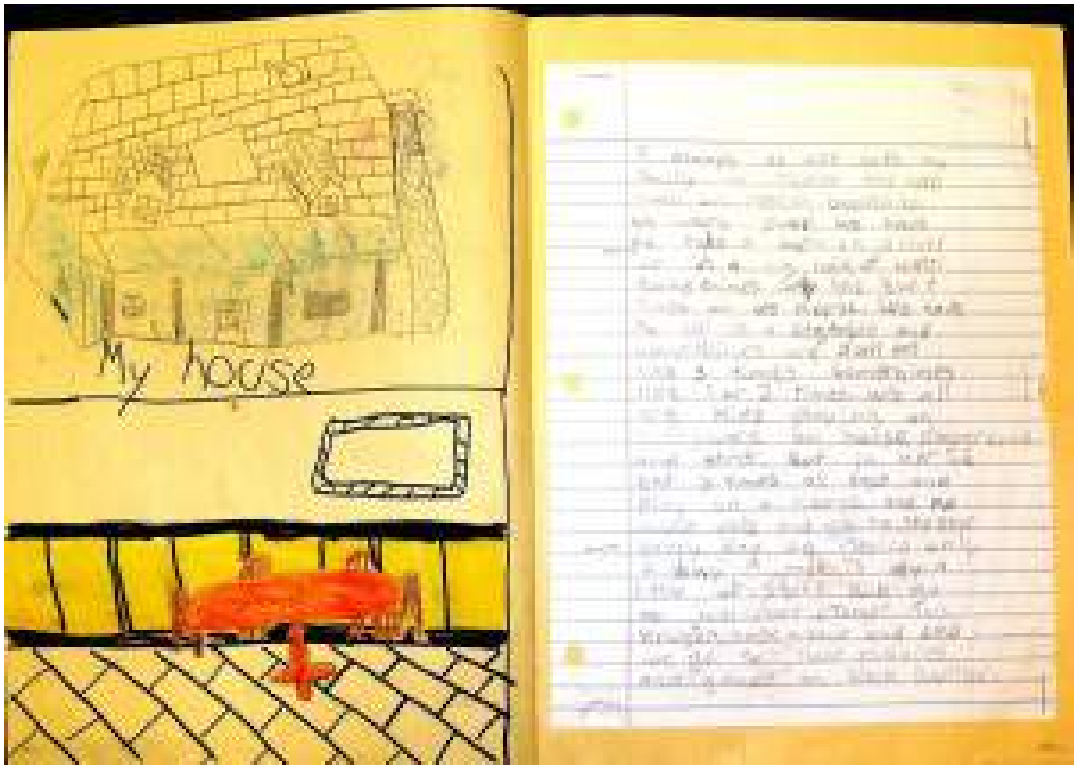
> That place is free to do whatever we want. Somewhere me and my family won’t be separated. A place with great people, and leader. A great providence of food and land. A place with no affairs. I wish we never be separated, and find a good life. A place where we’ll be treated nicely. Somewhere that can let go free. Don’t be treat in a bad way just because we’re different. I think would be happy.

Samuel expressed his greatest fears as he wrote, “I hope they won’t kill us in the U.S.” Many students wrote about worrying if people would laugh at them because they looked different or their clothes were different. Jesus said he was worried because people in the U.S. talk different and he would not know what they were saying. Grinning he said, “But I speak English now so I know what everyone is saying.”

In a reading class of mixed sixth and eighth grade ESL students I read *Immigrant Girl: Becky of Eldridge Street* by Brett Harvey. This book is about a Russian immigrant girl who is living in New York City. She tells about her daily life in her new home and compares it to the life she remembers in her home in Russia. Throughout the reading of this book the students and I engaged in conversations about their own feelings toward their new home and the one they left behind. The students told a lot about their homes in their former countries and compared them to their homes in the U.S. They also spoke openly, comparing daily events from their home countries to their daily lives now. I prompted students to think about their trip from their home country to the U.S., even though that particular piece was not in this book. The students enthusiastically shared stories and listened to and questioned one another. Over the next few days, I had my students write stories about their native homelands, their journeys to America, and their homes and their lives as they were now in America. After several days of writing, more discussions, and re-reading of the book each of my students had several stories completed. The students placed these stories into booklets, in sequential order, and illustrated each of their stories.

Miguel drew the outside and inside of his house and wrote a story comparing his old house in Mexico to his new one.

> In Mexico we were poor we have to take a bath on a river or in a big hold of water sometimes only like three or four times on our house. Here we bathe in our house every day. We have to eat in a big table and sometimes we don't eat like three times like one or two times only in Mexico. Here we eat three times a day. We go to Wal Mart, Target, Kroger, and Sack n Save.



Tony wrote about his journey to America from Honduras.

> At 2005 I was eleven. I went to my neighbor country, El Salvador. There was very cheap and big. After one year I went to Mexico. There is very nice people, but very expensive. At night Mexico City, Mexico is very beautiful. After one year again I went to Honduras. At 2008, January 8th I went to United State America to learn English and lot things. I couldn't bought hamburger in Mc Donald when I came to U.S.A. but now I can. And I'm in U.S.A. now.

Pedro shared a story full of struggles during his family's immigration to the U.S.

> When I was 3 years my dad went to Wisconsin and the immigration got him. He went to Mexico again he only was on Wisconsin like two hours and the police got him. He is in Mexico about like one week. He came again to Texas, not Wisconsin and he got a lot of work but one day he broke his foot and he go to the hospital and he have to pay a lot of money. All the money that he had worked for.

Even though none of my students immigrated in the same manner or from the same countries as the girls in these two stories, they all could relate to the stories in connected and personal ways. Each felt compassion for the character in the story and felt deep empathy towards the feelings shared by the character. Ana shared in her stories how she always wanted to be a nurse when she grew up and that she knows she will be able to do this in America. Maria wrote about a dream shared by her and her twin brother of having a family of their own and always being neighbors in America. All of my students shared in their writings not only about the dreams they had of a good life when they came to America, but also about the dreams they still had, along with many of their parents, about the good life they were still in the process of working to build as they enjoyed their life in the U.S.

As teachers, we should always try to learn as much as we can about each student and his heritage. With the diversity of backgrounds in today's classrooms that include many immigrant experiences, discovering individual cultures is not always an easy task. Culturally relevant literature has the potential to invite ELL students to explore the connections between their past life experiences and the communities in which they live. By providing literature in which they can see themselves and their own experiences, we encourage them to be proud of and to share their own stories orally and in writing. This will build a positive learning environment and boost our students' self-images.

Other books I have found to be successful in reading and writing with students:

Bunting, E. (1996).

Train to somewhere

. Ill. by Ronald Himler. New York: Clarion.

Hanson, R. (2005).

A season for mangos

. Ill. by Eric Velasquez. New York: Clarion.

Leighton, M. R. (1992).

An Ellis Island Christmas

. Ill. by Dennis Nolan. New York: Puffin.

Mora, P. (1997).

Tomás and the library lady

. Ill. by Raúl Colon. New York: Knopf.

Pearl, S. (2007).

Books for children of the world the story of Jella Lepman

. Ill. by Danlyn Lantorno. Gretna: Pelican.

Rodriguez, L. J. (1954).

America is her name

. Willimantic: Curbstone Press.

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Harvey, B. (1987). *Immigrant girl: Becky on Eldridge Street*. New York: Holiday.
Krashen, S. D., Tse, L., & McQuillan, J. (1998). *Heritage language development*. Culver City: Language Education Associates.
Lofthouse, Liz. (2007). *Ziba came on a boat*. La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller.
Murphy, R. J., Jr. (1999). On Stories and Scholarship. In R. L. Graves (Ed.), *Writing, teaching, learning 4th edition of rhetoric and composition*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

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