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# WOW STORIES

BECOMING CRITICAL READERS THROUGH  
ENGAGEMENTS WITH INTERNATIONAL AND  
MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

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**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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**Becoming Critical Readers through Engagements with International and**

## Multicultural Literature

*As a teacher, critical thinking and questioning are my primary goals for students.* - Courtney Bauer

One of the goals of Worlds of Words is to connect children with international literature. While encouraging children to read international literature is an important goal, the mission of WOW goes further to focus on using these reading experiences to promote intercultural understanding through critical explorations of the literature and the world.

In this issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* we share five vignettes of classroom engagements and literacy experiences that encourage critical reading. While the authors are at different grade levels and use diverse strategies, they share a commitment to helping the students they work with become more knowledgeable, careful thinkers about books, the book world, and their own world.

In the first vignette, Courtney Bauer describes how she and her fourth graders used critical literacy strategies to explore narratives documenting children's lives during the Holocaust. Next, Lorraine Wilson discusses her work exploring a conceptual understanding of refugees with grade 5/6 students in Australia. Wilson notes that critical explorations of literature depend on freedom from restrictive curricular mandates. In the third vignette, Deanne Paiva describes how her third graders analyzed the values and beliefs of characters in global literature.

Teacher knowledge is essential in order for schools to facilitate critical reading. The last vignettes explain how two different professors work with educators to strengthen their knowledge of literature and critical inquiry. Julia López-Robertson shares strategies she uses to help graduate students deepen their thinking about multicultural literature, an issue that is complicated by their lack of historical knowledge. Finally, a vignette by Kathy Short completes the issue. Short discusses how her curriculum and teaching engagements have evolved to help graduate students examine multiple perspectives and take on depth of thinking about international literature.

As you read these vignettes, think about how you connect students of all ages with literature in ways that promote intercultural understandings. 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 at preschool through graduate levels. See our [call for manuscripts and author guidelines](#) for more information.

Janine M. Schall

Editor, *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom*

# Transformative Practice: Multicultural Texts, Critical Literacy, and Student Choice

By Courtney Bauer

“I just don’t get how someone could treat another human being like that,” Jimmy wondered during our group discussion of a chapter from *Survivors: True Stories of Children in the Holocaust* (Zullo & Bovsun, 2004). The fourth-grade group sat in silence marveling at the significance of his words. Jimmy had said exactly what we all had been thinking, but were too afraid to discuss. How could seemingly normal people, who were considered your friends, turn on you in a matter of months and hand you over to the Nazi military police for an almost certain death? Seconds seemed like minutes and it was if the words were floating above us unattached to any reason or explanation.

After a minute Catherine piped up, “Yeah, why did the Nazis hate the Jews so much?” Other students nodded their heads. Looking back at the prologue of the book, I reread and summarized the first few pages. Political tensions at the end of World War I in Germany and the subsequent economic depression catalyzed anti-Semitic sentiment. Hitler believed that the Jews were responsible for Germany’s economic problems (Zullo & Bovsun, 2004). After defining some of the difficult vocabulary and providing background information about World War I, most of the students sat quietly with puzzled expressions on their faces. I finally told the class, “I don’t have an answer for you.” It was scary; the teacher didn’t really have an answer and neither did they. Searching for answers over the next two months, we did not anticipate that our exploration would end with more questions than answers, along with new understandings about tolerance, immigration, and the role of larger political and social systems in the lives of ordinary people.

## The Context: Teacher/Researcher

As a teacher, critical thinking and questioning are my primary goals for students. For the past eighteen years, I have worked predominantly with urban, culturally diverse elementary students; many of whom already feel disconnected from school by the fourth grade. Concern for social justice and equity for all children led me to explore the tenets of critical literacy theory and read the sobering, yet inspirational, work of authors like Shirley Brice-Heath (1983), Lisa Delpit (2002), and Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo (1987). These researchers describe how schools, administrators, and teachers often view minority students, particularly those who speak alternative discourses, as language deficient and lacking the literacy skills or the exposure to be successful in school. Such assumptions and misconceptions trickle down insidiously into classroom practices in ways that can be emotionally and academically damaging and can prevent those who struggle as readers from successfully acquiring school literacies (Delpit, 2002; Compton-Lily, 2003). In addition, these readers often read less at home and school, have inadequate materials for reading

at their level at school, and may only spend 20% of their day exposed to quality instruction in pull out programs outside of their regular classroom (Stanovich, 2004; Allington, 2007). Thus, the achievement gap continues to widen over the years between strong and struggling readers (Stanovich, 2004). Instead of schools building on students' rich and varied home experiences and knowledge, many students are silenced, alienated, and feel under valued (Delpit, 2002).

In contrast, critical literacy, a pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire, foregrounds students' local and personal knowledge and concerns while teaching academic literacy skills (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992). Resulting discussions, readings, and analyses of power inequities in the students' world provide the impetus for social action to improve and better their world.

Critical literacy benefits all students (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Unlike more traditional interventions with struggling readers (such as teaching phonics skills in isolation), students are exposed to academic literacy strategies utilized for relevant and personal reasons. Benefits for readers from mainstream cultures include an opportunity to better understand culturally diverse perspectives and the agenda and motivation of those with and without power in our society. Consequently, students from all backgrounds can regain their voice, reconnect to school, and transform their identities into engaged, curious, and critical learners (Busching, 1999; Edelsky, 1999).

## **The Context: The Participants**

During the 2009-2010 school year my fourth grade students varied in both ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic status. Of the forty-three students enrolled in my three sections, twenty-one were White, eighteen were African American, eight were Hispanic, and one student was Asian. Forty-eight percent were classified as low socio-economic status and seven percent were Limited English Proficient. In addition, approximately ten students struggled on a variety of reading assessments, indicating that most of the ten were in danger of failing the state reading assessments.

Although many of the students needed differentiated instruction, critical literacy allowed students to make the connection between school literacy practices and individual power. In prior years, some of my most reluctant readers had reconnected to classroom discussions and texts through critical literacy activities. Eagerly sharing their knowledge, they realized their life experiences were valued and relevant to our readings. These connections transformed some of my students into active, engaged, and curious learners. Thus, I incorporated the tenets of critical literacy often during our whole group discussions due to the multitude of benefits for a wide variety of students.

## **Blending Theory and Practice**

One of the biggest hurdles to fostering a critical curriculum is how to bridge theory into practice. Adapting materials and topics, yet following the mandated curriculum, has been an on-going challenge. Fortunately, this fall I stumbled upon two books full of examples and ideas, *Making Justice Our Project* edited by Edelsky (1999) and *Creating Critical Classrooms* by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008).

*Making Justice Our Project* (Edelsky, 1999) provides a description and examples of how to view texts through a critical lens while utilizing the tenets of whole language. Thus, a primary goal is to analyze underlying power relationships both in and outside of the classroom and how these relationships affect both personal and larger social issues relevant to the student. In order to move in this direction, the curriculum is centered upon, “books dealing with justice and injustice, social issues, and usually muted or absent voices,” (Edelsky, 1999, p.19). Thus, multicultural texts with themes of injustice are a natural curriculum choice. In addition, students can act to change these injustices.

*Creating Critical Classrooms* (Lewison, et al. 2008) provides lessons and themes to encourage students to question and consider multiple viewpoints in order to develop a critical stance. A practical model of critical literacy based on the work of Shannon (1995), Janks (2002), and Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) is provided in the beginning chapters. In this model, students move between the social and the personal dimensions allowing the possibility “to create powerful, transformative curricula” (Lewison, et al., 2008, p. xxvii). Thus, students draw upon their personal resources and interests to drive the curricula and create opportunities for education that are relevant and powerful. I found that by using a combination of this model and guiding questions like, “Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is not heard?” my students responded with critical and deep conversations.

Thus, armed with these two resources and a wonderful classroom library, I began searching for multicultural texts that could provide the impetus for these types of discussions and subsequent actions.

## **Jumping In**

The Holocaust is viewed as a topic typically for older children. I offered five multicultural titles related to our six-week theme: *Hiroshima* by Lawrence Yep (1996), *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coer (2004), [\*Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez\*](#) by Kathleen Krull (2003) *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Bette Bao Lord (1986), and *Survivors: Stories of Children from the Holocaust* (Zullo & Bovsun, 2004). The students voted overwhelmingly for *Survivors*. Several reasons made this text a good choice. First, the students chose the text and took ownership of the topic. Second, my principal wanted more non-fiction

incorporated into the reading curriculum. Third, according to our district's curriculum planning guide for reading during the last six weeks, students should be reading texts in the basal reader on the theme of "Survival." Therefore, this supplemental text connected to and would build upon their prior knowledge from our whole group readings. Lastly and most importantly, I knew that this particular book choice would inspire the students to question the Nazi government and allow for some deep, critical conversations about larger social systems.

*Survivors: Stories of Children from the Holocaust* contains a collection of narrative essays describing the personal accounts of children's experiences during the Holocaust. We jumped right in with the first story, which describes the experience of Luncia, an eight-year-old Jewish girl living in Lvov, Poland. The least violent of all the accounts, Luncia lived in hiding with a German family until she was reunited with her parents and hidden in another home until the war was over. As Luncia describes an incident where she is nearly discovered by Nazi sympathizers, the students held their breaths and then let out a sigh of relief when she escaped. Soon students complained whenever I ended our daily readings. "Why can't we read more?" was the constant request everyday. The students were hooked and so was I; we had to read more.

Questions followed about Jewish religion and culture. Most of my students knew little about Jewish culture and even less about World War II or the Holocaust. Most students only knew that Hitler was a "bad guy." We started discussing what we knew as a group about Judaism, which was minimal. Fortunately, one Jewish student volunteered to describe many of his religious beliefs and traditions, allowing students to see how their lives connected to Jewish peoples. Because one of the most well liked students in the class was Jewish, the Nazi's actions appeared even more atrocious. We also researched famous contemporary Jews and many students were surprised that many of their idols were Jewish. Although these beginning connections to Jewish culture and religion were important, I wanted the students to analyze the larger political and social systems that supported the mass genocide of Jews and apply this analysis to circumstances in their own world.

## **Recording Their Responses**

In an effort to extend the discussions, I asked the students to record their responses to our readings. *Creating Critical Classrooms* (Lewison, et al., 2008, p.229) provides concrete examples on how to guide students through this process. In the student samples below, I used the "Character Analysis" form to encourage students to consider all the different views of the main people in the story. Initially, students primarily described the characters' actions and not their perspectives. In the box for the Nazi guard's point of view (Figure 1), one student wrote, "They forced them to do what they say. [They] beat the Jews." These comments demonstrated literal knowledge and primarily described actions.

Character	Perspectives on the Text
Walter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walter didn't want to be a Nazi</li> <li>He's trying his best to fit in</li> <li>He's with Hitler to protect</li> <li>He's not racist, he's just an idiot</li> <li>He's not a Nazi</li> </ul>
Moskow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beat up Jews</li> <li>Scared to see two white boys</li> <li>Scared that Jewish people will hurt him</li> <li>Scared to believe what everyone says</li> </ul>
Felix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared in prison</li> <li>Scared who people are looking at</li> <li>Scared he'll be found</li> <li>Scared he'll be hurt</li> </ul>
Prisoner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to see other prisoners</li> <li>Scared to see other people</li> <li>Scared Jews are nothing</li> <li>Scared Jews are bad men</li> </ul>
Commissar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to see Hitler</li> <li>Scared Hitler is going to kill him</li> <li>Scared Hitler is going to kill everyone</li> </ul>
Peter G.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Giving Walter a special job</li> <li>Protects Walter better than other prisoners</li> <li>Keeps Walter special assignments like hiding dead Jewish bodies in the woods</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Student work before the tableaux. Form from Multiview Book Organizer (Lewison, et al., 2008, p.229)

Character	Perspectives on the Text
Baruch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life was better</li> <li>Scared going onto his assignment to rescue Jews</li> </ul>
Stanislov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to house Jews</li> <li>Scared to house Jews</li> </ul>
Maria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to house Jews</li> <li>Scared to house Jews</li> <li>Thinking about what's happening to Jews</li> </ul>
Leon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to make the poison</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> </ul>
David	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared to make the poison</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> <li>Scared to see his friend die</li> </ul>
Felix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared about always having to be a spy</li> <li>Scared and almost</li> </ul>
Mom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scared and almost</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Student work after the tableaux.

In an attempt to push beyond the surface, I had the students use tableau to “dig deeper into texts” (Lewison, et al., 2008, p.164). This drama activity took several class periods, but everyone was able to participate, including some of the children considered the most severely learning disabled. In groups of four, students chose one scene to depict from the book with each student portraying one character. The class as a whole tried to guess the scene from the book. Afterward the students explained who they were in the scene and their perspectives during the event. The students’ responses after the tableaux reflected a deeper analysis of their characters. For example, the second student in Figure 2 made statements like, “Scared to house the Jews” [Stanislov], and, “Scared and

almost hopeless” [Tsivia]. Thus through the group dramatization of pivotal moments in the text, the students were better able to explore and connect to the characters’ feelings and perspectives. Moreover, the students enjoyed this activity so much that they continually requested to use tableaux after all our readings.

We also used a “Critical Reading” form from Lee Heffernan’s, *Critical Literacy and Writer’s Workshop* (2004) with critical questions that required students to describe what surprised them, share questions they still had about the text, and explain what events they thought were most memorable. Most students easily answered three of the four questions. However, when I first asked students about their connections to the events in the chapter, most of them could not name any. Nazi treatment of the Jews seemed isolated and disconnected to personal or governmental behavior they had experienced, but the combination of the events in the second chapter and a highly publicized current event changed all that.

### **Pivotal Moment: A Clear Connection**

The second chapter describes Herbert Karliner’s experience in “Is There No Country in the Entire World That Will Take Us?” (Zullo & Bovsun, 2004). In 1938, terrorized by both soldiers and neighbors, Herbert’s family and many other Jewish families decide to flee Germany for Cuba on the S.S. St. Louis. When the ship docks in Cuba, the Cuban government refuses to allow entry to any passengers. Desperate and afraid, many consider jumping ship and entering illegally. Immediately, one student, Ignacio, interjected that his Dad did the same thing when he climbed through a barbed wire fence to cross the border from Mexico into the United States. Elan, an Ethiopian American student, declared that her uncle, who was caught in the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, also had to escape to the United States to survive. Many of the students from recently immigrated families made personal connections that they had never shared.

Unfortunately, Herbert was not as lucky as my students’ families and the ship was forced to leave Cuba. The captain, a Jewish sympathizer, sent out a plea to every surrounding country to accept the passengers. In fact, a telegraph was sent to the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt begging her to allow the children onboard into the U.S. Unfortunately, the American government denied the request, as well as the neighboring countries, forcing the Karliners and the other Jewish families to return to Europe. Students were shocked to discover that the United States had refused to take in the children.

Coincidentally, the same week we were reading about the Karliners, Jan Brewer, the governor of Arizona, signed the Arizona SB 1070 immigration law. During our weekly character classroom meeting, many of the Hispanic students heatedly discussed the injustice of this new law. Other students from diverse backgrounds agreed. How could policemen target Hispanics and request

residency documents from them and not from others? Two African American students brought up the Rodney King beatings that we had discussed earlier in the year. What if the policemen starting acting like that? Students were outraged. At this critical moment, I asked the class if this event reminded them of anything else. After a short pause, hands quickly flew up and some excitedly shouted out the Nazis and the Jews. While students discussed some of the similarities, I offered the many differences between the German government and the U.S. government and laws. This conversation led to the perfect opportunity to discuss the protection of individual rights. We went back at the prologue and the last two chapters and discovered that the German government slowly took away the rights of Jews, beginning with the random stopping of Jews for identification. Although the students didn't think that the intent of the Arizona governor was to hurt undocumented immigrants, they wondered how our own government could act so unfairly. Writing with intensity, the students wrote down their thoughts, this time with many connections. For example in Figures 3 and 4, the students comment in the connection box that police in Arizona can stop people who look Hispanic to check to see if they have papers.

<p>Something important we want to remember about this text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I think the most important part is when the soldiers demanded Walters family to leave.</li> <li>There were nazi soldiers that were trigger happy and shot many Jews whenever they wanted.</li> <li>Adolf Hitler hated Jews and wanted to kill them in concentration camps.</li> </ul> <p>A question we have is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why did Hitler attack Jews without warning?</li> <li>Why did Hitler want Nazis to be perfect?</li> <li>Why did Adolf Hitler take away Jewish rights?</li> </ul>	<p>An anomaly: Something that we did not expect or something that surprised us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Nazis would just attack and take over without warning.</li> <li>Kids would be brain washed at schools. Jewish kids were torched and killed by gasses or gunshots by the Nazis.</li> </ul> <p>A connection we have with our world is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arizona Governor signed a law for pro-immigrant protesters? Now police can stop Hispanics and see if they have papers.</li> </ul>
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Figure 3. Student work. Form from Heffernan (2004, p.5)

<p>Something important we want to remember about this text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arizona has the power to kick Jewish children out of school.</li> <li>The Nazis would not stop killing the innocent Jews.</li> <li>There were no Nazis to stop innocent Jews.</li> </ul> <p>A question we have is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why did the Germans help Jewish people?</li> <li>Why did Hitler hate Jews?</li> <li>What happened to the S.S.?</li> </ul>	<p>An anomaly: Something that we did not expect or something that surprised us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There's a concentration camp that the Germans are not that bad.</li> <li>How does help from a neighbor?</li> <li>Japan's culture is not like ours for most the rest of the world.</li> </ul> <p>A connection we have with our world is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arizona has made a law that a police officer can stop a person and they had to produce papers.</li> <li>People still rape African-American people.</li> <li>People can see a person from the back but they have no bags in their car.</li> </ul>
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Figure 4. Student work. Form from Heffernan (2004, p.5)

## Conclusion

This collection of responses was only the beginning. For our end of year research project many students chose topics related to the Holocaust. In addition, I brought up the creation of Japanese internment camps in the United States during the 1940's. This led to a whole new unit of study.

One of our primary texts was *So Far from the Sea* by Eve Bunting (1998). This fiction book describes the life of a Japanese American child in an internment camp. By this time, the students' responses were much deeper and more sophisticated. Students wondered why the American government took away the rights of Japanese American citizens. In Figure 5, a student stated, "I learned it is important to remember important events even if they are not the most wonderful subject in the world. Sometimes you have to face the past and what has happened in the past."

TABLE 10.21.2 Literature Response Cube	
Immigration	
<p>Book Title: <u>So Far from the Sea</u></p> <p>What did you learn from this book?</p> <p>I learned that it is important to remember important events even if they are not the most wonderful subject in the world. Sometimes you have to face the past and what has happened in the past.</p>	<p>What important part?</p> <p>Then it says that the government took the COURT of the United States. President Roosevelt had the power to do anything he wanted. He was during the war and he passed an order that the Japanese Americans were not allowed to live in the United States. American citizens were not allowed to live in California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska.</p>
<p>What connections, if any, can you make between the story and people you know?</p> <p>There are similarities between the Japanese Americans and the African Americans. In African Americans, they were not allowed to live in certain areas. In Japanese Americans, they were not allowed to live in certain areas.</p>	<p>What questions do you have about immigration?</p> <p>Why do some people not like immigrants? I don't see why we are allowed to accept people in our country, especially when they are not American.</p>

Figure 5. Student Work. Form from "Literature Response Cube" (Lewison, et al., 2008, p.301).

TABLE 10.21.2 Literature Response Cube	
Immigration	
<p>Book Title: <u>So Far from the Sea</u></p> <p>What did you learn from this book?</p> <p>I learned that it is important to remember important events even if they are not the most wonderful subject in the world. Sometimes you have to face the past and what has happened in the past.</p>	<p>What important part?</p> <p>I learned that the government took the COURT of the United States. President Roosevelt had the power to do anything he wanted. He was during the war and he passed an order that the Japanese Americans were not allowed to live in the United States. American citizens were not allowed to live in California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska.</p>
<p>What connections, if any, can you make between the story and people you know?</p> <p>This story reminds me of how the Jewish people treated the African Americans. They were not allowed to live in certain areas. In this story, the Japanese Americans were not allowed to live in certain areas.</p>	<p>What questions do you have about immigration?</p> <p>Why didn't Japan let people out of their country? I don't understand why we are allowed to accept people in our country, especially when they are not American.</p>

These conversations continued until the end of the year. At the beginning, I was unsure whether students would relate to the narratives or where we would end up on this journey. However, given the outstanding multicultural texts, student choice, and the guiding questions by Lewison, Leland & Harste (2008) and Heffernan (2004), the students moved from a superficial understanding of cultures and historical events to a deeper knowledge. Furthermore, learners analyzed these events critically and made many personal connections. Although in the end we did not act upon these injustices, I hope these students will have a heightened sensitivity to the protection of individual rights and the boundaries of the government, even if we never satisfactorily answered their questions about hatred between groups of people.

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## **Learning To Mean: Teaching about Refugees**

By Lorraine Wilson

The work described in this vignette commenced in Term 4 with Grade 5/6 children in Dowson Primary School in Melbourne, Australia, where most of the children live in high rise public housing, almost all are immigrant children, or children of immigrant parents, and many are refugees. The work then continued in Penderly Primary School, a distance of 4-5 kilometres from the first school. The families at this school are almost exclusively from white Anglo middle-class

families with very few immigrant children.

Our inquiry into refugees grew out of the political context within Australia involving refugees where boat people were arriving on our shores, people smugglers were operating from Indonesia, and Australian detention camps were being set up to keep refugees from integrating into Australia. At the same time, several quite provocative children's picture storybooks about refugees were published, providing a contrast to the news reports. My belief as a holistic educator is that one of the over-riding purposes of education is to learn about, and to learn to care about, the world's people and so I decided to explore these issues with students.

The work unfolded simultaneously with the development of a National Curriculum for Australian schools. This curriculum included statements about refugees that provided the space for our inquiry into understanding the experiences of these refugees:

Students who are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) make up about one-quarter of the Australian school population. This includes children of recent or settled migrants, refugees, rural, remote and urban Aboriginal students, and increasingly, international students. These students may have little or no English at all. These students may be illiterate in their first language, speak a dialect of English or speak everyday English but lack proficiency in the language of schooling. The national English curriculum must acknowledge their diverse backgrounds and life experiences, and how their language experiences provide a building block to develop their skills in Standard Australian English. (Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English, p. 14)

### **Tapping Existing Knowledge through Writing Definitions**

The work began with individual children in each school writing a definition to respond to the question "Who/what are refugees?" Several times throughout the inquiry children were given the opportunity to revisit these definitions and to revise them, if they so wished.

Several children at each school initially had no idea who/what refugees were. Below are the first two definitions of a Grade 5 child.

what is a refugee? i don't know

First I did not know what refugee meant then when she read that story I know what it meant, like I think that Refugee means you have something you lose it & get a new one.

Figure 1. Definitions: Who is a refugee?

Gradually the children were able to fill out their definitions.

- I think refugees are people that their home get destroyed and try to find another home.

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Refugees are people that flee from other countries because there might be a war going on or disease or not much food and many other reasons then they go to another country were its safe and stay at that country

Figure 2. Definitions: Who is a refugee?

In the next example, a child was able to draw upon personal experience to write an elaborated definition. This definition argues that each of us is the total of our lived experiences and so each one of us is different.

Refugees are people escaping from their home country usually because of war or government. They usually have to travel illegally because they can't afford legitimate travel transport or passports and so forth. My grandma was a refugee. Her parents ~~we~~ worked for the Russian Government but then the Soviets came and kicked them out. They had to flee but my great grandmas dad was caught.

What were the machines doing to the pond? What do ducks eat? What was the dog doing in the reeds? Was there other ducks in the ponds?

One book had ducks, and the other book had humans, but they were both refugees. They both had their homes destroyed, but only the ducks got rescued.

Figure 3. Definitions: Who is a refugee?

Some weeks into the inquiry I sorted the children's current definitions and found they fell into five different groups. I wrote a sample definition from each of these groups on a large chart. At the start of following sessions we focused on just one of these definitions. Individual children were asked to either speak in support of this definition or to argue against it. This activity noticeably sharpened children's understandings.

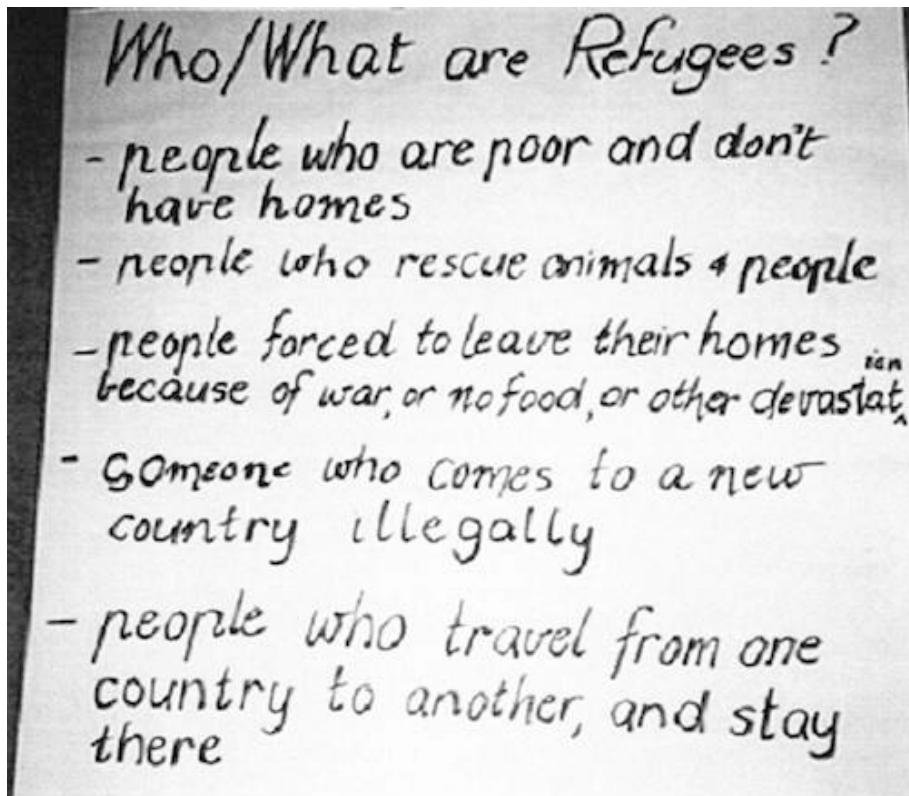


Figure 4. Summary of children's various definitions.

## Accessing New Information through Picture Books

In the first sessions, two picture story books were read aloud to further develop children's understandings about refugees. *Refugees* by David Miller (2004) tells what happens to a duck family when heavy earth moving equipment begins draining their swamp home. They are forced to flee and to find a safe, new, home. *Home and Away* by John Marsden (2008) tells the story of a family in an unnamed country through the voice of a fifteen year old. At the beginning, they are a typical neighbourhood family, but then war breaks out and their world is turned upside down. The family is forced to flee for their survival. They obtain passage on a boat, where terrible events occur. Eventually they reach land and for the first time in many months, experience hope, but sadly, they are surrounded by naval officers and imprisoned in a detention camp. The quality of their lives further deteriorates.

## Processing New Information through Sketch to Stretch

One activity the children engaged with in processing new information was Sketch to Stretch (Whitin, 1996). With this activity, children create a visual image using colours and symbols to represent the message or meaning of the story. They do not simply draw to re-tell the events of the story.



Figure 5. Death lurking between a war torn country and the detention camp.

In this sketch-to stretch the child has represented the refugees' lives as caught between war and the detention camp.



Figure 6. A dying flower signifies a dying family.

In this sketch, the child has drawn a flower to represent the life of the refugees. The black colouring along the left hand side illustrates the deteriorating quality of the refugees' lives and the death of some of them.

### **Accessing New Information through Refugee Speakers**

Two Somali women, both refugees from Somalia and members of the Dowson Primary School community, visited the children at Penderly Primary School to tell of their experiences in leaving their country. For twenty minutes the first guest told what happened on the morning she left her village--how she could not carry any personal possessions because in one arm she held her eleven-day-old baby, and with her other, she held the hand of her one-year-old child. She told also how her husband stayed behind to fight, and after her flight for safety, it was four years before she knew whether or not he was dead or alive.

Over 100 children from Penderly Primary School in grades 4/5/6 sat enthralled as they listened to

the visitors' stories. They asked question after question, particularly returning to "But what did you take with you when you left?" The children had difficulty conceptualising how one could flee one's home and not take any personal possessions.

## Processing New Information: Contrasting Expressive Forms

The children had a choice of activities to process the new information gleaned from the Somali women. One of these involved using different expressive forms. Each expressive form has the capacity to clarify meanings. Different people find particular art forms easier to use than others in the clarification of meaning. Visual artists, musicians or ballet dancers each use their art form as a way of expressing their life meanings. Many of us also find it easier to express some meanings with one expressive form rather than another. For example some find it easier to show the impact of hurricane winds via drawing or movement rather than by writing. It follows then that if our purpose is to develop children's capacities to make sense of their worlds or, to develop children's meaning making capacities, they must have opportunity to learn about and use different expressive forms in schools.

One activity we did required the children to use two different art forms, writing and drawing, to show their understanding of an event. They were asked to write, and then draw the scene where Khadra, one of our Somali visitors, fled her village. When completed, the children were asked to make notes about how they made meaning by writing and by drawing. I asked them to consider: Which elements of each expressive form were available to them? How did it differ to make meaning by drawing rather than by writing?

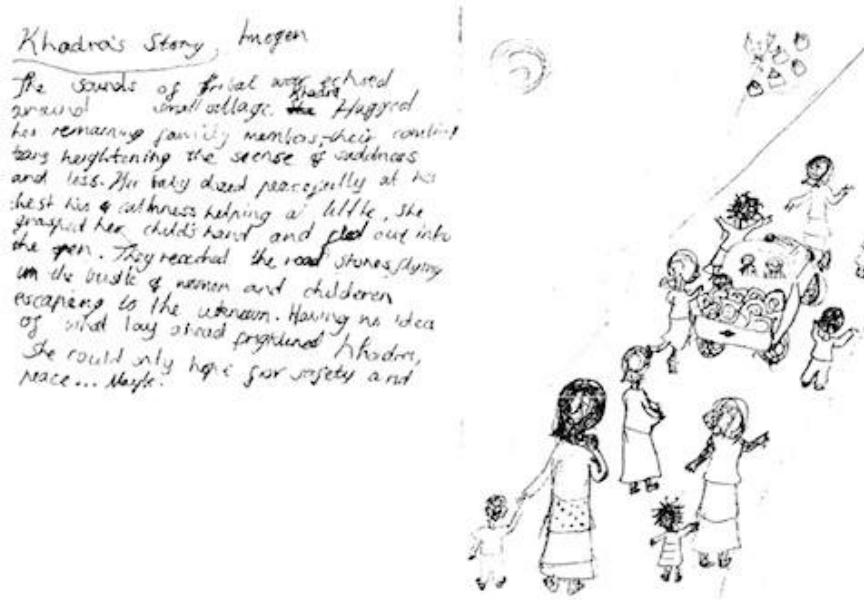


Figure 7. Making meaning by writing and drawing.

*The sounds of tribal fighting echoed around the small village. Khadra hugged her remaining*

*family members; their combined tears heightening the sense of sadness and loss. Her baby dozed peacefully at her chest his calmness helping a little. She grasped her child's hand and fled out into the open. They reached the road, stones flying in the bustle of women and children escaping to the unknown. Having no idea of what lay ahead frightened Khadra, She could only hope for peace.....maybe. Imogen*

Interestingly for me as a teacher, I learned more about the children's understandings of Khadra's flight from their art work than from their writing. For example, while some children used the word 'village' in their writing, their drawing showed a high rise apartment building.

It was noticeable how detailed the children's written and visual descriptions were. Perhaps when the task involved writing and drawing only the initial scene, the focus was more evident for the children. The task was more manageable than, for example, being asked to do a re-telling of the whole experience.

The children found it difficult to differentiate between the elements of each expressive form they had used and so had difficulty responding to my questions, indicating that I needed to provide more teaching and demonstration. I include just one example.

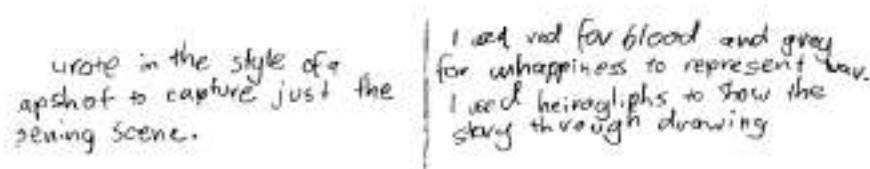


Figure 8. Children try to describe the elements of each expressive medium they drew upon to make their meanings.

### Processing Information through Word Chains

As the work progressed a list of words which stood for 'refugees' was compiled. Toward the end of this inquiry the children were asked to individually sort the words into two groups: one group was to contain those words which constructed refugees positively and the other, those words which constructed refugees negatively. When the word groups were sorted, the children were asked to order the words within each group; that is, with the negative group they were to sequence the words in order from those they thought gave the least negative impression to those which gave the most negative. This activity was great for drawing the children's attention to nuances of meaning between different words and phrases.

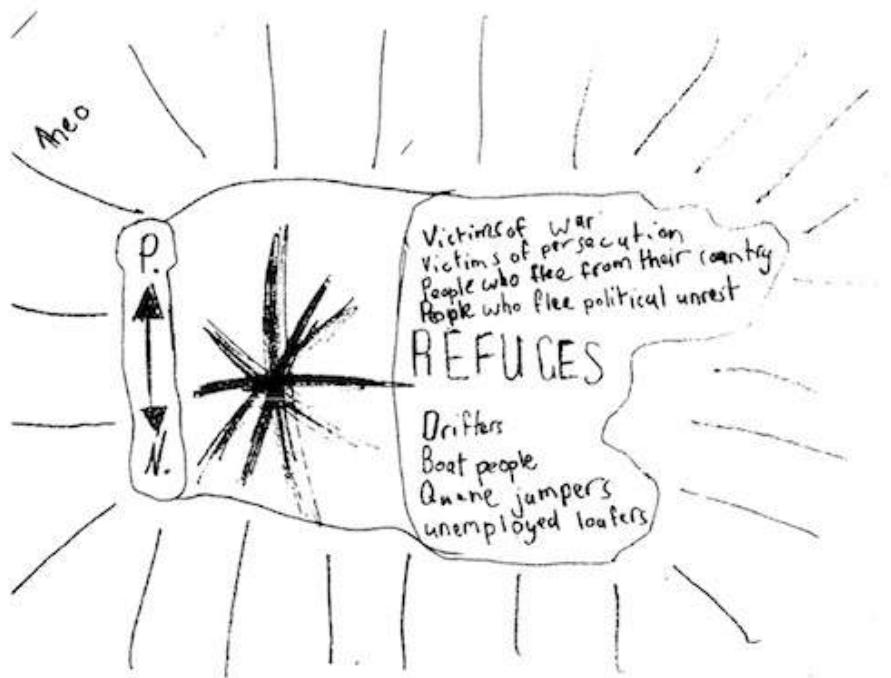


Figure 9. Ordering synonyms for 'refugees' from the most positive to the most negative.

### Accessing New Information: Reading *The Island*

*The Island* (2007) by Armin Greder is a picture book that tells what happens when a stranger is washed ashore on a small island. While the majority of the local villagers treat the stranger very badly, one, a fisherman, feels a responsibility to help the stranger, resulting in negative consequences both for the fisherman and the stranger. The children listened as the story was read aloud.

### Processing New Information: Listen, Speak, Write in Role

After the initial reading and discussion, we engaged in an activity that I adapted from Susan Close, British Columbia. It involves the following processes:

- The children each choose a role as one of the main characters
- Teacher reads a story aloud as children listen in role as one of the main characters.
- The children answer in the role as their character as questions are asked by the teacher about how they were feeling or what they were thinking at key events throughout the story.
- The children re-write the story in role as the character

In this first example Lilianna re-wrote the story as the stranger.

## The Island

Lilianne

I'm cold, I'm hungry. Wait, I see a Island! I'm coming closer! Oww!! Help me, I need food. Hey, they look very different to me, they're big, scary and... well... huge! I hope they will help me. Hey, why are they poking me? Hey! I'm being draged and poked with. I hope they give me warm cloathes and food. Why are they pushing their children away from me? Is this a cell? Hey, guys, I'm hungry! Please give me food?! I need help. Why are they tying me up on a boat? Hey... What are you doing to me? Give mercy!!!

Figure 10. Liliana writes in role as the stranger.

Claire re-wrote as the fisherman.

## Claire The Fisherman in The Island

One Day a man came to our Island. He had no clothes.

I felt like I needed to help him.

Everybody else disagreed with me.

They did not want him on our Island.

The people wanted to keep him in the Pig Pen with the Pigs, after I managed to persuade our People to keep him for a while.

I felt sorry for the man, I mean, sleeping in a Pig Pen?!

One day the strange man came into the village.

I knew he was trying to ask us for food.

I tried to get the people to give him some food.

It was a hard job doing that, then I suggested the man get a job. No one wanted him to work for them though. I would have like him to work for me but unfortunately there's only room for one on my fishing boat.

Poor guy, he must feel really alone. Sometimes I feel alone on my own when I'm sitting and fishing out at sea.

I try to be nice to this man and I try to persuade the People to look after him. But I also try to not make it obvious to the People that I feel guilty and sorry for the old man.

Right now, I'm wondering what his thinking.

The next day, the people made the man go back on his raft and go back out to sea.

I want to do something about it but I am afraid of what the People will do to me.

Suddenly, the people unexpectedly set fire to my boat. Oh, what ARE THEY DOING!

And lucky I'm not on it, I escaped. Oh, my poor boat!! POOR Man!

Now the people will not eat fish from the sea because I don't feel like saying.

Figure 11. Claire writes in role as the fisherman.

One of the over-riding aims of the inquiry was to develop empathy with those who are different. The children were challenged to think about the different ways of behaving when a stranger arrives in their lives. Working in pairs, they planned a role play set in a familiar context, such as a football club. One character was familiar with the context and the second was a stranger entering that context for the first time. The role play was to happen twice. One time the stranger was to be warmly welcomed, the second, he was to be made to feel very unwelcome. The children developed the role play orally and then wrote it, later sharing it with classmates.

The context for the role play included below is a local grocery store.

(UW)

NP: Hello.

GS: What in god's name are you?

NP: The New person in <sup>town</sup>.

GS: What are you doing in my grocery store!

NP: Nothing.

GS: Well I don't go near the fruit or there will be trouble.

NP: Why can't I go near the fruit?

GS: You will contaminate it with your filthy hands.

NP: OK but Who are you?

GS: Don't bother me! You are not welcome here.

NP: That's not nice to say!

GS: Don't speak unless you're spoken to!

(W)

NP: Hello

GS: Have we met before?

NP: No.

GS: My name is Ronald and I run this grocery store with my son Donald.

NP: That's nice.

GS: Please, tell me your name.

NP: Amy.

GS: Nice to meet you Amy. Now what can I do for you on such a lovely day?

NP: Nothing.

GS: Well then, I am afraid I have other customers to tend to. Good bye for now, I hope to see you around.

Figure 12. A role play set in grocery store, with the grocer first being most unwelcoming to a stranger, and in the second, being very welcoming.

As well as writing and sharing their two role plays, the children were asked to compare the language used, the tone of voice, and the body language.

Name: Loo + Charlee			
	BODY LANGUAGE	VOICE TONE	LANGUAGE
ES W :	Trying to understand buy coming forward.	Greetings	Eager to find out about the person. (please, tell me your name). ✓ Yes
res on	✓		
UVW	Trying to get away from the strangers.	Angry Annoyed Frustrated, ("Don't bother me!")	Trying to shoo them away. Offensive and de-grading/ example, "filthy hands". ✓ Y Ignoring the strangers' comments and opinions, ("Don't speak unless you're spoken to!"),

Figure 13. Comparison of the welcoming and unwelcoming body language, voice tone and language used.

## Accessing New Information through Children's Life Journeys

At Dowson Primary School, the children wrote their life journeys, telling simply of the places they were born and the different places they had lived. Several of these life journeys were used in Penderly Primary School as a source of new information about refugee children.

One Grade 6 student at Dowson told of her birth in Khartoum. She was born one of triplets, the only baby to survive. Part of her life story is included here. This scene is where her mother has just been told that the third baby will live.

*There was a tear of joy that came running from the hurt and trapped face of fear. She was feeling that she was one of the lucky mothers. She saw her newborn child and she was like a mother that was no other to me. She looked after me so well, let me tell you. There was a farmer that had a seed and he planted the seed and he didn't look after it. He just left it there for he crows to eat and it was just a waste of time buying the seed. There was another farmer that had a seed, and planted it and he gave good care to it and gave new birth to it. And that's how my mother looked after me.*

This piece of writing exemplifies the way cultural and religious beliefs shape the meanings we make of our lived experiences.

## Concluding Activities: Bringing Students Together

The planned culminating activity was a visit by the children from Dowson to Penderly. Time was to be spent with the children playing together, chatting and jointly engaging with some class activities. The schools are not far apart and the purpose of bringing the two groups of children together was to enhance relationships between them when they met at shared community facilities, out of school hours.

This event took some time to arrange, mainly due to a lack of funding for transport of the children from Dowson to Penderly, but eventually it did occur when Dowson was able to obtain free use of the Police Bus. It was a wonderful morning. As the morning drew to a close I witnessed two children from the two different schools, exchanging email addresses. Perhaps these remarks at the end of the morning, from the police officer-driver of the police bus, say it all: "This program is building community harmony. I'm going to seek funding to ensure it continues."

## The Impact of the National Curriculum

In this classroom work on refugees, I was free to choose the topic for the inquiry as a teacher. In Penderly, where there were no refugee children, the work was encompassed within a broader topic of Belonging, which had particular relevance for children from different groups who were commencing the year in a newly formed, double Grade 4/5/6. Thus at the start of the year, time was spent with the children sharing who they were, their families, their likes, dislikes, their hopes. A particular focus was on the development of a classroom community where all children felt they belonged. This work then extended into the study of Refugees within the community. As the teacher, I was free to develop the inquiry, taking into account the knowledge, understandings and needs of two different groups of students.

This approach, beginning with student knowledge and taking account of children's individual family, cultural and community backgrounds seems to be supported by the following principle, included in one of the key Australian National Curriculum documents.

The curriculum should allow jurisdictions, systems and schools to implement it in a way that values teacher's professional knowledge and that reflects the needs and interests evident in local contexts, as it will be teachers who decide how best to organise learning for students. Organisation of learning should take account of individual family, cultural and community backgrounds; acknowledge and build on prior learning experiences; and fill gaps in those experiences. (The Shape of the Australian Curriculum, May 2009, p. 8).

However the first principle and guideline on the same page as this quote reads:

The curriculum should make clear to teachers what is to be taught, and to students what they should learn and what achievement standards are expected of them. This means that curriculum documents will be explicit about knowledge understanding and skills, and that they will provide a clear foundation for the development of a teaching program. (The Shape of the Australian Curriculum, May 2009, p. 8).

What does this mean? If the knowledge, understandings and skills are to be described explicitly, what room will this leave for local school systems and for teachers to plan curriculum which reflects the needs and interests evident within their local context? How will explicit descriptions of knowledge, understanding and skills allow for teachers to take account individual family, cultural and community backgrounds? An added complication is that national testing has already been implemented in Australia.

Finland, which does so well in cross cultural comparisons of education, has a National Core Curriculum. However what is to be taught is framed much less explicitly and leaves room for development of curriculum at the local level. Their curriculum documents state, ‘The national core curriculum is the national framework on the basis of which the local curriculum is formulated’ (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004, p. 8). Schools in Finland are free to include learning which is specific to their community or region. Significantly, while there are quite detailed instructions about how assessment is to occur, such assessment is left to the schools. There is no national testing in Finland.

## **Conclusion**

International conflicts today mean thousands of people are refugees. Strangely 90% of the world’s refugee population lives in the poorest countries. For example while Australia hosts roughly one refugee per 1400 citizens, Jordan, Lebanon, Chad, Iran and Tanzania host one refugee for every 100 citizens (Hathaway, 2009). How we behave toward those who are homeless and in need either diminishes or increases our humaneness.

The tension between a national curriculum, which specifies explicit knowledge, understandings and skills, and education, which starts with each child’s knowledge and is inextricably linked with that child’s life experiences and culture, seems destined to further disadvantage non-mainstream children and refugees in our schools. For all children to have opportunity to live and grow and learn about the world, knowledgeable teachers must be free to plan curriculum drawing upon their knowledge of how children learn, of their students, and of the local community, together with input from members of that community.

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## Students' Views of the Values of Characters in International Children's Literature

By Deanne L. Paiva

As a reader of multicultural books with my primary-age students, I have striven to select and critique books that attempt to depict authentic cultural character traits within authentic settings and issues (Hancock, 2008). Recently my literature journey has begun drifting towards international literature which is defined as literature that is originally published in a language other than English and/or a country other than the United States, or published in the United States with characters that represent cultures or countries other than the United States (Hancock, 2008). As a teacher, I assume that I should apply the same criteria and have the same expectations when evaluating international literature that I do with multicultural literature. I look for literature that portrays characters, their settings, and their cultural issues in an authentic, respectful way. These books do not ask readers to look at the characters as the same as them, but rather asks readers to embrace and celebrate the characters' diversity, thus adding a new layer to their understandings and appreciation. When looking for quality multicultural books, Rochman (2003) suggests that

“good books unsettle us, make us ask questions about what we thought was certain. They don’t just reaffirm everything we already know” (p.104).

One purpose of children’s literature is to pass on moral and cultural values to a new generation (Bishop, 2003). Using that as a tenet, I began thinking about the values in multicultural children’s books. A brief conversation launched my inquiry into how to think about the values depicted in multicultural children’s literature. I was analyzing the values portrayed by the characters in Allan Say’s *Tea with Milk* (2009). In this book, the central character flees her parents’ home in Japan once she realizes that she is to be part of an arranged marriage. A graduate student in the small group in which I was sharing my findings questioned me about the idea of arranged marriages in Japan. He had lived in Japan for several years and was married to a Japanese woman. He said that he was not aware of arranged marriages in Japanese culture. I contacted another source, a friend who is also Japanese, who informed me that arranged marriages still exist in certain social classes. They were more prevalent a half a century ago which matches the setting of *Tea with Milk*. I was lucky to have someone familiar with Japanese culture to question me as well as another source to clarify.

My inquiry into the values in children’s books led me to another thought: the values that I see in these books may not match the values my students see after experiencing the book because of our differences in age, background, education, and experiences. I teach third grade in an urban public school. Most of these third grade students are Hispanic, along with one Anglo student and two students who emigrated from Ghana. Although all of the Hispanic students were born in the United States, many of their parents moved to the United States from either El Salvador or Mexico. These students have large family groups or members of their community from their home countries living in Dallas. Some students whose extended families reside outside of Dallas visit their parents’ home countries or family members residing in other countries once a year.

My classroom seems to be one of the students’ first experiences with multicultural literature. Our daily read aloud time and instructional time are heavy with multicultural literature, often focusing on the works of a specific author such as Allan Say or Patricia Pollaco. I began reading international literature with them in the second part of our school year. I have had only a few experiences with international literature, so I relied on the book reviews in *WOW Reviews* as a valuable resource when selecting literature. I chose books with Hispanic characters that reflected the majority of my class population, a book from Ghana to honor two cousins from Ghana, as well as books that represented cultures not found in my classroom. Besides the characters’ cultures, I chose books which depicted subject matter that might be interesting to students, allowing them a chance to share family stories and explore topics that could enhance their understanding of historical or contemporary issues.

Since students are the consumers of these books, I am more interested in the values they glean from a story than the values I see, so I set out to engage the third-grade students in conversations about the values depicted by the characters in this international literature. I chose two simple questions to examine the characters' values identified by students: **What is important to the characters? What evidence from the book supports your idea?** Each week we would read an international book aloud. Generally, I introduced the book, conducted a picture walk, and generated some ideas and questions from the students before I read. If I saw misconceptions, I tried to clarify through the picture walk. I read the book two to three times in two or three settings and then asked students our guiding questions.

After the first reading, I wanted to capture their initial reactions to use later as a foundation for their text experience and so I recorded their responses to: **What do we know about this book?** I used a large chart tablet to record responses anytime the students were reflecting on the books. We enjoyed many wonderful pieces of international literature, some light-hearted, and others informing us on difficult issues. In this article, I have chosen a few that represent the larger group of books.

*[Grandma and Me at the Flea](#)* (Herrara, 2002) is a story about a grandma and a grandson, Juanito, who go to the flea market every Sunday to sell their used goods. While at the flea market, Grandma sends Juanito on errands to other flea market merchants with a token especially for that person. The storyline shows Grandma as a rematero, a community advocate, and a healer. Students said that these values were important to the characters:

<u>Important to the Character</u>	<u>Evidence from the text</u>
Value used things	They resell used things and buy other people's used things.
Trading	The zarape seller traded a blanket for the rub down that Grandma gave his sister when her back hurt
Herbs can heal headaches	Grandma told Juanito to give herbs to Senora Vela.
Paying for Juanito's expenses	His parents move from farm to farm for work
Tamale recipe for a quincenera	The Beltman's daughter is having a quincenera and he says it will be a big hit with the sweet tamales.
Grandma is a Remetero	All the people who she gives things to are so thankful. The jewelry man starts to cry when he says how much Grandma helped him.

Table 1

*[Josias, Hold the Book](#)* (Elvgren, 2006) is set in Haiti. Josias does not “hold the book” or go to

school because he works his family's land. Each day his friends encourage him to attend school with them, but he does not see a purpose for schooling, until one day he cannot get his beans to grow well in his garden. He comes to see education as a way to help his family prosper on their land. This time my students commented on **what is important** as well as **what is not important** to the characters:

<u>Important to the Characters</u>	<u>Evidence from the text</u>
Helping in the garden	Gather water, plant beans, tried several ways to make the beans grow better
All of the family helps with the garden and animals in order to survive	Parents do not go to a job, his sisters help around the house and do not go to school
They use resources they have to survive	They make their own hoses and use hay for the roofs; make their own fires; grow the food they eat; carry water on their ways for a long way and up a hill.
Family	They work together and never fight.
<u>Not important to the characters</u>	<u>Evidence from the text</u>
School	Josias doesn't want to go to school until he needs help with his garden; his parents won't let him go until the end of the story.
Church	They never talk about going to church.
Stores	They never buy anything at the store. There are no stores in their village.

Table 2

*Four Feet Two Sandals* (Williams & Mohammed, 2007) is a book that asks the reader to understand the outcomes of war. Two female characters, Lina and Feroza, meet in a refugee camp on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border and build a friendship while sharing a pair of sandals with each girl wearing the pair for a day at a time. The girls' shared experiences of slain family members and fleeing persecution helps strengthen their friendship and support for each other in the camp. While introducing this book, I had to spend more time than with other books building a background for my students to understand the setting of contemporary civil war and the effects on civilians, not just soldiers. I tried to give only the facts and not interject my viewpoints when sharing what may have caused these girls to flee. Of course, students reacted with emotive responses which turned into a natural conversation between them. The students kept looking to me for a gesture or verbal cue of acceptance as I sat motionless so that their viewpoints could drive the pre-reading discussion. Despite that they were so passionate regarding the girls' plights, their after-reading responses seemed almost void of the setting of war or a refugee camp:

<u>Important to the Characters</u>	<u>Evidence from the text</u>

Sharing	The girls shared the sandals, washing clothes, and water.
Clothes that were donated	Everyone ran to the trucks to get some.
Sandals	They shared the sandals and they took them away from Lina's little brothers so they won't ruin them.
Water	They stood in long lines to get water.
Family	They told stories about their families.
School was important for boys	In the camp only boys got to go to school.
School was important for Lina and Feroza	They would sneak up to the window to watch the boys and practice their names in the sand.
Ramadan	They would meet and share memories.
The list to get a new home	Everyone from the camp would crowd around the list to see if their name was on it. Lina got excited when her family's name was on the list.

Table 3

Two students were cousins from Ghana and so I was thrilled when I found an international book from Ghana, *Sosu's Call* (Asare. 2002). Sosu is physically handicapped and not accepted by his rural village because he is not able to walk. Sosu helps save his village from a devastating flood by dragging himself to the village drums and calling out to the adults working the land. The two students native to Ghana shared that they did not live like Sosu in the country, but they lived much like we do in Dallas with houses and apartments and their parents went to jobs in the city and did not farm. However, Crystal did enjoy telling us that her cousin Wadie did "run around with no shoes in Ghana like Sosu." I liked how their information helped broaden students' views of Ghana so the students would not assume everyone lives like Sosu. Rochman (2003) states, "One book doesn't carry the whole ethnic group experience" (p. 105). A student, Jackson, wrote a response that extended beyond the story:

*I think that Sosu's life is going to be good because he is a hero and now everybody likes him. Now since he saved a village, they might donate money so people can build a hospital there because some people may be sick and they don't have medicine so they will die.*

My goal as a teacher through this inquiry was to capture students' perspectives about the values of characters. I looked through my students' eyes and not my own. My experience has left me with two new questions:

- Do students only look for values that match their values?
- How can I guide students to see multiple perspectives?

Students' views of a character's values are born from their own value systems. After we read [Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería](#) (Laínez, 2005), a story about a grandmother and grandson who teach their languages to each other through the Mexican version of a BINGO game, I observed students demonstrate their value of bilingualism by playing the game Lotería using both English and Spanish. They also shared with me that they play Lotería with real money at home. Their experience conflicts with my beliefs and experiences of children gambling with real money. As a child I can only remember the prize for winning being candy or a token or the right to go first in the following game. This reinforced for me that my students and I can never separate ourselves or check our identity at the door before we read a book. Hancock (2008) writes, "Moral background becomes an influential part of response to the actions and decisions of characters in literature. Readers measure the right and wrong of characters against their personal value systems" (p. 41).

What I am trying to avoid in this experience is to allow students to assign a value placing their culture as superior to the culture represented in the book. I do not want students to believe that their values are better than another culture's values as depicted in a book. As to the question of multiple perspectives, I wonder if more probing of students' responses, rather than simply recording their responses, would ask students to go deeper in their understandings. I wonder if we could achieve the building of multiple perspectives by triangulating our understandings with other resources, books, and characters. That might lead students to understand what influenced the characters to make decisions in the books and how events in our lives influence our decisions as well.

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## **“What?! That happened in America?”: Learning about U. S. History through Multicultural Literature**

By Julia López-Robertson and Lillian Reeves

My teaching is guided by a sociocultural view of teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978) in conjunction with a desire to prepare preservice and inservice teachers to teach children from diverse cultural, socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds. These beliefs propel me to set up an environment conducive to the active participation of students in my courses. Concerned with the number of preservice and inservice teachers lacking knowledge of how to teach children from diverse backgrounds, “the persisting teacher to student cultural and linguistic mismatch” (Haddix, 2010, p. 99), I use multicultural literature as a vehicle to provide insight into the lives of the diverse children who attend U.S. schools. While I realize that the literature provides but a glimpse into the complex lives of the children and their families, it is nonetheless a step in the process of preparing culturally responsive teachers (Gay, 2000).

In my graduate class, *Curriculum and Materials Development for English Learners*, I had the pleasure of spending Monday evenings with eight students (seven whom I had in courses either as undergraduates or graduates) with varying degrees of teaching experience; one was an ESOL teacher, one was a middle school teacher, one had taught overseas, two were teaching English to adults and three were recent graduates of our Early Childhood program. Additionally, doctoral student, Lillian Reeves, the co-author of this piece, worked with me in the course; Lillian participated in our Blackboard discussions and co-authored several blogs that the students and I wrote for [WOW Currents](#). Lillian was the extra set of eyes that brought a fresh perspective to interpreting and synthesizing the students’ discussion posts. While there were a variety of engagements that helped prepare students for teaching diverse learners, the focus of this vignette is our discussions of YA novels.

### **Pairing Multicultural YA Novels and Scholarly Articles**

Most course engagements drew from children's or young adult literature that I read aloud in class or novels that students read independently. Additionally, I paired each YA novel with scholarly articles because I sought to provide students with the background and a deeper understanding of the historical and sociopolitical context of the novels we were reading (see Table 1). In doing so, I felt that I could provide the seeds for richer discussions because the students could draw on the history and context of the situation presented in each novel.

<u>YA Novel</u>	<u>Scholarly readings</u>
<i>Return to Sender</i>	<i>In the Contact Zone: Code-switching by Latino Writers</i>
<i>A Step from Heaven</i>	<i>Moved by War, Migration, Diaspora and the Korean War</i>
<i>Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story</i>	<i>The Spirit of a People: Hmong American Life Stories;</i> <i>Hmong Voices and Memories: An Exploration of Identity, Culture and History;</i> <i>The Hmong in America</i>
<i>American Born Chinese</i>	<i>Graphic Journeys: Graphic Novels Representations of Immigrant Experiences;</i> <i>Graphic Novels in the Classroom</i>
<i>A Glass of Water</i>	<i>Mexicans as Model Minorities in the New Latino Diaspora</i>

Table 1. Young adult novels and scholarly readings.

## Book Selection

To help close perceived gaps in students' knowledge of the immigrant diaspora, I chose to focus our readings on a select group of Young Adult novels that reflected a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds; presumably ones that might be found in our classrooms. I selected two books representing two different experiences of Mexican protagonists: [Return to Sender](#) (2009) by Julia Alvarez and [A Glass of Water](#) (2009) by Jimmy Santiago Baca. Alvarez's novel focuses on young adolescents whereas Baca's is a young adult/adult novel that discusses mature themes such as drugs, sex, and violence. I chose this book to give my students a more raw view of the struggles of young adults who experience violence against their parents and how this violence affects their views of the world.

[A Step from Heaven](#) by An Na (2001) recounts a young girl's journey from childhood in Korea to adolescence and assimilation in the United States. In [Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story](#), Pegi Deitz Shea (2003) tells Mai Yang's story of struggle and acceptance from a refugee camp in Thailand to a home with her family in Rhode Island. [American Born Chinese](#) (Yang, 2006), a celebrated graphic novel, chronicles the experiences of a young Chinese American boy who turns his back on his native culture in order to 'fit in' and realizes that in the process he has lost part of his identity.

## Blackboard and In-Class Discussions

In addition to our in-class discussions, students participated in weekly Blackboard discussions online, giving them the opportunity to extend conversations begun in class and to initiate new ones. These Blackboard discussions served as the basis for the blogs that each pair of students, Lillian, and I co-authored for [WOW Currents](#), in March, 2011.

Our analysis of the Blackboard discussions and in-class discussions revealed recurring themes of shock and concern regarding knowledge of U.S. history, “what, I didn’t know about this and I thought I was good at US history!” and concern that, “if I consider myself a pretty educated person and I don’t know this, what does this mean for the kids in our schools now? I went to a pretty decent high school, how was this skipped over.” Davis (1995) states that many American students do not know U.S. history and offers that,

The reason for these historical shortcomings is simple; most of us learned history from textbooks that served up the past as if it were a Hollywood costume drama...our historical sense is frequently skewed, skewered, or plain screwed up by myths and misconceptions. (p. x)

Davis’ point resonated with many students as evidenced in the excerpts below:

100 – *The Spirit of a People taught me a lot about the Hmong's story and the history*  
101 – *behind why many of them are refugees forced to leave their home country in*  
102 – *hopes of finding a better life. – I was confused as to why they were living*  
103 – *in a refugee camp in Ban Vinai from the start. It really is a shame and a*  
104 – *disservice to all of the Hmong students who come to the U.S. for reasons*  
105 – *unbeknownst to them. If this is a shameful act of the US gov't that has*  
106 – *been swept under the rug and erased from our history books, how are we*  
107 – *supposed to do these children justice in the classroom? Again, this*  
108 – *connects back to Campano and in the importance of knowing the culture and*  
109 – *history of our students.*

Jennifer learned generally about the Hmong through the YA novel and more specifically about the “history behind” why many were forced to leave their homes (lines 100-102) through the article, *The Spirit of a People: Hmong American Life Stories* (Buley-Meissner, 2002). In lines 103-105, Jennifer expressed that it was a “shame and a disservice to all the Hmong students who come to the U.S. for reasons unbeknownst to them.” While it is unclear who should be feeling shame--the Americans for their ignorance of history or the Hmong for keeping their history from their children--she continues with this line of thought and adds a hint of resentment in lines 105-106 when discussing the “shameful act of the U.S. gov’t that has been swept under the rug and erased from our history books.” Additionally, she clearly articulated her frustration at teachers’ positioning in schools when she questions, “how are we supposed to do these children justice in the classroom?” (107). Finally, her direct connection to Campano (2006), a required reading for another course she took with me the semester prior to this one, reinforced her belief that as

teachers we must know our students and their history (108-109).

Michelle's comments in the following excerpt illustrate Davis' (1995) point that American's "historical sense is frequently skewed, skewered, or plain screwed up" (p. x), which can be attributed to completely omitting certain figures from U.S. history:

100 – *Harvesting Hope: The Story of César Chávez* by Kathleen Krull is a powerful  
101 – picture book that tells the story Chavez's life and mission. To me, it testifies to the  
102 – point we were talking about with the Hmong people and the absence of certain  
103 – people in the history books and school curriculum. I would not have known about  
104 – Cesar Chavez's life until picking up and buying this picture book for my  
105 – classroom except for maybe hearing his name. Although he is a controversial  
106 – man, shouldn't we at least know who he is and what he did?

She begins by bringing our attention to a picture book about César Chávez and connecting that to the absence of the Hmong and "certain people in the history books and school curriculum" (lines 102-103). Her use of the word 'testifies' (line 101), a deliberately strong word choice, indicates her distress that there are important people of color missing from U.S. "history books and school curriculum" (lines 102-103). Later (lines 103-105) she reveals that she may have 'heard' Chávez's name but would not have learned about him except that she happened upon the picture book, *Harvesting Hope: The Story of César Chávez* (Krull, 2003). In this excerpt Michelle shared a gamut of emotions; beginning with the simple telling about a "powerful picture book," then sharing her distress about the omission of important people from U.S. "history books and curriculum" and ending with a straightforward plea, "shouldn't we at least know who he is and what he did?" (line 106). In another discussion Michelle asked a poignant question, "What message are we sending the children of this country [U.S.] through the things that we say or fail to say?" Indeed, what are we saying?

## Final Reflections

Throughout the semester, the students continued to comment on their disbelief at not knowing about some of the historical events about which we were reading. Sometimes they were angry that the events were 'swept under the rug.' I shared that I first learned about the Japanese internment camps when I read *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 2004) in a graduate course about multicultural children's literature and that I also was angry at the atrocities of the U.S. and how they seem to have been wiped away from our history books (Davis, 1995). Sharing that I, too, was unaware of some of the occurrences in U.S. history seemed to make them feel a little better about learning about U.S. history this late in their schooling.

The students' responses to the books were often developed around questioning, applauding, or expressing concern about the work, neglect (historically, culturally, linguistically), or interventions of the teachers portrayed. This literary experience and the historical intervention it shaped created

a dynamic catalyst for the graduate students to assess and ultimately to intervene as historical, cultural, and linguistic advocates on behalf of the students they will serve in their own classrooms.

While not all of our teachers can be certified in ESOL when they enter their classrooms, they will undoubtedly encounter immigrant students and language learners across the grades and content they teach. Specifically, English teachers and literacy specialists have an obligation to be informed advocates for their students concerning matters of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). One way, then, to address the concerns raised regarding teacher preparation is to broaden courses in education to include global literature as readily as canonical literatures.

The work of John Dewey (1938) and Louise Rosenblatt (1965) have influenced educational reformers to view literature as an interactive pathway by which we come to first better understand ourselves and then to better understand others. When graduate students, heading into classrooms, are equipped with literary experiences that disrupt and confront any notion of singularity in the American experience, they are more likely to encourage a broader reading of our social circumstances--a reading the graduate students themselves demand and secure as evidenced in courses like this one. These experiences can foster a shift in curricula and the expansion of instructional outcomes that are no longer limited to securing the success of native English speakers alone, but are expanded to ensure a more democratic experience for all children in our schools.

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## Links to Blogs: Border Crossings

[To be or not to be: Graphic Novels in the Classroom?](#)

[Border Crossing: Children in the Cultural Crossfire](#)

[Border Crossings & Tangled Threads](#)

[The Space Between : A beginning journey into border crossing](#)

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## The Significance of Perspective in Exploring International Literature with Educators

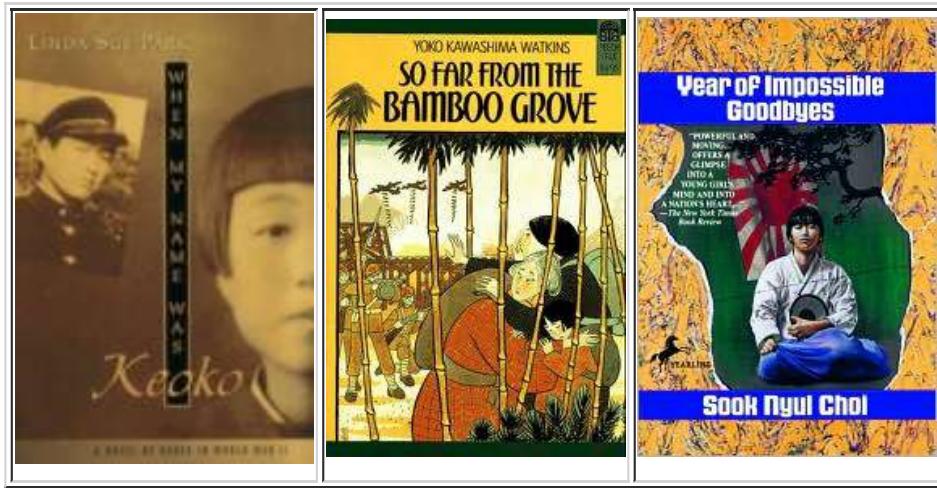
By Kathy G. Short

Courses and workshops on international literature for teachers and librarians have become increasingly popular in recent years in response to the growing availability of these books and the emerging interest in global education. Because of the complex issues that surround global education, these courses must go beyond immersing educators in the books. Becoming familiar with international books is a first step in a much more complicated process of challenging educators to consider issues of cultural authenticity and the types of engagements with these books that build intercultural understanding, not stereotypes (Short, 2011).

The first time that I taught a course on international literature, we took on a different continent each evening, meeting in literature circles for small group discussions of books from that part of the world and reading *Bookbird* articles written by authors from those cultures. This broad survey of literature from the world was interesting and a range of perspectives and writing styles were evident in both the professional articles and the children's literature. The struggle for me was that we stayed on the surface of each culture through this survey approach, instead of digging more deeply. Class members gained a sense of the types of books available in different regions of the world and the issues for each of the regions, but we only had a week with each book or set of books before moving on to the next continent. We gained a breadth of reading experiences, but we sacrificed depth and critical thinking.

The value of a cross-cultural study is the opportunity to focus deeply on one culture to understand its complexity and diversity, so the next time I taught the course we engaged in an in-depth study of Korean culture for several weeks. We read and discussed [When My Name Was Keoko](#), by Linda Sue Park (2002) about her parents' experiences during the Japanese occupation of Korea during World War II. We responded to this book in a range of ways, including creating cultural x-rays of

characters to show the external features of culture that were visible to others as well as the internal values and beliefs within the heart of that person. We compared the perspectives in this book to two other books from the same time period, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (Watkins, 1993), a memoir by the child of a Japanese officer in Korea, and *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (Choi, 1991), a memoir of a North Korean child. Comparing the perspectives in these three novels provided strong evidence that authors' life experiences influence the stories that they tell. In addition, we created a jackdaw, a box of information, newspaper articles, maps, photographs, and artifacts relating to the time period and events in these books. Each person took an issue or event that intrigued them and did further research on the internet to identify an artifact to share and add to our jackdaw. Jackdaws are a teaching tool that connects historical books with real events of the time through concrete objects (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2007).



We also browsed and read picture books about Korea published in the U.S. and compared these with picture books from South Korea. An international student from South Korea shared her collection of picture books currently being published in that country and talked about her analysis of these books and the changes in literature for children within South Korea. This experience brought to the forefront the problem of the dominance of folklore and historical fiction in books available in the U.S., resulting in outdated images of life in that country, as compared to the many contemporary images of life in the South Korean books. It also led to discussions about translated books and the issue of which books are chosen for translation into English and who makes that decision.

We ended our study by looking at the Begler (1996) model, which provides a frame for examining the complex factors involved within any culture. The model indicates that all cultures exist within a historical context that shapes the cultural forms and systems and operate within a geographical context that involves constant interaction and adaptation. Begler also argues that all cultures serve five basic sets of functions--economic, social, political, aesthetic, and values/beliefs. These values and beliefs shape behavioral norms and provide meaning to human activity within cultures. We

made a large poster-sized version of this model and recorded our current understandings about Korean culture on post-its, placing them on the model to gain a sense of what we understood and what was still missing from our understandings.

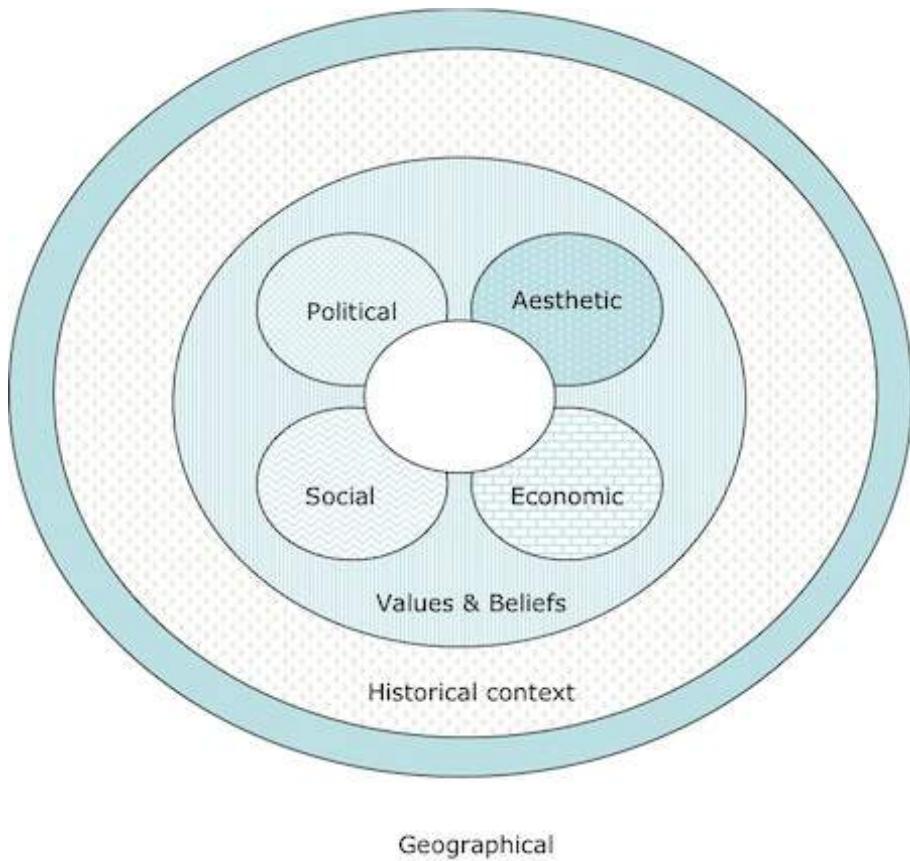


Figure 1. Begler model.

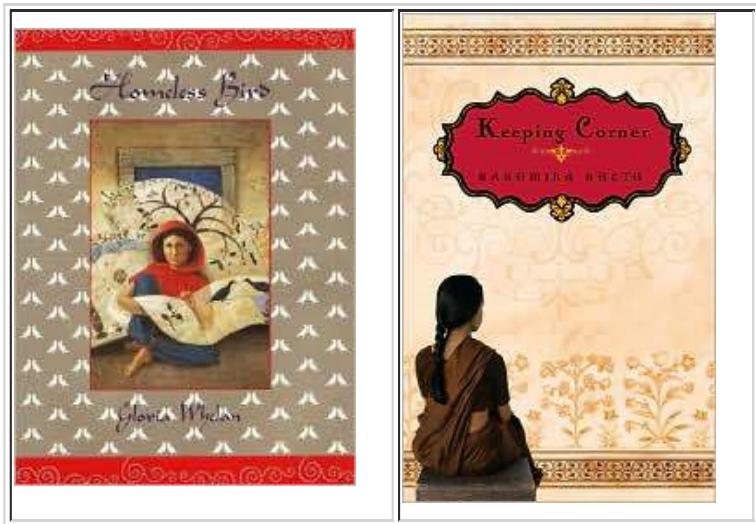
We did follow the Korea study with several class sessions where we looked across other global countries and cultures to get a sense of how these cultures are represented in children's and adolescent books available in the United States. Engaging in the Korea study meant that this survey of cultures had to be condensed and was less comprehensive; however, the Korea study provided for a depth of thinking and a range of perspectives that helped teachers develop strategies for critically considering other texts from global cultures. We realized that reading one text in isolation from other texts and without some knowledge about a culture was dangerous and could easily lead to misconceptions and stereotypes.

Critically reading books set in global cultures is difficult when readers have only surface knowledge about those cultures. The next time I taught this class, I decided to have teachers always read a book in the context of other books to provide us with perspectives that facilitated more critical reading. In particular, we read paired books that were from the same culture or had similar themes, but provided differing perspectives. These pairings often exposed problematic issues, such as the domination of western views or assumptions about race, class or gender. Dan Hade (1996)

argues that paired texts can provide the means for readers to read critically and to uncover stereotypes within literature for themselves instead of teachers imposing their views about particular books. He paired books with problematic stereotypes with books that challenged those stereotypes, such as pairing *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) with *Piggybook*, (Browne, 1986) as a way to encourage discussions about gender stereotypes.

In the course, the books in each pair were selected to reflect opposing points of view and so we were able to read the books against and beside each other, which supported us in uncovering problematic issues. Initially, I was concerned that class members would resist having to read two novels in one week, but the rewards of reading paired texts led them to ask for more paired texts. We learned how to read critically as we read globally.

One effective paired book set was *Homeless Bird* (Whelan, 2000) and *Keeping Corner* (Sheth, 2007), novels about young girls who become child widows in India. Both books received starred reviews and are considered well-written, powerful novels, but differ in the source of their authorship. Whelan brings an outsider perspective to writing about India, which she came to know through research and traveling to the culture in her mind, while Sheth was born in India, came to the U.S. as a young adult, and grew up with a great-aunt who was a child widow. Our discussion focused on the differences in how the stories are told, not in judging the books as good or bad because of outsider/insider distinctions. We explored differences in what came to be represented in the books through the differing perspectives of the authors.



As we gathered in literature circles, many talked about finding *Homeless Bird* personally moving with an inspiring message. Then they read *Keeping Corner* and were struck by the rich details of daily life and culture that were missing from *Homeless Bird*. In fact, we realized that *Homeless Bird* read more like a fairy tale, with a focus on plot and a lack of detail about setting. The main character is caught in a downward spiral of negative events that pile up one after the other with stock characters like the evil mother-in-law, a “prince” who takes her away, and a happy ending.

This fairy tale strategy made sense, since the author did not have intimate lived experiences in that culture. In contrast, we felt embedded in Leela's life, culture, and time in *Keeping Corner*. We were immersed in her story of gradual awakening to issues of tradition, independence, and women's rights. We lived the story *with* her rather than observing her story from a safe distance as we did with *Homeless Bird*. We knew the character in a more intimate way and were still with her as the story ended with hope and promise, but uncertainty.

This experience convinced us on the power of reading books alongside each other and we went on to explore other types of paired books:

- Books with a similar theme, one set in a global culture and the other in our own familiar culture, to facilitate connections, such as [\*The Composition\*](#) (Skarmeta, 2003), set in the dictatorship in Chile with *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldua, 1997), set on the U.S./Mexico border, to consider issues of fear and the use of police intimidation. Another example is reading *The Shadows of Ghademes* (Stoltz, 2004), set in Libya, with *Nightjohn* (Paulson, 1993), set in the U.S, both of which include reading as resistance and as freedom within oppression during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Barbara Lehman, et al. (2010) has written about this type of paired book as a means of encouraging readers to see their lives connected to the issues in a book outside of their culture.
- Books that contrast differing perspectives on the same historical event, such as *When My Name was Keoko* (Park, 2004), a Korean perspective on the Japanese occupation of Korea during World War II, and *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (Watkins, 1986), the memoir of a Japanese child whose father was an occupier.
- Fiction and nonfiction on the same event and time period to provide a rich informational context for a story, such as *Nory Ryan's Song* (Giff, 2002) with [\*Black Potatoes\*](#) (Bartoletti, 2005), on the Irish Potato Famine.
- Books with a similar theme, such as the need for belonging and relationships, as a way to examine connections and differences across cultures in relation to that theme, such as [\*The Crow-Girl\*](#) (Bredsdorff, 2004), set in Denmark, and [\*Wanting Mor\*](#) (Khan, 2009), set in Afghanistan.
- Historical and contemporary stories of the same global culture to explore the dynamic and changing natures of cultures, such as *Wanting Mor* (Khan, 2009), a contemporary novel, and *The Shadows of Ghademes* (Stoltz, 2004), set in the late 1800s. Both focus on Muslim girls within Middle Eastern countries.

As we read these pairs, we were intrigued by how our understandings of a book shifted when that book was juxtaposed with different books. The significance of perspective quickly became clear—

the most interesting pairings were ones where the two books offered distinctly different perspectives on a particular event, culture, theme, or issue. The two books need to challenge each other in some way, not simply be connected by a surface-level topic.

We needed a range of strategies for reading these paired books. One strategy is to ask everyone to read both novels during the same week. These discussions were compelling as students discussed reading the books against each other and compared differences in their reading experiences depending on which book they chose to read first. When we read the paired sets of informational books with fiction novels the same week, readers decided which to read first based on their own reading preferences. Those who were strong nonfiction readers found that reading the informational book first caught their attention and led them into the novel, while the novel readers needed the story in order to get them interested in the information. We found that the order in which we read books affects our interpretations and understandings.

Reading two novels a week along with professional readings was a heavy load so we played with multiple ways of reading paired books. One was to read one book the first week and then the second book the next week, which provided for a stronger contrast of the differing perspectives across the books. Another strategy was to have four small groups each reading a different novel related to the same theme, in our case the theme of literacy. Students first met in small groups to discuss their novel and to develop webs of the significant themes related to literacy. We reorganized into text set groups with one person from each novel group in a new group where everyone had read different novels. They shared the central plot and themes of their books and looked for connections and comparisons on literacy across the books. A variation of this was that we read two novels with the class split in half and so first met in small groups for discussion, then paired the two groups who had read the same novel for a comparison of the ideas developed in their small groups, and finally met as a class to compare the two books.

We also took the responsibility for finding our own paired books after a number of experiences with paired novels that I had put together. When we read different translated novels for small group discussions, students brought one or two books that they thought would pair well with their novel in offering a different perspective, and shared those books in their literature discussion. The task of searching for books connected to issues or themes in the novel, but provided a different perspective, creating deeper understandings and insights into the novel. When we read historical novels from a range of countries, students engaged in internet research on the time and place and brought that information to the literature circle.

Finally, another important strategy was pairing novels with professional readings. For example, we read novels in which the characters engage in cross-cultural experiences, moving from one culture to another, such as *Benny and Omar* (Colfer, 2007) and *Hannah's Winter* (Meehan, 2009). These

novels were paired with professional readings on intercultural learning by Case (1991) and Fennes and Hapgood (1997). We met in small groups to discuss the novels, followed by a discussion of the professional readings. Students then returned to their literature circles to analyze the intercultural learning of the main characters in relation to the professional readings.

In addition to these strategies for engaging in the reading, we used a range of response strategies to help us see connections and differences across the books. These strategies included Venn diagrams, webs, t-charts, and comparison charts. For one set of books, we created heart maps for the two main characters in the two novels to show the values and beliefs at the heart of each one and then cut out the hearts and positioned them to show how much their hearts did or did not overlap. For another paired set, we created a three column chart to show how the two books Connect to each other, Extend each other, and Challenge each other.

The key to effective paired books is perspective, not finding the right answer or point of view, but considering multiple, even opposing, views on the same event or issue. Reading paired books with differing perspectives challenges us to recognize our own views as only one of many possible perspectives, instead of as the norm. Whether we shift our beliefs or not is not the point, just knowing that other alternatives exist provides for a deeper understanding of our lives and world.

Engagements with international and global literature open the potential for transforming readers' perspectives through thoughtful dialogue and responses to these books. These interactions invite educators and students to reflect on their own cultural experiences and to imagine global experiences that go beyond themselves. All readers need to find their lives reflected in books, but if what they read only mirrors their own views of the world, they cannot envision alternative ways of thinking and living and are not challenged to confront global issues. The challenge is to find ways to open up safe spaces that invite educators to experience the power of this literature for themselves so that they, in turn, take the risk of inviting their students to join with them in building bridges across global cultures.

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### **Links to Blogs: The Importance of Paired Books**

[Strategies for Reading and Discussing Paired Books](#)

[Text Sets as Contexts for Understanding](#)

[Paired Books: Reading a Book in the Context of another Book](#)

[Never Read a Book Alone](#)

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