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# WOW STORIES

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS  
THROUGH INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE

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# **WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom**

## **Volume I, Issue 1 Developing Intercultural Understandings Through International Children’s Literature at Van Horne Elementary School**

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### **Contributors:**

Van Horne Elementary

Jennifer Griffith, Teacher, Second Grade  
Kathryn Tompkins, Teacher, Fourth Grade  
Amy D. Edwards, Teacher, Fifth Grade  
Lisa Thomas, Instructional Coach

University of Arizona

Kathy G. Short, Professor

### **Production Editor:**

Rebecca K. Ballenger

# **WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom**

## **Introduction: Developing Intercultural Understandings Through International Children's Literature at Van Horne Elementary School**

Although Arizona children live in a world increasingly connected through mass media and globalization, most gain their world knowledge through television and so their understandings are often grounded in fear and stereotypes. We are committed to bringing books and children together in order to build bridges across cultures. We want to encourage thoughtful dialogue around international literature so that children can reflect on their own cultural experiences and imagine global experiences beyond their own. By immersing themselves in story worlds, children gain insights into how people feel, live, and think throughout the world as well as come to appreciate their own cultural identities. They move beyond a tourist perspective of collecting facts and artifacts to recognizing common values and valuing unique cultural differences.

The administrators, teachers, and children at [Van Horne Elementary School](#) in the [Tucson Unified School District](#) are engaged in the exciting work of exploring intercultural understanding and developing critical thinking and global perspectives as a school community. Children and teachers participate in experiences with literature in a weekly Learning Lab directed by the Instructional Coach, Lisa Thomas. In addition, the teachers and administrators meet in a weekly study group to thoughtfully consider our work together and to challenge our thinking as professionals and as people. Another component of this project is a collaboration with Kathy G. Short, a [University of Arizona](#) professor from the [Department of Language, Reading and Culture](#) in the [College of Education](#).

One aspect of our work has been writing classroom stories about our first year of exploring how to engage children in thoughtfully responding to literature and in considering cultural perspectives. The classroom stories in this issue reflect our first efforts in working toward these goals and in writing about what is happening in some of the classrooms. We hope to add many more stories from other classrooms in the school along with stories about how this work develops over time. We recognize that we are just beginning a much longer journey of reaching toward intercultural understanding but are excited to be traveling together.

We want to acknowledge the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) in providing a grant for our research, especially in giving support for teachers to engage in the writing of these classroom stories.

We hope that sharing our classroom stories will inspire other educators to write their stories as well.

## **Encouraging Reflection through the Graffiti Boards and Literature Circles**

by Jennifer Griffith, Second Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 1 of 3

Reading aloud to children has always been a significant part of the day in my classroom. I regularly read aloud a book and spend a few minutes talking about children's thinking in response to the book. After discussing literature circles and response strategies in our school-based teacher study group, however, I began wondering about the difference between literature circles and read aloud, particularly in relation to encouraging greater depth of thinking and talk around the books. I wondered how the opportunity to reflect before talking about a book would influence young children's thinking. Douillard (2002) notes that many educators assume that reflection is for older students, but her teacher research with primary children indicates that, "Reflection helps students remember and actively participate in the learning experience" (p. 93). I wanted to see what would happen if I engaged my kids in reflection and so another primary teacher and I developed a plan for bringing literature circles into our classrooms. We began our school year with the plan to devote three weeks to our readers workshop and then one week to literature circles. We continued to read aloud to our students on a daily basis and invite short discussions but during our week of literature circles we wanted to encourage more reflection and sustained talk around a book.

Our first literature circle took place in September. We chose to read *You Be Me, I'll Be You* (Mandelbaum, 1990), a picture book from Belgium about a young biracial girl, Anna, who isn't happy with the way she looks. Anna explores questions about her identity by "switching" skin colors with her white father. We chose this book because of the special relationship between a father and daughter, something we felt our kids could connect to and because of the deeper issue of feeling different and uncomfortable with your physical appearance. We were interested in seeing whether our kids would pick up on these issues and explore them in discussion. In addition to having a variety of issues that might be explored, this book was also part of the international collection at our school and so seemed like a great choice for our first discussion.

We decided to introduce the reflection by using graffiti boards (Short & Harste, 1996). This strategy is easy to use with primary students because they can respond through art and/or writing. This strategy involves placing a large sheet of paper at each table. Each group member takes a corner of the paper and writes and sketches their thoughts about the book in a graffiti fashion. Their responses, comments, sketches, quotes, and connections are not organized in any manner. The goal is to record initial responses during or right after listening to a book. Group members can then share their thinking using their graffiti as a reference. These boards can also lead to organizing and webbing their connections to find a focus for further discussion.

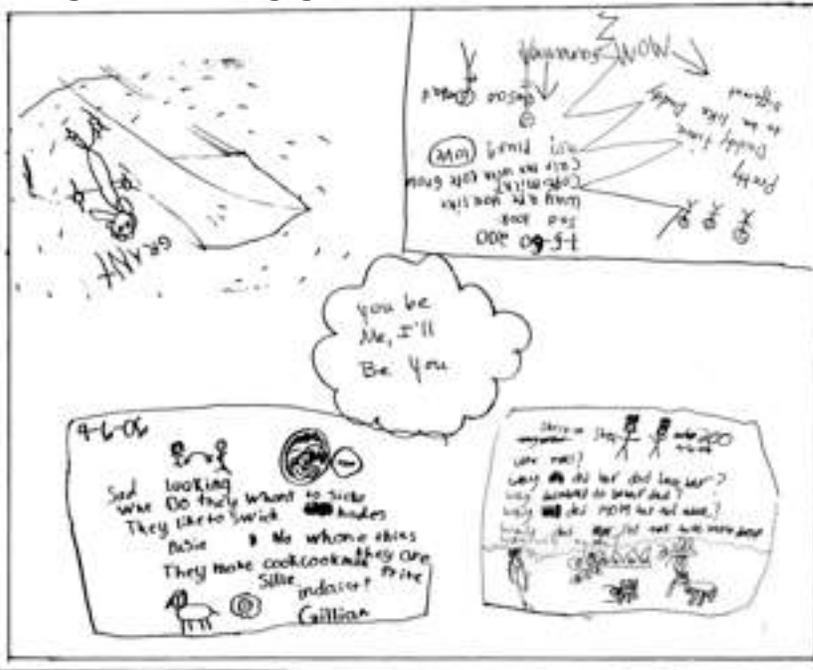
We spent the week reading the book everyday to our students and introducing the graffiti boards. Day one was an introduction to the book, day two was responding to the book on graffiti boards, day three was sharing our boards with the class, and the final day was a literature circle using our graffiti boards as a springboard for our discussion.

The first day the kids and I talked about our focus on learning how to talk about books. We discussed the importance of thinking about our reading and having the opportunity to reflect on our thoughts and connections and then talk about them with others. I chose not to give a lot of direction to what this process of reading, reflecting, and discussing would look like; I wanted the kids to develop their own approaches to the process that fit their personalities. So often, we give kids step-by-step directions for how to do something; I wanted this experience to be a self-exploration of how to reflect on a story and have a deep conversation about literature. The endeavor was new to me as well so I would be exploring what worked for them.

I introduced *You Be Me, I'll Be You* by showing the cover and explaining that we would read the book everyday that week. Each time I wanted them to look and listen for something new from the story and to hang on to those thoughts. We read the book as a whole group that day and I showed the illustrations. I taught them the response strategy of Say Something (Short & Harste, 1996), pausing at several different points in reading the story aloud and asking them to turn to a neighbor and share their thinking about the story in the form of a connection, question or prediction. The kids did turn and talk as pairs but had a hard time knowing what to say to each other, almost as if they were afraid of not having the 'right' answer. My goal was to encourage them to begin reflecting on their thinking by providing time to pause and think during the story. I knew it would take some time for them to feel comfortable with this kind of reflection and talk. The second day of reading *You Be Me, I'll Be You*, I introduced graffiti boards. I demonstrated the process of responding through a graffiti board by having a colleague, Anna, read *King of the Playground* (Naylor, 1994), while I stood at the front of the room with my own graffiti board. I represented my thinking aloud by sketching pictures of my connections to the story and characters, writing connections to my own life, noting my wonderings or questions about the story, and jotting quotes that resonated with me. This process allowed the kids to see what a graffiti board looked like and to view my reflection process.

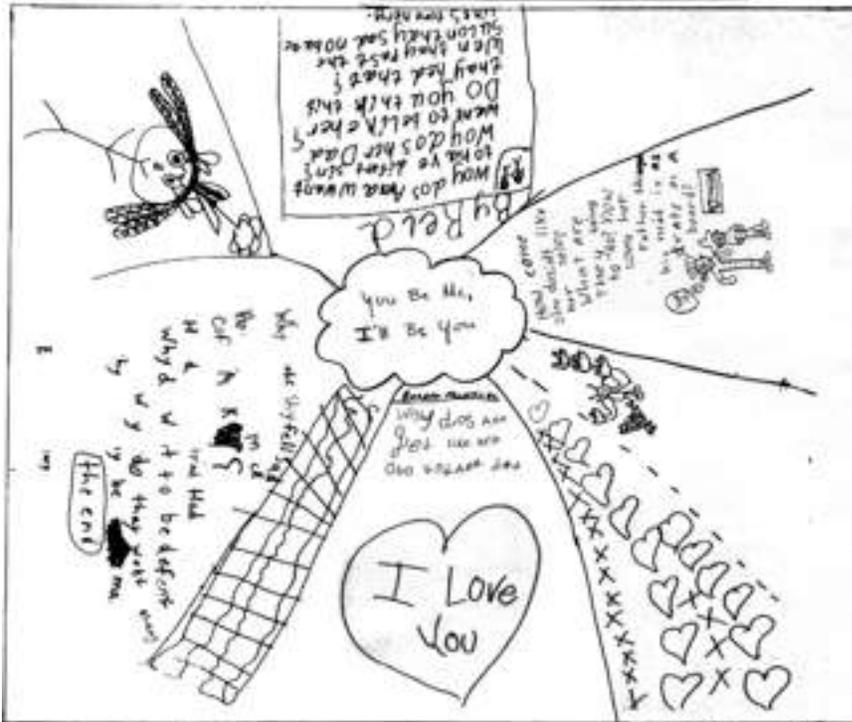
The kids returned to their tables with a large piece of paper and markers. I explained that I would read the story but not show the illustrations this time and that while I was reading they could reflect on their boards using whatever response technique they wanted. I encouraged them to try out the different ways of responding that they had seen me use on my board but let them make their own decisions about what they wanted to do. I walked around the room reading the book and observing their first experience with this type of response. I was really excited with what I was seeing – the kids were asking thoughtful questions

and expressing their thinking both visually and in writing. I especially enjoyed seeing the active engagement of all of the students.



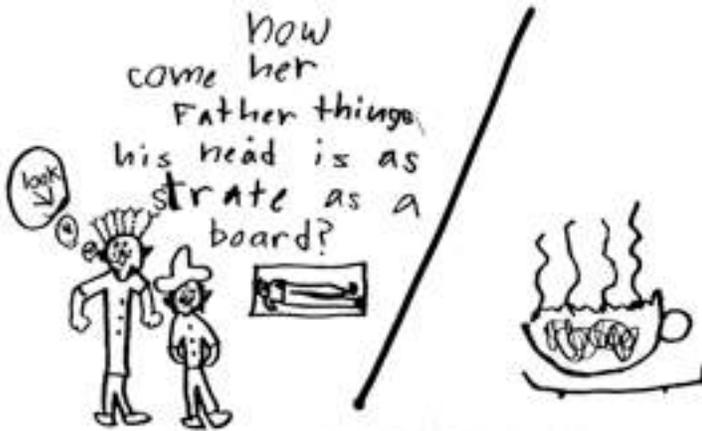
After studying the graffiti boards of each group, I noticed many common threads and found that their responses could be grouped into three categories. A large majority of the kids asked the question, in some form or another, of “Why does Anna not like herself or her skin?” The kids had a hard time grasping the idea of not liking something about oneself. Their focus wasn’t on Anna’s concern that she was a different race than her father but on why she wasn’t happy with herself. They truly seemed puzzled as to why she didn’t like herself and why she would want to be like her father. It was refreshing to see these kids question why a young girl would have a problem with her appearance.

Reid was the only one who brought up the issue of people not liking their appearance. She referenced the part in the book where Anna and her father walk by the salon and they see that no one likes their hair; that everyone is altering it in some fashion. Many kids did not seem to see skin color as an issue; no one brought up the fact that she had a different skin color than her dad even though several of my students come from biracial families. Only one boy, who is white, commented on skin color, saying, “The girl wants to be her dad, the girl wants some white skin.”



Another category of their reflections was questions and wonderings about the language used in the story. Children wondered “How come her father thinks his head is as straight as a board?”; “What is coffee-milk?”; “What is pluff?” Many kids attempted to illustrate what these might look like in a creative manner.

“Head straight as a board” was a favorite to draw. When the kids later shared their graffiti boards with the class, many of them discussed possible definitions such as “pluff” being a cloud or “coffee-milk” as a color name. Their definitions were as creative as their illustrations of these new words.



A third category on their graffiti boards was wondering, “Why was the mom mad at them? Why did she think they were clowns?” None of the children could figure out why the mom was upset with Anna and her father when they met her after both had ‘switched’ skin colors. One student did suggest that the mom was

embarrassed by them but didn't develop his thinking. Several wondered why the young girl who passes by Anna and her father on their way to meet the mother points at them and asks if there is a circus in town, but nobody brought up this pivotal moment for discussion.

The issues that I had identified as my reason for choosing this book weren't explored fully by the children, perhaps because those issues did not connect to their life experiences at this age. I noticed after looking at these categories and the children's responses that there were no personal connections on the boards, which surprised me because young children usually make many personal connections. In our second literature discussion and graffiti boards on *Grandpa & Bo* by Kevin Henkes (2002), there were many personal connections, so the lack of personal connections with *You Be Me, I'll Be You* seemed to be due to their lack of experience with the content of the story. It could also have been that talking about skin color and race was new for them and so they avoided the topic. On the third day of our work with *You Be Me, I'll Be You*, the kids shared their graffiti boards with the whole class; each student focusing on their section and sharing their reflections. This part of the process took the longest and by the last graffiti board the kids had grown impatient. Many noticed that their responses were similar and we discussed how these would be great ideas to bring up in our literature circle the following day.

The fourth and last day with this book was our discussion day. We went to the library, which was more conducive for 28 second graders to have a literature circle. We sat in a large circle and I placed the graffiti boards in the center to use as a springboard for ideas/topics to spark conversation. I explained to the students that there was no need to raise their hands – they would know it was their turn to speak when no one else was talking. This was the only guideline I provided.

The discussion began but unfortunately didn't go as I had envisioned. Kids talked over each other and too many side conversations took place. They did use the graffiti boards as a springboard, but not in the way I had hoped; many read off of their boards rather than using their questions to spark a discussion. I believe the reason for the lack of depth in their conversation was because this was our first discussion and so this type of talk was not yet familiar or comfortable for the kids. If I had chosen to prompt the conversation it may have been more successful but my goal was to sit back and see what did and did not work so I would know how to change the process for the next time.

Four weeks later my kids and I were ready for another literature circle by reflecting before discussing. This time we chose the book *Grandpa & Bo* (Henkes, 2002) because it connected with the theme of family relationships that we had been exploring. I used the same schedule as with the previous book so by the third day the kids were ready to share their graffiti boards. This time around the story supported more personal connections and less questions and wonderings. The sketches were more related to the setting of the story as opposed to the

characters, which made for beautiful boards. Instead of sharing our graffiti boards as a whole class we shared at the tables, which shortened the experience. We decided to create a web to narrow our thinking and help us focus our discussion. Our web was a combination of our reflections from our boards. I decided to do this literature circle in our classroom because the kids felt more at home there. This setting seemed to support them in a more informal approach to their discussion. The kids began by sharing lots of personal connections, ones that they had represented on their boards. By the end of this literature circle, I felt they were close to having those meaningful conversations that I had envisioned for our classroom.

Although the students struggled in our first literature circle, I reminded myself that both the discussion process and the reflection on graffiti boards were new for all of us. This first experience was a stepping-stone in what would be a year filled with learning how to talk meaningfully about literature and utilizing reflection to elicit this type of talk. When I examine the talk during read alouds where students are asked to immediately make a few comments and literature circles where they have time to first reflect, I can see how providing them with time to reflect on their questions, wonderings and connections allows for more insightful conversations. I agree with Douillard (2002) that, “Reflective activities in the classroom help make thinking more visible, enabling students to learn from one another and to gain greater insights into their own thinking and learning processes” (p. 93).

Dewey (1938) argues that reflection provides learners with the opportunity to organize ideas so that they are more available for pushing the learner’s own thinking and for sharing that thinking with others. Reflection supports learners in connecting with what they already know, considering alternative perspectives, posing and solving problems, and organizing their experiences. Encouraging young children to regularly engage in reflection helps them develop purpose and control over their own thinking and learning. I believe that literature circles provide one way to encourage young children to take on reflection as a means of thoughtfully considering and questioning their lives and learning.

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## Exploring Kids' Talk about Books: An Author Study of Kevin Henkes

by Jennifer Griffith, Second Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 2 of 3

After several months of exploring literature discussion as a whole group in our classroom I decided to move to small group discussions to provide more opportunities for children to talk with each other. I wondered about the types of talk that I was hearing from my kids in literature circles and whether they were having a 'true' literature discussion. Noe and Johnson (1999) found that, "Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books" (p. ix). My concern was whether my students' talk was really moving from conversation into dialogue in order to get at this critical thinking. I was worried that their thinking was staying too much on the surface of their thinking as they explored many connections instead of focusing in depth around an issue.

Our small groups were organized around an author study of Kevin Henkes in which each group would read and discuss one of his books. *Chrysanthemum* (1991) is about a little girl who has always loved her name, but discovers that kids can be mean when she starts school. She is often teased until her teacher chooses a name for her baby that is the most beautiful name she's heard. *Wemberly Worried* (2000) is about a little girl who does nothing but worry about everything, especially when she has to go to school. She makes friends with Jewel, who is also a worrier. The third book in our set was *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (1996), in which Lilly brings her new purse that plays a 'jaunty little tune' to school. When it disrupts class, her teacher, whom she idealizes, confiscates it for the remainder of the day. Upset Lilly draws a mean picture and slips it into his book bag only to find out when she gets her purse back that he has written an apology letter to her. Playing catch, exploring nature and re-creating a Christmas spent apart are just a few of the ways a boy and his grandfather enjoy their summer together in *Grandpa and Bo* (2002). Our last book was *Julius, Baby of the World* (1990), which explores the familiar theme of the arrival of a new baby and sibling rivalry.

I introduced each of these stories through a brief book walk and explained the voting process. Each book was given a number and each student recorded his/her top three choices on a post-it note. I then went through their ballots and created the groups. The next day I announced the literature groups and handed out their chosen book in a plastic bag with a letter to their families, inviting them to read the book with their kids and talk about their favorite parts, marking them with a small post-it. They had two days to read their book and return it to class for discussion day.

On discussion day the kids came to the carpet with their books marked with two places they wanted to talk about. I explained that they would be sitting with a small group and the time was to be spent talking about their book; making connections, sharing why they chose a certain part of the story, asking questions

or exploring wonderings. A colleague, Mrs. Nichols, was in our room to help manage the other groups while I participated in one group. Over time, I rotated to different groups each week. I dismissed each group to a certain area of the classroom and asked them to start discussing. This week I chose to sit with the *Julius, Baby of the World* group in the library area of our classroom. It was important to me that I devote this time to one group and try not to focus on what was taking place in the rest of the room, which is why I asked Mrs. Nichols to be part of this experience.

The group I chose was comprised of five students – Matthew, Evan, James, Sammy, and Reid. I expected Reid, Matthew and Evan E. to guide the discussion since they were my natural talkers in class. All of these kids except James and Sammy have siblings who live at home, which I felt might play a part in their participation since the book focused on sibling rivalry. As we sat there, no one jumped in to get started and so I asked, “So what did you think about this book?” My goal was to sit and listen but interject if they needed to get back on task or needed a prompting question.

Reid began the conversation with an observation. “I thought it was nice when the cousin came over to their house.” Instead of responding to Reid, Evan shared a connection, saying, “I liked the part when Lilly didn’t want to share a room because I had to share a room with my brother and I didn’t want to either. And I made a connection to the part when she was in time-out, I’ve been in time-out.” I eagerly awaited someone else to respond to Evan’s comment with their own connection or a connection to the book but to no avail. Sammy came back with her own reaction, “I liked when Lilly was singing the ABC’s wrong.” Reid replied back, “I liked that part too.” At that moment I wondered whether they were on the right track. I wasn’t sure if I should try and get them to think differently to encourage more deep conversation about the book. Then I remembered that they were second graders and talking about this part in the story seemed to be important to them so I did not interrupt as they continued the conversation about the ABC’s and jumped into responding to each other.

Matthew: I liked the part about singing the ABC’s.

Evan: Yeah I liked that part too, it was funny.

Reid: Yeah she was trying to get him off track.

Sammy: I liked when she said 3, 8, 6, c, f, e, because it was kind of cute.

The conversation then went back to unconnected comments. In the middle of this, Evan stated, “I know why the author wrote it – to be nice to your baby brother or someone else in your family.” I was excited about this comment and waited for a response – but again nothing. Matthew came back with, “I kiss my baby brother on the nose” and that moved the discussion into a lot of “I liked...” statements. I decided to redirect the conversation by saying, “Let’s go back to what Evan said about why the author wrote it. Do you agree or not?”

Matthew: I agree. People should be nice  
Evan: I bet the author had a baby brother.  
Teacher: Any comments?  
Everyone: No.

Then all of a sudden I was in the middle of what I believe to be a true dialogue around a focused idea as the kids talked about what happens to Lilly because of her baby brother.

Evan: I feel bad when baby gets all the attention – that happened to me. I wouldn't do anything to get their attention though, like Lilly did.  
Matthew: My brother feels that way when I give attention to the baby.  
Reid: Well Lilly would be my older brother and I guess I would be Julius.  
Evan: The baby is getting all the attention.  
Matthew: When Ethan was in my mom's tummy I was afraid that was going to happen and it did, he gets all the attention.  
James: When I play with my friends that happens sometimes, they get all the attention.

I found James's comment profound, since he was a child who did not have siblings at home. He wanted to be a part of this conversation so searched for a way to connect himself to his classmates. I wondered if the students were aware that they had just had a successful exchange about the book.

As a new teacher using literature circles, I was hazy about what these discussions should look like in a primary classroom but, after this encounter, I felt that these kids were on the right track. Not once during the 30-minute discussion did they stray far from the book and at some point they all participated. Their comments, for the most part, did not build off each other, but there were times when they moved from conversation about their many connections to the book into a short dialogue around one topic. I also know that young children struggle with trying to remember their thoughts and need to say what is on their mind before it slips away. With more experience in literature circles and studies of different authors, I knew that there would be a huge change in the depth of their talk as they learned to build from each other and dialogue about focused issues.

The small groups came together as a whole class to chart the books. We included the title, main characters, setting, plot, and solutions and recorded the similarities and differences in Henkes' books. This chart was then available to students as they continued reading and discussing his other books in our weekly literature circles. My hope was that they would bring connections between his books naturally into their conversations.

Each literature circle is a learning experience and I noticed that while one group of students may be successful at moving into dialogue, another group might struggle with a conversation. I believe that demonstrating talk as a whole class

with a read aloud is the best way to promote and encourage thoughtful talk about literature.

After reflecting on the process, I found that this group of children moved from conversation about a wide range of topics, which included what seemed like many random isolated thoughts, to dialogue about a focused issue, how Lilly felt about the arrival of her baby brother. As a teacher who believes that kids should be having focused talk from the beginning, I realized that they have to begin somewhere and they need to have conversations to share their many connections in order to find a focused issue that they can then dialogue around. Even when it seems that a discussion has gone off track, it doesn't mean that it has failed (Noe & Johnson, 1999). Kids always seem to bring a discussion back around when you least expect it and that's what I experienced with this group. How eye-opening for me to understand that the kids were engaged in the same process as adults who have conversations that eventually lead to a dialogue. Literature circles naturally begin with conversations where readers, no matter what their age, share their many connections to a book and, out of that sharing, find an issue that is significant to them and that they then explore through dialogue with each other.

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## **Young Children’s Responses to Texts in Art and Music**

by Jennifer Griffith, Second Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 3 of 3

My focus as a teacher this school year was to learn how to engage my students in meaningful reflection and talk around a piece of literature. In our teacher study group, we spent the first semester exploring literature circles and sharing our experiences with each other. My class had come a long way in their talk about literature. We were using graffiti boards as a response strategy to support our reflection before talking with each other and were working toward focused dialogue around an issue from the book. I was looking for other ways to encourage my students to keep developing their talk and thinking. A conversation with our Opening Minds through the Arts (OMA) teacher, Jenny Cain, opened up the possibility of having kids engage in thoughtful discussion around other kinds of text, such as a piece of music or a painting. We were curious to see what kind of talk the kids would use in this context.

It had always made sense to me that a literature circle would only involve discussing a text or piece of literature. Kathy Short (2000), however, argues that a text can be more broadly defined as “any chunk of meaning that has unity and can be shared with others. A text therefore can be a novel, a piece of art, a play, a dance, a song, or a mathematical equation” (p.165). This definition of text builds on semiotics and an understanding of sign systems as “multiple ways of knowing—the ways in which humans share and make meaning, specifically through music, art, mathematics, drama, and language” (Short, 2000, p.160). Children naturally engage in art, music, movement and language as ways to think and respond to the world around them outside of school. However, in the school setting we often limit our children’s thinking to utilizing only one sign system at a time and that is primarily talking and writing. Jenny and I were excited about using a range of sign systems to elicit conversation and dialogue and to exposing our students to different ways of thinking and responding. We couldn’t wait to see what would happen.

Because it was fall, we decided to have our text be the piece of music ‘Fall’ by Vivaldi and to use watercolor as a means for children to respond to that text. We would then engage the kids in discussion around their paintings. As an art history major I knew that artwork allows for a variety of interpretations and connections and so was excited about the prospect of the kids having dialogue around a piece of art. I was curious to see how their talk about art would be similar or different from their talk about books.

The process took a month because we only visited Jenny once a week. It was broken down into three major experiences – listening to the musical text, reflecting on that text through art, and having a discussion. Jenny introduced the kids to the project and we talked about how when you listen to music and close your eyes, a visual image is created inside your head. She explained that we would use pencils to sketch our vision and then paint those sketches with

watercolors to reflect on the music. The first session was spent listening to ‘Fall’ and focusing on the images in our minds. We ended with a brief sharing of our thoughts on the musical text. Jenny explained that our next session would be spent sketching our thoughts and reading books that depicted the season of fall. This concept of seasons was hard for our kids since many had not experienced a distinct fall with changing leaf colors in the desert, but had only seen it in books. In our second session the kids found a spot on the floor with a piece of paper and a pencil. We listened to Vivaldi and began sketching our thoughts and visions. The kids were completely engaged in this process and took care to create their feelings and images. We concluded this session with a read aloud of Cynthia Rylant’s book, *In November* (2000), that illustrates the season of fall and the colors associated with the season for those who might need inspiration. Jenny took us on book walks of several other picture books that represented fall and that showed the kids the colors often associated with this season. She displayed some of the illustrations on the smart board where the kids had the opportunity to look closely and talk about their observations of these illustrations. This conversation was a great precursor to the discussion the kids would eventually have around their own artwork.

Our third session took place in our classroom, where we listened to our musical text once more and created watercolor interpretations. My kids were comfortable with this medium; we had used it several times in previous projects. The kids had an hour to work on their pieces and we played Vivaldi throughout our session. Most of their paintings were representational ‘fall’ paintings with trees and colorful leaves (even though that is not the kind of fall or trees that we have in the desert). Many kids painted a single tree with leaves both on and off the tree as if the wind were blowing, using colors that are associated with fall such as yellows, browns, oranges, and reds. Other kids created more abstract paintings, using colors to represent their feelings towards the piece of music; some used black where others used reds and oranges. It was awesome to see a variety of artwork representing their different understandings and feelings about the season and music. I was proud of their efforts and their thoughtful attention to this type of reflection. Jenny and I were eager to participate in what we hoped would be a successful dialogue around their masterpieces.

The following week concluded our experiences around Vivaldi’s text. Jenny mounted their watercolors on black paper and posted them in the main hallway as a gallery for everyone to admire. We decided to conduct our literature circle in the hallway, gathered in a semi-circle around the paintings. Jenny set up the conversation, saying “Remember what you do in the Learning Lab? You don’t need to raise your hand; you just wait for someone to finish talking. Doing I wonders and connections...talking about what you think and feel about the pictures. Yes, it could be about what you feel when looking at a picture, what you think when you see it, the story you think it’s trying to tell.”

My kids and I had previous short, informal discussions about artwork where I made sure they knew that there were no right or wrong answers in talking about art and it was obvious that my kids hung onto this idea during this experience. I noticed that the children naturally went right into “I wonder” statements, even though Jenny had not focused them on using this as a way to start their talk. ‘I wonders’ give kids something to further explore and talk about in their talk. Often kids begin a literature discussion with personal connections and the discussion doesn’t go beyond each individual connection; kids simply share connections where wonderings invite an attitude of inquiry. Some of their wonderings included:

Kaitlynn: I wonder if the painting was done really close to the end of the day in Mr. Nichol’s class. (My colleague, Mr. Nichol’s class participated in this experience so his class’s watercolors were on display as well)

Ryan: I wonder if one of those paintings is upside down.

Mason: I wonder what they were thinking of when they were drawing.

Kaitlynn: I wonder if any of them had some trees in them.

Gage: I wonder if they were thinking of something of where they lived somewhere.

Student: I wonder if they have vines.

When Evan asked, “I wonder why most of them are about fall and colors,” Kaitlynn thoughtfully responded, “I think that they were thinking about fall when they did it because we were listening to the music called ‘Fall’, so they were thinking of ....maybe they heard the word fall, and so they were thinking of a story they were trying to tell and maybe they were thinking of what they really wanted to do or they didn’t want to do anything but colors.”

In examining the transcript from this discussion, I also noticed that the kids were moving from simple ‘I like’ statements to providing the reasons behind their thinking – a definite indication that they were developing stronger discussion strategies. They supported their thinking in their statements whereas in the beginning of the year they simply stated what they liked without any further support. It was exciting to see them make this step forward in terms of inviting discussion and response from other students.

Some examples of these statements include:

Kaitlynn: I like Grant’s picture because it reminds me of my aunt’s barn.

Nathan: I like Grant’s picture because it reminds me of the zoo.

Student: I like that picture because it reminded me of when I first went to the zoo.

Sammy: I like the picture where it looks like candles.

Nathan: I like that picture because it has lots of colors in it.

Matthew: I like that picture, that Sammy just said, because it reminds me of Tucson, because of the colors of leaves, it looks like a sun.

The students made connections to other texts as well. Intertextual connections can support kids in more complex and conceptual thinking so I was excited to see

this talk start to emerge when Mason said, “Oooh! I made a connection. You know that book you read yesterday, Mrs. Griffith? When the mummy, the vampire, the witch and there’s a big line in it?”

The kids then moved into a dialogue around their interpretations of the paintings, for the first time going beyond only sharing their connections or wonderings. It was exciting to see them become true literature circle participants and art historians all at the same time. This talk seemed to be facilitated by their need to move from one sign system to another, in this case they were trying to express their visual images in language, just as earlier they had to express what they were understanding in music through visual images. This process of transmediation involves “taking understandings from one system and moving them into another sign system” (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000, p.160). Our experience involved two transmediations as they moved from music to art and from art to language and, in both cases, had to transform their understandings to the new system.

In this part of the discussion, the kids were interpreting what they thought the painting meant, particularly the colors and images.

Dan: I liked the one that looked like a storm and it has colors.

Student: It looks like a tornado.

Gage: That looks like the grim reaper.

Student: It looks like a tornado.

Student: I like the ones right underneath it. I like how their leaves are falling, and yeah, I like how their leaves are falling and there are no leaves on the branch.

When reading through the transcripts of this experience it was enlightening to see how the kids’ responses consistently connected back to the paintings they were interpreting. I had noticed that in our literature circles their responses often consisted of one child telling a story that connected to the previous child’s story rather than connecting to the book itself. The book was often lost as children chained their stories one to the other.

This process showed Jenny and I how important it is to allow kids to explore different sign systems not only for reflection but to have them experience different types of text such as a piece of music. As Short, Kauffman and Kahn (2000) explain, “Sign systems are significant because they form the basis for creative and critical thought processes” (p. 169). This experience gave children the opportunity to reflect in a new medium, watercolor, and take those visual reflections into a new context, discussion around a piece of art. Essentially by responding in a different sign system, students had a way to think about and share their feelings and images (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000). The kids were successful in this endeavor and their dialogue supported their thinking and response. It was eye-opening to me that we could use texts other than literature to enhance our literature circles. I learned that introducing kids to other texts such as music and art gives their talk a different sense of purpose and provides

them with an opportunity to use other resources to engage in meaningful discussion with each other.

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## **Creating Lifelong Relationships: Children’s Connections to Characters**

by Kathryn Tompkins, Fourth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 1 of 3

I know the importance of identifying with characters in literature because I am a reader. I have always been a reader. As a kid, I loved books featuring characters with traits like mine. I know the most powerful books have been ones where the character lives in my mind long after I forget the specific plot and so I search for books with memorable characters whenever I read aloud to my students.

The challenge in choosing literature to read with students has been going beyond books with characters just like them to open up their minds to other ways of thinking and living in the world. I wanted to explore how to engage my students in relating to and caring about characters with whom they didn’t have a lot in common—at least on the surface. I was curious about the kinds of characters that my students would be drawn to, but knew that I wanted to find books where the characters grew and changed over time, so that students would see how they also could grow through their life experiences. I brought many different books into the classroom and found that students particularly connected to characters who demonstrated strength or who wouldn’t give up even when they faced hardships in their lives.

The first book where I witnessed my students really caring about the characters was *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997). This book focuses on a community garden in an urban neighborhood and each chapter is in the voice of a different character and his/her interactions with the garden. Students didn’t necessarily connect with each character but there were several who they identified with and tried to understand. Two standout characters were Curtis and Maricela.

Curtis used to be a bodybuilder who had dumped his girlfriend, Lateesha. Years later when he realizes that he messed up the relationship, he goes back to find her and plants tomato plants outside her window in the community garden. Curtis has a hard time getting Lateesha to talk to him so he puts his efforts into the tomatoes that he dubs “Lateesha’s Tomatoes.” His frustrations continue when his tomatoes are stolen, no matter what security measures he takes. The students identified with Curtis for two main reasons. On one hand they saw that Curtis didn’t realize what he had until he lost it and connected that theme to movies and TV shows. They talked about love and how hard it is, for any reason, when it comes to an end. They also identified with Curtis’s struggle to keep his plants safe. They argued that it was never possible to be totally secure, because it doesn’t matter how high or strong your fence is or how many alarms you might have—If someone wants to steal what you have then they will find a way. As a teacher, their pessimism was disheartening but I listened as they talked about having bikes or video games stolen. They understood the idea that nothing is really ever safe.

Maricela is a pregnant teenager, who doesn't want her baby and pretty much hates life. She gets a glimpse of the miracle of life in the garden, and for one moment doesn't hate the baby growing inside of her. Maricela was the chapter that I was most nervous to read aloud with my students. I had prepared myself for all of the questions that would come about in the discussion of a pregnant sixteen-year-old. I was surprised at how well they dealt with the young mother because age was not a concern for most of my students. I did have a few who didn't know how anyone could get pregnant if they weren't married, but a couple of my students were born to sixteen-year-old mothers who are raising amazing young people. They saw that age doesn't make you a good or bad mother. One of the issues that upset the students was why she hated her baby. They couldn't understand how any mother could hate her baby. Their talk turned to exploring the idea that she didn't really hate her baby; she hated what she had to give up about her life. She wasn't the typical high school student like their brothers and sisters who worried about what clothes to wear or where to go out on the weekends. She had to worry about the baby she was carrying.

At the end of *Seedfolks* we made a mural depicting each chapter. Everyone wanted to work on Curtis or Maricela. Those two characters stuck with students. Their lives made sense, particularly their worries about finding love or security, and what it means to be a teenager. *Seedfolks* provided characters that my class could connect to as they looked ahead to becoming teenagers.

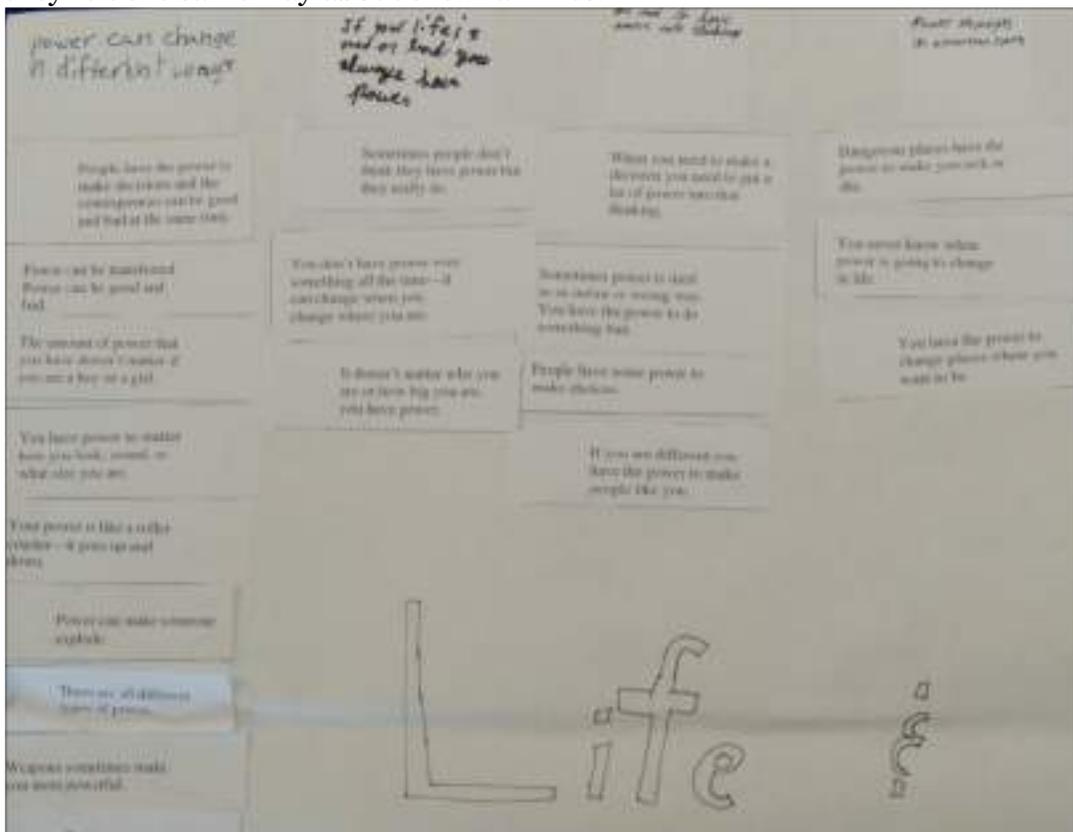
Another character whose life seemed much more removed from my students' lives but whom they grew to love was Keoko, from *When My Name was Keoko* (Park, 2002). Keoko, whose Korean name is Sun-hee, is a child living in Korea during the time of the Japanese occupation. Initially, it was hard for them to connect with Sun-hee because of their distance in both culture and time from the events in the book. They listened as Sun-hee described how the Japanese took away her Korean language as well as a Korean education and her Korean name. They were angered when the soldiers raided her house and threw out her writing. Angel identified with Sun-hee when she talks about the power of words. He commented that if the words weren't so powerful, then the soldiers wouldn't try to take them away. Alex agreed, saying that you can burn the paper but not the words. Students liked that Sun-hee could still be herself when she wrote in her diary, even though she had to hide her true feelings in school.

The students talked a great deal about their freedom within the United States and the power of writing. They worried about Sun-hee and her family because the Japanese controlled so much of their lives—taking away the “Korean” Rose of Sharon trees and replacing them with “Japanese” Cherry Blossoms, confiscating jewelry and metal, and taking their food so that they had little to eat. Students were shocked by the Korean's lack of freedom and angry at the Japanese.

Students identified with Sun-hee's lack of freedom. They imagined being in her place and unable to write their thoughts in a diary or journal. They were frustrated that she couldn't do things that they can, like speak different languages

or wear her hair how she wanted. On the other hand, they identified with her lack of freedom because of their personal experiences and frustrations with parents and teachers who control their lives. My students understood someone else telling them what to eat or when to go to bed because they hear those demands from adults. They don't always like having someone telling them what to do and when to do it, and so could identify with Sun-hee's resentment toward the Japanese soldiers.

Another connection was Sun-hee's closeness to her family. She had the typical annoying little sister relationship with her brother so that was easy for students to identify with! She also had parents whom she loved and an uncle whom she admired for his strength and sense of humor. The students easily identified with her love of family because their families are so important to them. We had earlier made cultural x-rays in class that showed what we value in our hearts, what we look like, and how we define ourselves on the outside (race, religion, education, language, etc.). Family took up the largest portion of my students' hearts. They could identify with Sun-hee's love and concern for her family members because they felt the same way about their families.



As students came to care deeply about Sun-hee, they began to see all Japanese as evil men who took away the rights and freedoms of Korea. We had to spend a great deal of time talking about lumping all Japanese with those individuals who took the freedoms away from the Koreans. It was important to note that some Japanese people mistreated the Koreans but that didn't mean that all Japanese were mean. This resonated with a shy student, Alex, whose grandmother is from

Japan. Alex noted in small drawings on the bottom of one of her responses in her literature logs that her dad, her brother, and she all have a certain percentage of Japanese blood in them. We worked to move beyond a “them versus us” perspective and to see the complexity within all cultures and conflicts.

The most significant character during the year became Nory, from *Nory Ryan's Song* (Giff, 2000). My students talked about Nory as if she were a lifelong friend. Initially, this book was hard for them to connect to because of the setting in Ireland during the potato famine in the 1840s. Once we did some background research, students seemed to better understand Nory's actions and thinking. They worried about her because she had no food. They worried about her because she was left raising a young brother while other family members went off for help. They worried about her because the English landlord threatened to throw out her family for not paying rent after he took away her animals. Nory had no parents to protect her. As much as students might want freedom, they also want adults there at the end of the day to keep them safe. Nory loved her family as did my students, but they wondered if Nory loved her's more. She never seemed to eat, giving all she had to her little brother. They wondered if they would make the same sacrifices for their siblings as Nory so unselfishly did.

Students had such admiration for Nory and the way she took care of her brother when she was starving and exhausted. She found ways to survive by getting disgusting sea creatures for them to eat or by risking her life to climb the cliffs to get bird eggs. She was amazingly strong and they admired that she was not a quitter. They tried to imagine being in her situation and wondered if they would be as strong. They almost saw her as heroic. The sacrifices Nory made were beyond what the students could imagine. Would they walk the long journey into town alone in hopes of getting some help? In this way the book provided opportunities for self-reflection and the students illustrated those thoughts in their literature logs. They drew Nory with all of her concerns and stresses in life.

The students cried out each day when I stopped reading aloud. They cared so much about Nory and wanted to make sure that she was safe. The class also showed their love for Nory through their anger toward the English landlord who charged rent to poor families and took all of the animals away so the Irish didn't have a way to live. They couldn't understand how someone would deliberately set up the Irish to fail. The students were upset and discussed what they would do if they were there to help Nory. They saw her as a real person and wanted to help her to live!



There are probably great books that don't have a main character to whom students can relate and grow to love. However, when reading international literature I feel that it is important to have that bond between the students and at least one character. There are already so many issues that serve as barriers to their sense of connection and understanding, such as the time period difference and a lack of knowledge about the setting and culture. If the students can find something to identify with in the character or certain qualities that they can admire, then they will take the time to invest in the book and stick with the characters throughout their struggles in understanding the book. Examining my students' responses to the characters in these books helped me identify several issues to consider related to characters when I choose literature to read to my class.

The author must develop the character in enough depth for us to feel that we know him/her as a real person.

The characters need to change and grow in believable ways due to the experiences they have in the story.

We like characters who face difficult situations and for whom we feel fear and hope. We need to feel both a sense of connection and tension for the character's life situation.

We like to read about contemporary real life issues that we can identify with and use to reflect on our own fears and concerns. We connect to issues that we have felt in our own lives but from a different perspective or time than our own.

The character must be unique in some way that is compelling to us. We have to be pulled in by a character that captures our attention.

Peterson and Eeds (1990) state that characters are, “the guides who bring the story world to life and teach us to see the rich potential human beings have for goodness, love, faith, and hope, as well as for fear and evil” (p. 31). This potential for human beings to love and hope drew my students into these books and created lasting relationships with characters they still continue to care about and revisit through rereading the books. Building a lasting relationship with a character is a gift that teachers can offer students that makes a difference in their lives. Books can expand children’s life experiences and open their hearts and minds to characters who remain significant in their lives.

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## **Exploring Racism and Prejudice through Literature**

by Kathryn Tompkins, Fourth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 2 of 3

My students had no problem talking about hate. White people hated black people, some men hated women, Hitler hated the Jews. Challenging them to understand that these were also issues of racism and prejudice met with resistance and getting them to consider that these issues still exist today seemed nearly impossible. Anytime we got close to talking about racism, they found a way to divert the talk and, because talk about racism was new to me as well, I was not sure how to move them beyond this resistance. Bolgatz (2005) says that we develop racial literacy, the ability to thoughtfully discuss issues of race and racism, by talking about race and racism “even when that talk is difficult or awkward” (p. 2). To effectively invite this talk, I decided to examine my field notes and students’ literature logs to understand the ways in which my students resisted this talk as well as how their talk about racism gradually changed across the school year.

Bolgatz (2005) points out that race does not have a biological basis, but is a social construction growing out of the intersection between skin color and sociohistorical hierarchies of power. Racism can be blatant such as when someone claims that particular human populations create superior civilizations and should dominate other human groups because they are intellectually superior. Many racists believe that differences between races are due to genetic factors, not to environment or history. Racism can be more subtle when assumptions are made that Whiteness is the norm or standard against which “others” are judged or when we fail to question inequality and accept it as “just the way the world is.” One way in which racism occurs is through prejudice where we judge others without having evidence to back up our opinions. Because racism is maintained through everyday life practices including the media and school curriculum, I knew that we could not avoid talking about racism and prejudice in my classroom just because those issues are uncomfortable. I also knew that the racial demographics of my class would influence our talk since half of my students were white and the rest were Latino with a few other students from other ethnic groups.

“I think that just happened in the old days” is a phrase that started off the year for my fourth graders when we read any book that raised issues of racism. In their minds, racism and prejudice existed a long time ago and then Martin Luther King, Jr. came along and solved all of the problems of the world. Bolgatz (2005) found that students discussed historical racism as if it “existed in a vacuum, with no connection to their own beliefs” (p. 86). I knew that I had my work cut out for me when it came to challenging my students to recognize that the problems of the past are often still present today. Racism may be less blatant than in the past; however, all one needs to do is turn on the news to be confronted with the problems of racism around the world as well as in our own community. I was fortunate to have a team of co-workers to think with me about ways to open the

eyes and minds of children using literature. We worked together, reading books and participating in discussions to encourage students to personally connect with characters and discuss the difficult social issues faced by these characters. The first read aloud that challenged students to consider racism was *On the Other Side* (Woodson, 2001). In this story, two girls, one white and one black, are separated by a fence. They aren't allowed to cross the fence to play together. The students focused on the issue that it wasn't "safe" to cross the fence, rather than admitting that it might be an issue of prejudice. They thought that maybe the moms didn't know each other so they didn't want their daughters to play with strangers. Of course they predicted that, after the book ended, the fence was knocked down and the girls became great friends. They were sure there was a happy ending!

The next book that we read was *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996). A grandmother tells the story of when she was a little girl and went to town to see if she could fry an egg on the hot cement. She succeeded and was on her way back home when she stopped to get a drink. The sign on the water fountain said "Whites Only" so she took off her shoes to reveal clean, white socks before she stepped up to drink. A white man came along and threatened to beat her with his belt. Before she knew it there were lots of black people taking their shoes off to get a drink at the fountain. The discussion in class consisted primarily of questions from the students – "Why was the white guy so mad at her?" "Why could only whites drink?" "Couldn't she read the sign?" "Why don't whites like blacks?" Most of the students seemed afraid to talk about the hate that was evident in this book but this time they did not dismiss that hate and were verbalizing their questions about racial tensions. They were especially awkward around one student in the class whom they perceived to be black. I wasn't sure how to help them become more comfortable with discussing difficult issues but at least they were beginning to ask "why?"

We engaged students with several contemporary books to challenge their assumption that racism is a thing of the past. *First Day in Grapes* (Perez, 2002) is the story of a young Mexican-American boy whose family moves from one migrant farm camp to another. He gets picked on at school and made fun of but he stands up for himself. Most kids saw this book as kids bullying each other, but Ozzie believed that the children's actions were racist. He argued that it was not just bullying but that the children were mean to the boy because he was Mexican and said that he knew this because his brother had been bullied for the same reason.

I read aloud another contemporary book, *White Wash* (Shange, 1997), the next week. This book definitely reminded me that I would not always feel comfortable with the content of the books I read to children. I know it is important to be open to books that might be hard for me to read because they make me sad. The students need to know that I care about what we are reading. The clothes and talk of the characters in this story are clearly in the present. A young girl, on her way home from school with her brother, is painted white and the boys who attack her

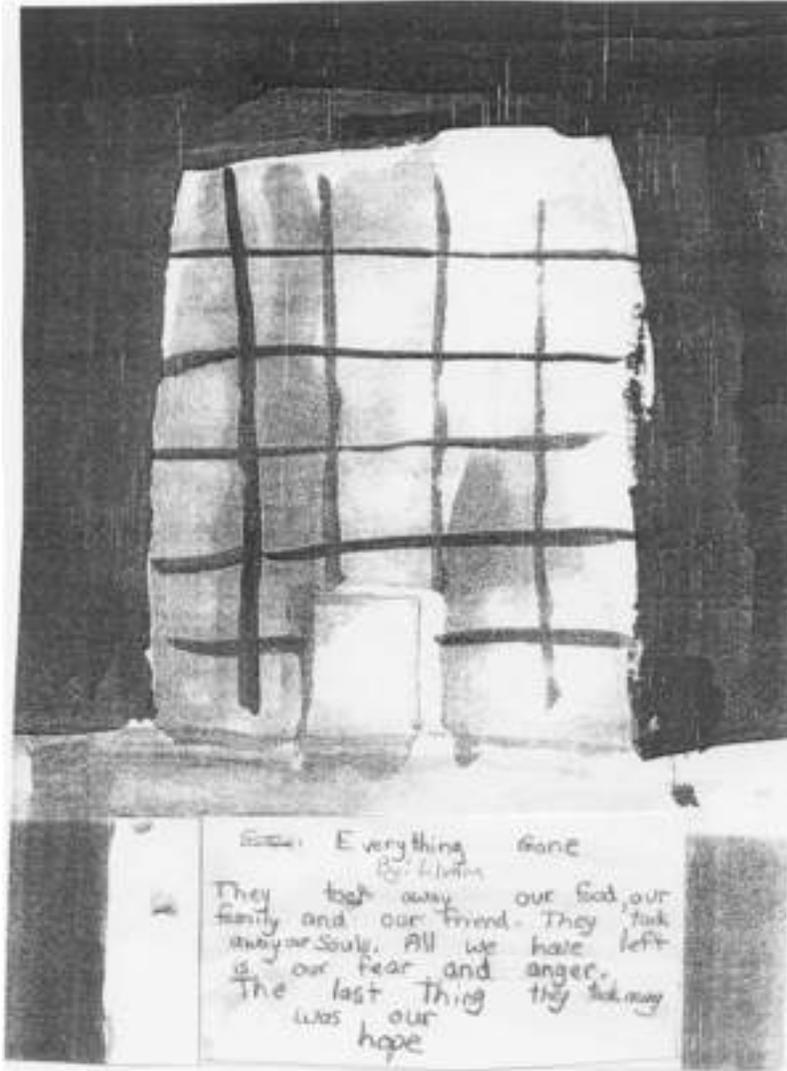
insinuate that she is not American unless she is white. Her brother also gets beaten up and can't help defend her. I thought that this story would evoke anger in my students about what happened to this young girl and her brother. The students talked about kids being bullied because of their skin color, but then the clichés started coming out. Despite the obviously current styles of clothing, the students stated that it must have happened before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s time. They also stated that it shouldn't matter what a person is like on the outside, because all that matters is what is on the inside. They took the position of colorblindness, which my students seemed to feel was a good thing. Bolgatz (2005) defines colorblindness as "dismissing the significance and relevance of race" (p. 81). I struggled with how I could help students understand the importance of recognizing race and skin color as one part of a person's identity and as influencing their experiences and interactions with others. Many students had been told by parents and teachers so often that skin color doesn't matter and that everyone is the same on the inside that they dismissed the racial issues in books as insignificant. While some students were uncomfortable talking about race and took positions of colorblindness to avoid the discussion, others seemed to view these issues as irrelevant to their lives and seemed bored with our discussions.

One book that caught some of the students' attention was *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbieki, 1998), which has a beautiful cover of a nun and a girl planting flowers in a little pot. The girl learns that she will have a "woman of color" as her teacher and wonders what color her teacher could be. When she meets Sister Anne, she can't help but stare at the darkness of her skin and is afraid to have those hands touch her. Sister Anne is a wonderful teacher, inspiring her students with her humor and dedicated way of making learning fun. Then a paper airplane sails near Sister Anne and when she opens it up it says, "Roses are red, Violets are blue. Don't let Sister Anne get any black on you." Several students laugh but Sister Anne sits in silence thinking. The next day the classroom walls are covered with pictures showing racist acts toward African Americans. She tells them that those are the colors of hatred and encourages them to open up their hearts. The story ends with the girl drawing peoples' hands in all different colors – pink or polka dotted, red or yellow. The discussion began with talk about how poorly black people were treated in the past. One student identified herself as having black skin, although she does not consider herself Black since she is from Fiji. There was some discussion about how white people didn't want to touch black skin. Then the talk turned to the happy ending and how it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside. While students still fell back to clichés, they seemed more open to talking about their own skin color and recognizing the dark skin of their classmate with whom they were friends.

We finally seemed to be getting somewhere with the book *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990), the story of the friendship between Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese when Jackie went to play for the Dodgers. The book begins with a history of segregation that I thought might help the students understand discrimination in the United States. Jackie is taunted by players and fans yet

continues to play baseball and Pee Wee stands by him in the face of racist slurs from crowds. Ozzie opened up talk about racism by asking, “Who started hating black people?” Other students responded with stories of kids not being allowed to play who were black and adults who make racist comments. They also discussed movies that showed scenes of racism. Ozzie said that he recognized racism because he was bullied at his old school for being Mexican. Finally, students were actually discussing racism. Once again, however, the discussion ended with a student stating that everyone is the same on the inside and we are all human beings. It was discouraging that when we finally seemed to make progress in talking about racism, we ended up back with those clichés!

The next book, [\*Rose Blanche\*](#) (Innocenti, 1985) deals with prejudice that isn't openly about skin color. This isn't a book about blacks and whites or Mexicans and whites and so I thought it might challenge students' thinking about these issues. A girl finds children who are imprisoned in a fenced yard during the Holocaust. She wants to help them because they are starving so she takes them food. At the end she is in the field and a shot is heard. She never makes it home. The students were shocked and saddened. I realized that students had no knowledge of the Holocaust and the rampant hate that Hitler exposed to the world. I wanted to do something more with the Holocaust yet struggled with how to appropriately raise these issues with fourth graders. I didn't want them to just see photos from concentration camps but wanted them to understand more about the people whose lives were forever changed by hate and prejudice.



I waited a few months and then introduced the Holocaust by talking about hate. We watched a video of Patricia Polacco reading her story, *The Butterfly* (2001), about two girls during the time of the Holocaust. We also talked about Anne Frank and I read excerpts from her diary to the class and showed various picture books about her life. I wanted students to make connections to her as a young person, just like them, who lived and died during that time. I tried to find stories about her that they could relate to, such as her love for her cat and her friends. She became a real person to them rather than only a character in a book. They saw how much she was like them. I knew we were getting somewhere when they started checking out books on her life and reading about her on the internet. I decided to share *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (Volkovd, 1962), a book of children's drawings and poems from 1942-1944 in the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. I read aloud a few poems and showed illustrations from the book. I tried to select poetry that highlighted a child's view of the world and children's ability to see beauty in everything, even in their darkest moments. I gave each student a small piece of paper and asked them to write about anything

they were feeling. Then they used watercolors to paint a picture to go with their writing. The results were better than I ever would have imagined. The kids stunned me with how deeply they felt for children caught in the Holocaust. They wrote about the fear that the children must have felt for the unknown, the hopelessness of the camps, and struggle for those who tried to hide from the Nazis. I knew then that we were breaking down barriers and students were beginning to see characters in books as real kids with lives who were deeply hurt by racism and prejudice. They were beginning to identify with them and their struggles. The most effective way to connect children with issues of racism and prejudice seemed to be through the stories of other children, past and present. Around this time, students were asked to make cultural x-rays of their own cultural identities. The posters had an outline of a person holding a large heart. Around the outside of the person, students were asked to put words and pictures describing themselves and their cultural identities, such as their languages, color, race, age, religion, where they lived, if they felt they were rich, middle class or poor, etc. In the heart, students put what they cared about and valued. Students were also asked to color the person to look like themselves. They had no trouble getting to work on their hearts and writing about their love of their families, friends, pets, sports, and even foods. Getting them to work on the outside was a different story. We heard, "I don't have a culture, I am just white." We struggled with ways to help students see culture as more than ethnicity or skin color and as influencing how each of us think about who we are and what is important in our lives.

As part of our study of Korean culture, we read aloud the story of a young girl and her brother during the Japanese occupation of Korea before World War II. In *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002) a family loses their names, their language, and much of their culture when the Japanese occupy Korea. The students identified with Keoko (whose Korean name is Sun-hee), a curious young girl who knows more than her family gives her credit for, and Tae-yul, her brother who is an active adolescent. Students imagined being in their situations and having to change their names and learn another country's history in school each day. The uncle, who lives with the family, eventually flees because he writes a secret newspaper bashing the unfair rules that Japan has put into place in Korea. The father, who is a great scholar, cannot be the head of the school because he is Korean and so is not allowed by the Japanese to be in a position of leadership. Schools aren't allowed to teach anything Korean. The Japanese didn't like anything Korean and the Koreans didn't like anything Japanese. If a Korean had an alliance with the Japanese occupiers, they were called Chin-il-pa, which meant love of the Japanese. Their lives were made easier by the Japanese who helped them to get rich yet their fellow Koreans hated them for being traitors. Students resonated with the idea of the Chin-il-pa because they had experiences of being disliked for one reason or another and also because they couldn't believe that any Korean would side with the Japanese.

Sun-hee's visit to her Japanese friend, Tomo, who is playing with a toy plane, provoked the most discussion. Tomo flies the plane around yelling, "Kill the Americans." My students were appalled that anyone would want to kill Americans. As I continued reading they learned that the Japanese had shown a movie in the school to teach the students what Americans were like. The film showed white people, usually wearing hats and riding horses, shooting and killing other people. The students were told that Americans hated all people with black hair. Sun-hee knew that her family admired America for its freedom and education so she didn't believe what she was told. My students thought that the movie was an old Cowboys and Indians video and discussed why the Korean students would think it was real when it was just a movie. Robert said, "I think the video was to fool them to hate the Americans." It was hard for the students to grasp that this story took place over 60 years ago and that Korean students had never seen a movie and so didn't know that it was entertainment. For the first time my class realized that people could be prejudiced against an entire country and have opinions that were not based on evidence. I realized that until students recognized how others could misperceive them, they couldn't fully understand how they could develop stereotypes and misperceive someone else.

This issue of how others view Americans caused a great deal of tension for students. Were people really prejudiced against Americans? Suddenly the talk turned from "people didn't like them" to questioning why anyone wouldn't like us! The first discussion on this topic started when we talked about the first few chapters in Keoko. One student said he would be mad if Japan took over the U.S. and changed our names. Another argued that it wouldn't happen because "we are too powerful." The discussion continued with talk about how we already had fought Japan when they attacked us "for no reason" at Pearl Harbor and started World War II. They seemed oblivious to the idea that anyone would not like Americans or would want to fight us, or that we would ever do anything to provoke someone into hating us. There was a lot of talk about how the U.S. tries to make peace and fights for freedom for ourselves and others. Students took the position that we were lucky to live in America where we could do whatever we wanted. They also stated that we would never start a war; we only wanted to protect other countries like Iraq. Ozzie tried to change the focus by saying, "that is how our soldiers die" but the topic went right back to how we go to war for peace. The students decided that the people of Korea should have stood up for themselves and not be controlled by Japan. They did not recognize what it is like to have another country occupy your country by force.

The discussion of how America only fights for peace carried over to other discussions in our class. When one student again talked about how we never start wars, that we only defend ourselves or protect other countries, Robert challenged the class by asking, "Who started the war in Iraq?" He wanted to know why the class thought we were there fighting for peace and whether you could "fight" for peace. This was an interesting challenge to the idealistic picture that these students held of the U.S. We seemed to be moving into a discussion of the tension between being proud to be Americans with the freedom to discuss these issues

and questioning whether we are blinded by that patriotism and unable to see why other countries might dislike us. This discussion was diffused by Shawn, who used the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. to argue that one can fight for peace. It seemed that one student always diverted the conversation when we started getting to the deeper issues. Once again, Dr. King solved the world's problems! The difficulty in getting students to openly discuss racism was preceded by the challenge of getting them to recognize race as a significant factor in our world. Exploring a range of books portraying racism in different forms helped students become more comfortable with difference as a positive resource in the world, rather than as a problem. Once one student described herself as having "black skin" it seemed to open the door for the rest of the class to discuss race and to recognize that it does matter who we are on the outside as well as on the inside. I feel confident that next year I will more quickly recognize the moments in our discussions when I can challenge students to consider issues of racism and prejudice and the literature that helps open the spaces for that talk. Bolgatz (2005) argues that, "Racial literacy requires that students engage in interactions intellectually and emotionally. Students have to care about how race and racism affect them" (p.35). Looking at my students' responses, I learned that as long as they viewed racism as removed from their lives, they failed to engage intellectually or emotionally. My challenge for next year is to create opportunities for students to confront racism and prejudice as present in their daily lives. I also have come to realize that I need to create a safe environment in which students can discuss difficult issues, but to accept that we may never feel completely comfortable with these discussions. Knowing how to interact with each other around issues that are not comfortable is actually a significant part of our learning about race and racism. As we explore our own cultural identities and prejudices as well as the cultures and perspectives of characters in books, I hope that students will come to see how they can take action and work for social change in the world.

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## **Engaging Students with the Unfamiliar: *Nory Ryan's Song***

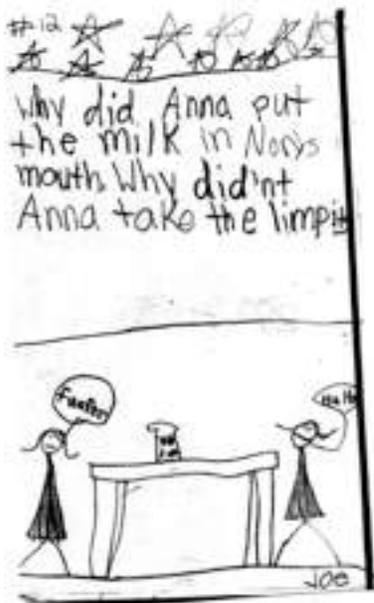
by Kathryn Tompkins, Fourth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 3 of 3

Choosing the right book to initiate talk with students is a decision that I make carefully, particularly looking for read alouds that will connect to issues that matter in their lives. When I decided to read aloud an international book, I knew that students might struggle with this book because the connections to their own lives would not be as evident, but I had fallen in love with the main character. [\*Nory Ryan's Song\*](#) (Giff, 2000) is the story of a young Irish girl who refuses to give into hunger, exhaustion, and hopeless circumstances during the potato famine of the mid-1800s. I knew that students would struggle initially to relate to Nory because of the unfamiliar historical and cultural context, but I felt that they would also fall in love with her once they got to know her and came to care about her. Nory was an appealing character to me because of her strength at a young age and I thought that students would connect to her as a person and imagine what they would do in her situation where there was no one who was going to come and save her and her family. I didn't realize how difficult it would be for them to understand the reality of a famine, especially one taking place so long ago. Their initial responses made it clear that I had to find ways to make this book real and connected for my students.

Our routine for the literature sessions with [\*Nory Ryan's Song\*](#) was important to me because I felt that it was the best way to immerse students into the book so that they could have meaningful discussions. Each day during the literature response time, I read one or two chapters aloud. I did not stop and talk about the language or the issues in the book until the class had listened to the chapters and responded in their literature logs. I did stop briefly occasionally to refer to the glossary of terms but we talked about the language more during our class discussion than during the read aloud. I focused on reading aloud without interruption because I was afraid students would lose the story if I continuously stopped reading to clarify cultural and historical details. The students quickly became familiar with the process and knew they would listen to the story, have time to respond, and then discuss and ask questions of each other or of me. I tried never to cut off a discussion of the chapters because I felt that we learned through talking to understand the book.

Rosenblatt (1991) points out that readers move between two types of stances or purposes for reading that influence their understandings and experiences of literature. I wanted to invite students to take an aesthetic stance and immerse themselves in the story world we were experiencing and feeling. I believed that if I continuously interrupted the story to explain historical or cultural details, I would instead focus students' attention on the information they were taking away from their reading, an efferent stance. In any kind of literature experience, it is vital for readers to experience and enjoy the story world. I don't want them to feel that they have to search for correct answers or facts. I do not want to do anything

that will take away from the emotional experience of reading a powerful book that touches their hearts as well as their minds.



Students had small literature logs to respond in after each read aloud. They responded through writing their thoughts and questions or sketching for five minutes and then we discussed the book as a class. At the beginning of the book their responses were narrow and surface-level. In their logs, I saw entries saying that “Nory has a friend named Shawn,” or “Nory’s dad went fishing.” Students were just skimming the surface of the book to note information but not trying to understand the characters and their situations. They were bored by the idea of this young girl starving in Ireland because they didn’t believe that it could happen or thought it was a problem that could be easily solved. One student asked, “Why didn’t the U.S. go help them?” Students saw the U.S. as having a mission to go into other countries and save them from their problems. They wanted to know why no one went to the aid of the Irish and why England would continue to

charge rent to starving people and throw them out of their homes. It seemed strange to them and these tensions led them to become a little more engaged in the book.

I didn't have to work at interesting students in the language of the characters. They began using *fuafar* in reference to anything they felt was disgusting. They loved calling dogs *madrás*. The most intriguing part of the language for them was the reference to *sidhe*, creatures from another world who cause trouble. They talked about how people carried salt to protect themselves and how the horrible *sidhe* liked to steal boys. They were particularly fascinated that Nory's little brother, Patch, wore a gown rather than pants to fool the *sidhe* into thinking he was a girl because he would be stolen if they saw he was a boy. They were fascinated by these spirits and the idea that the night belonged to them so that children had to be careful when they left the house after dark. They used vocabulary from the book in their writing and class discussions. The author does a great job of including Irish words that are easy for students to remember and process in their talk. She doesn't overwhelm readers with lots of terms that would cloud their understanding but has carefully selected key terms that give a flavor of the language and culture.

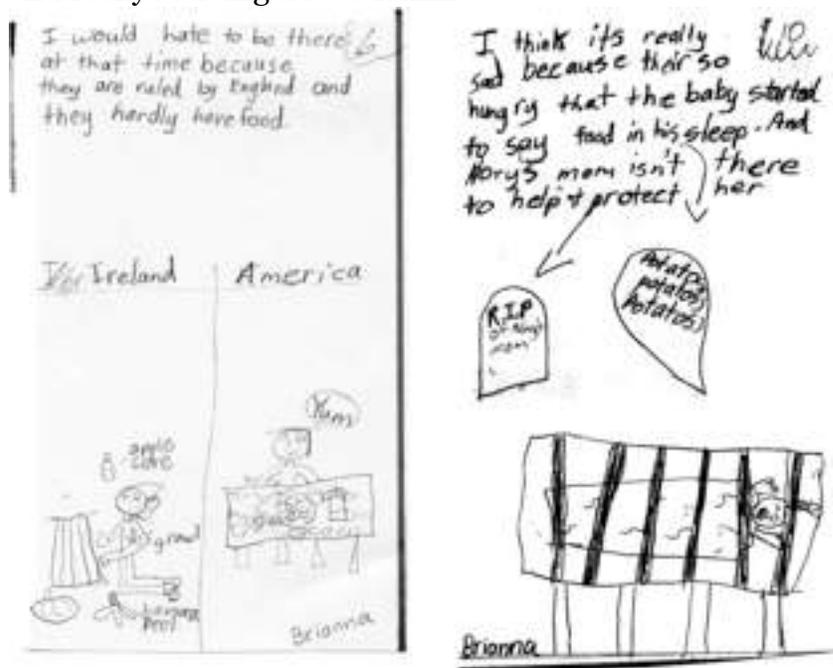
One strategy that helped students understand the context of the book was to show them maps of Ireland. Most of the students had heard of Ireland but they didn't know anything about it. They had no idea where it was located or what surrounded it. The book said that Nory's family and other Irish people were trying to get to the port of Galway to board ships to other countries. We found Galway on a map and that helped them realize that the book was set in a real place with real issues and real people. If Galway was a real place, then people like Nory must have existed.

I found it was important to look at maps and other reference books at a separate time from our read aloud and discussion of [\*Nory Ryan's Song\*](#). The time we spent reading and discussing Nory was used only for reading and discussing the book, not for lessons about Ireland. I scheduled other times throughout the day to look at maps and discuss books on Ireland to learn more about the place where Nory lived so that they would have more background knowledge on the place and time. I didn't want students to get caught up in the details of Ireland when we were discussing Nory's life.

Another strategy that helped students better understand the time period was to find books dealing with the potato famine. It seemed difficult for my class to understand the severity of the potato famine from 1845-1850. I checked out books on Ireland and the potato famine that they could browse and they read about and saw the destruction caused by the rotting potatoes. They wanted to learn more about this time and they were eager to find more information, so much so that they started doing their own internet research. Whereas they initially saw potatoes as an occasional food to eat, they came to realize that the potato was a staple for the Irish, not only as food but as future income. Potatoes

were the livelihood for the Irish farmers. In *Black Potatoes* (Bartoletti, 2001), the students learned the details of this famine and it became real to them. The fact that one million people died due to starvation and disease over a five-year famine came to mean something. The book had illustrations that helped students picture the time when Nory lived. This made her more relatable to the students, despite her “living” over 150 years ago. The history came alive as a real time with real consequences due to the loss of potatoes. Their initial thoughts were, “Okay, the potatoes are rotten so go to the store.” After doing research on the 1840s in Ireland, they understood there were no stores or trees full of fruits, just potatoes. No potatoes meant no food.

I noticed the point when they understood the difference in the way that Nory lived by the entries in their literature logs. At first they saw famine as meaning a person was hungry with a growling stomach. As Brianna’s log shows, she thought they “hardly had food” and so their stomachs started growling. As she grew to understand what a famine really was, she drew tombstones for those who died and a young boy who is so hungry he moans for potatoes in his dreams. The research into the time period in Ireland and the illustrations in the books helped students understand the difference between having a stomach growl from hunger and really starving due to famine.



Looking back I realize that another strategy was taking time each day to discuss with students and talk through their understandings of the chapters we were reading. I could tell from their literature logs when they started connecting to the story. Each day during discussion they talked through the issues and questions they had about the book. They challenged each other and tried to answer their questions. They also expressed their frustrations with what they didn’t understand. This time to engage in talk became an important strategy for them to work out new understandings about the book. Their talk also helped me to know

what resources to seek out. The fact that they were stunned by the idea of a famine told me that I needed background materials on the potato famine. Listening to their talk helped me plan ways to help them better understand the book.

One student, Maya, who loves to read and usually connects to stories read aloud in class, struggled at the beginning of the book. She felt sad for Nory but didn't see the characters as real people dealing with the unimaginable issue of famine. Once we learned more about the famine through books and internet research, she came to see the characters in *Nory Ryan's Song* as real people. She felt hate for the English landlords who took away the animals and the homes of the Irish people. She was so angered by this situation that she fixated on the landlord during class discussions. We had to talk about that, just because the mean landlord was English, it didn't mean that all of the English were the same. There are people in America who make bad choices but that doesn't make all Americans bad. The book evoked powerful feelings in the children.



By the end of *Nory Ryan's Song*, the students were hooked! They felt as if she was a friend and cared about what was going to happen to her. I had become a fan of all three Nory books—*Nory Ryan's Song*, *Maggie's Door*, and *Water Street*—and made the decision to continue my literature time using *Maggie's Door* because I knew how invested the students had become in Nory. I felt that we had moved over the hurdle of finding something in the book to connect to because the students understood the famine and how life was for the Irish during this time period. The day that we finished Nory I watched and listened as they discussed her future and stressed about what would happen to her. When I told

them that they would continue to learn about Nory they begged me to start reading *Maggie's Door* immediately. I had never seen students so excited about a book! Who would have guessed how strongly they would identify with a young girl who lived so long ago! We sailed through *Maggie's Door*, reading at least one or two chapters a day, and they continued to fret about Nory making her way to the U.S. They fell in love with Nory and with Shawn and wanted the "American Dream" for them.

*Maggie's Door* ends with Nory and Shawn seeing the Statue of Liberty from their ship and reuniting with members of their families. The students knew that this couldn't be the end! I started *Water Street* the same day we finished discussing *Maggie's Door*. When I read the first chapter, the students were crushed that Nory was all grown up and that this book focused on her daughter. They were frustrated because they had grown to love Nory as a young girl whom they could identify with. They gave Bird, Nory's daughter, a chance simply because she was Nory's daughter, and did learn to love her as well.

The author of these books, Patricia Reilly Giff, did an amazing job of creating characters who students could come to know and love and want to identify with, despite the differences in their lives and situations. [\*Nory Ryan's Song\*](#) became the standard for my students in judging other books. They constantly compared other characters and books to [\*Nory Ryan's Song\*](#) and worked at understanding historical events in other countries by connecting those events to Nory. This book was definitely our "touchstone" book for the year.

I also learned more about how to get my students to invest in a book that is set in a different time period and cultural and geographical context.

Pick a book with a strong character to whom students can relate.

Provide background information using maps, books, or internet research.

Don't interrupt the reading of the book to give informational lessons.

Let them discuss! They can learn so much from each other through talk.

Reading through all three books was a tremendous investment of time, but the depth of what students came to understand about Irish culture and their strong sense of commitment and connection to Nory made that time well worthwhile. They continued reading and rereading these three books, checking them out of the library for their personal enjoyment. Nory had become a significant person in their lives with whom they had a relationship across time and place and Ireland was no longer a name on a map but the home of a friend.

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## **Extending Thinking: Literature Response through Art**

by Amy D. Edwards, Fifth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 1 of 3

As a teacher, I am always looking for new ways to encourage my fifth graders to extend their thinking and to further explore what they have learned. It is important to me that they be responsible for their learning and not dependent on me to challenge their thinking. Response to literature can effectively do this through the arts, including visual art, music, drama, and language. Responding through art allows students to think symbolically about what they have read by representing their thinking in a whole new sign system (Peirce, 1966). By moving from language to art, music, or drama, they create new connections and meanings, open new lines of communication, and are encouraged to question their understandings (Siegel, 1995).

One way to facilitate thinking is by having students do a Sketch to Stretch, which is a reader-based response where students are asked to create a quick graphic or symbolic drawing of what the story means to them or of connections that they see as significant related to the book. This sketch is not meant to be an illustration of the story but rather focuses on the meaning constructed in the reader's mind. Students then share their sketches in small groups letting others comment on the meanings they see in the sketch before sharing their own interpretations (Short & Harste, 1996).

I chose to introduce the Sketch to Stretch strategy for specific reasons. This strategy encourages students to deepen thoughts about ideas in literature and to respond in symbolic ways. I wanted my students to think about the themes and concepts in the books rather than simply tell their personal stories related to the book and to be able to think at a symbolic level. I chose the short chapter book *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997) as a read aloud because it has a variety of topics and broad concepts that students can respond to. Each chapter is told from a different character's point of view and is about a decaying neighborhood in which a garden brings all of the characters together despite many differences. The book is full of rich concepts reflecting difficult life issues, including immigration, poverty, love, death, teenage pregnancy, and caring for others. Each day a chapter was read aloud and students responded in their literature logs made especially for *Seedfolks*. This was done by stapling blank paper into a folded 9 x 12 piece of construction paper to serve as a cover.

After each chapter was read aloud, students recorded their connections and ideas. Students responded in any way they chose and responses varied greatly, sometimes in the form of a quick write and at other times a drawing or a web. If symbols were chosen to represent meaning, students were encouraged to show importance by making drawings larger if they represented something more important and smaller for things less significant. It was evident that some students gained more meaning through these multiple opportunities to respond visually. The drawings seemed to stimulate new thoughts and understandings.

In looking through the students' literature logs I noticed connections and ideas that may not have come up in a routine question and answer situation. Their responses were more thoughtful and seemed to build meaning in a new way for each student. Ashleigh responded to the chapter about Leona, a woman raised by Granny and her Goldenrod tea, who showed tremendous patience and perseverance in getting the city to clean up the "vacant" lot. She wanted to plant goldenrod tea but couldn't stand the trash dumped in the lot by others who thought they wouldn't care because they were such slobs down in that neighborhood. She knew others would want to plant too, but not until the lot had been cleared. She called everyone in city hall that she could think of, and when that didn't work, brought a bag of the vile smelling stuff to city hall to prove her point. It worked. Men in jumpsuits sent from the jail cleared the lot. Leona never gave up hope. Ashleigh's sketch shows the road to happiness. The message she wrote is that hope takes you great distances. The garden in the story gave many of the characters great hope.



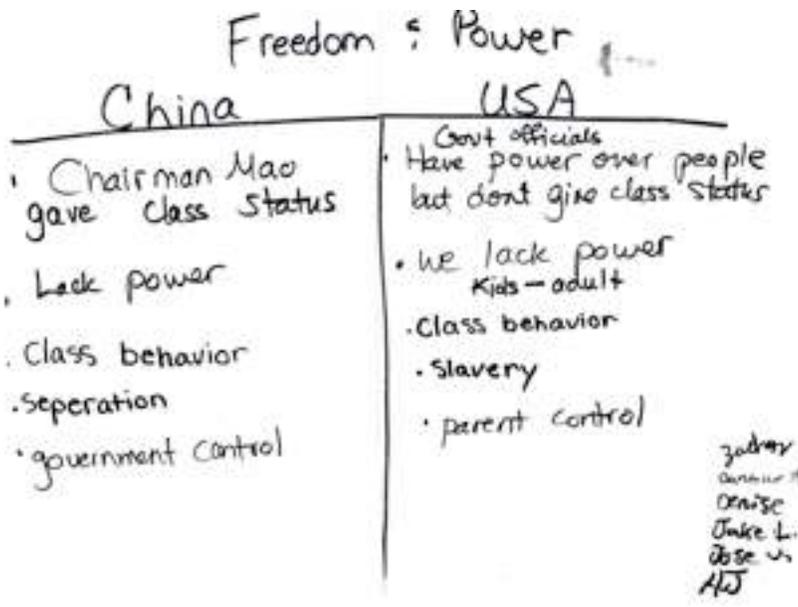
In the chapter about Virgil, a fifth-grade boy tells of his father's greed. Virgil's dad drove a cab and had cooked up a scheme to get rich by growing baby leaf lettuce and selling it to fancy restaurants. The two dig up a plot of land four times bigger than anyone else's and plant the tiny seeds only to have the crop fail due to hot weather. When Virgil's teacher asks why they have taken up so much land, Virgil's dad says it is for the extended family. Virgil knows he is lying. Ashleigh's sketch shows that greed and deceit were the reason the plants died.

Rachel created a sketch to reveal what she learned about Amir. Amir, an Indian who is uncomfortable living among so many strangers in America, believes the garden's greatest gift is the ability to see one's neighbors. His eggplant's unique

color allows his neighbors to break the rules about avoiding others and invites them to start a conversation. He talks about his immigrant neighbors and the stereotypes he had come to believe about each group. His conversations with his new friends dispel his false beliefs. Amir is a shrewd businessman, trained to give away nothing, to always make a profit. The garden encourages him to break that rule by sharing the harvest. He recalls an Italian woman who admired his eggplants and told him how to cook them. As they share stories about their families, he suddenly realizes that she is the same woman who accused him of giving her the wrong change at his store the year before. She called him “a dirty foreigner” even though she also has a strong accent. He reminds her of the incident, and she apologizes, saying, “Back then, I didn’t know it was you.” Rachel drew a picture of someone being offered a candy bar. The person declines, saying, “No, I hate candy!” Then they reconsider saying, “Was that a Kit Kat bar?? I love those!” She ends with the message, “Never judge a candy bar by its wrapper. Never judge a person by its culture.” She adds a picture on the next page showing a mathematical equation that says, “Plants =Life, Life=Love.” This student clearly had gotten deep meaning from this story and was able to show her understanding through words and symbols in a way that is both clever and surprising.

After completing the book we worked on artistic responses using watercolor. Students created a sketch to stretch that represented the central meaning of the story for them. As a whole group, students brainstormed messages from the book. Many students looked through their literature logs for reminders. Some of the meanings students came up with were:

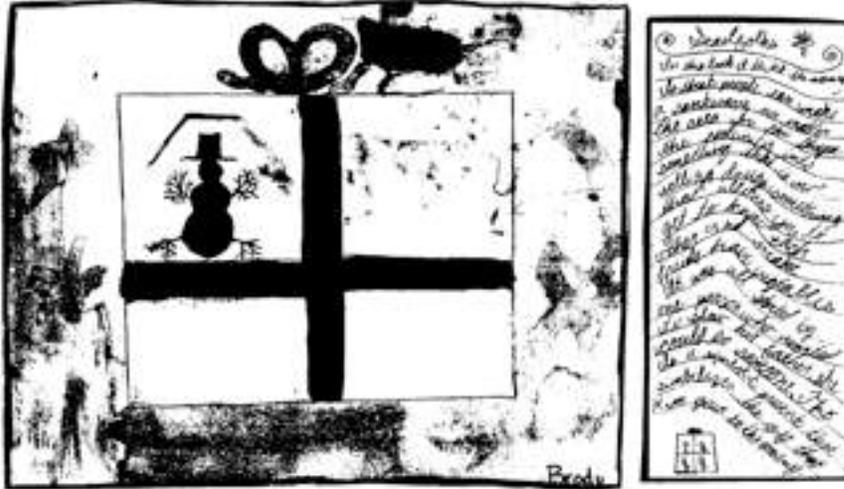
The garden is a symbolic friend.  
Love solves all.  
Caring for the Earth and its people is like a chain reaction.  
When you set a good example, good things happen.  
Planting is life, planting gives life.  
Working together despite our differences.



I showed students four ways to visually represent the meaning of *Seedfolks* in their watercolors. They could demonstrate a personal connection, create an abstract image, use a mathematical equation or develop a thematic depiction to demonstrate what the book meant to them. They were asked to accompany their artwork with a message or to choose a quote from the book to put alongside the artwork. We then shared these watercolor sketches in small groups using *Save the Last Word* (Short & Harste, 1996) before all pieces were displayed in the hallway as a gallery collection.

Matthews's watercolor shows the garden as a symbolic friend through a plot of ground shaped like a person with plants growing all over the body. The garden's hair is represented by asparagus; its ears are ears of corn, and a carrot serves as its nose. The "garden" is holding hands with two friends. His message says that the garden is like a symbolic friend who helps other friends with the troubles they have. His sketch is bright and beautiful and conveys Matthew's thoughts in a way that expressed his understanding.

Brody beautifully painted a picture of a wrapped gift or present. He saw the meaning of *Seedfolks* as a symbolic present that the first character, Kim, who planted the six seeds, gave to the community. Kim planted the seeds in memory of her father, who was a farmer. Brody says in his message that the garden allowed people to shape the community into something positive and not as a place for selling drugs or for crime. The garden allowed the neighbors to get to know each other, make friends, and share their vegetables. He calls the garden a sanctuary for the residents to shape into something good. Creating this sketch enabled Brody to understand more fully the meaning of the text. He was able to create meaning through art that may not have been captured through language.



Kaitlynn's watercolor shows colorful flowers surrounding a red flower in the shape of a heart. The flowers are all different shapes and sizes representing different types of people in the world. The green wash of color surrounding the flowers represents life. She says the flowers are all unique, a lot like people. The heart shaped flower in the middle represents "Love", because love can do a lot for the world. This illustration goes beyond a literal understanding of the text. Kaitlynn used transmediation (Eco, 1976) to recast her understanding of the text by moving from the understanding she made in one sign system and transferring it into another, in this case from language to art.



My picture shows many flowers. All flowers are different, like people. Yet they were all planted in the same garden, like all people live on Earth. The green represents not only grass, but life. All the flowers are unique, just like people. Butterflies are also unique. Each with a special design. The flower towards the middle is shaped like a heart because a little love can do a lot for the world.

When the gallery was complete, students took a gallery walk to see the work of their classmates. We sat in the hallway to get a chance to explore and let students share their thoughts with each other. It was the best culminating activity I had ever had a chance to experience with my students. Their watercolors were a great way to sum up the learning that occurred. Doing the gallery walk was very special and made the students feel like real artists. The students were proud of their work and felt valued, knowing that everyone appreciated their unique perspective. There were no right or wrong responses.

Response to literature starts with negotiation and conversation that leads to dialogue. Students need to engage in discussion with others to gain meaning through building on others' ideas and interpretations. Talking about the text facilitates meaning making with the goal of creating and critiquing their understandings, not with coming up with the same interpretations (Short & Kauffman, 2004). Art as a response supports readers in showing what they know

in another sign system and in a way that others may not have considered. Thinking through different sign systems to make and share meaning is an important facet of literature response and part of what makes us uniquely human.

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## **Moving from topics to Conceptual Thinking through Literature Discussion: *The Other Side***

by Amy D. Edwards, Fifth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 2 of 3

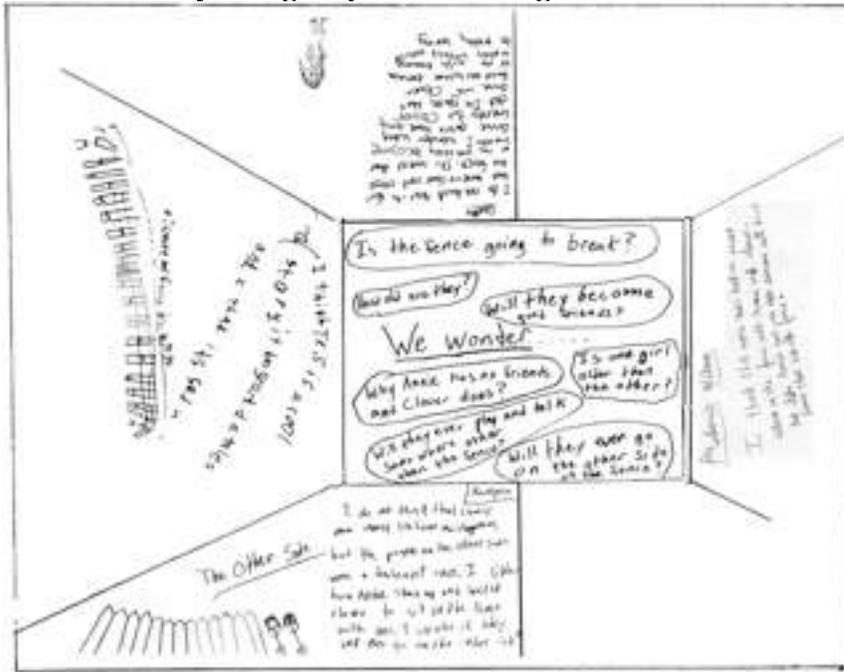
Teachers at our school work collaboratively with our Instructional Coach in a setting that we call the Learning Lab. Classes come to the lab once a week for a lesson and then work on connected areas of study in their regular classrooms. Our focus this year has been literature discussion and facilitating students' thinking more deeply around conceptual issues rather than only discussing topics. Concepts enable us to think abstractly and to develop interpretations that lead to inquiries around issues instead just naming topics or ideas in texts (Santman, 2005).

In years past, I engaged my fifth grade students in book clubs that were teacher led, accompanied by a list of questions generated by me for students to answer. These book clubs encouraged surface-level thinking and getting the right answer. Only occasionally did students go deeper in their discussions to address issues in the text. I wanted to try discussions that were more student led and with a format that would encourage personal connections and conceptual thinking rather than talk about topics. This became my mission for the school year. Literature circles provide ways for students to employ critical thinking while reflecting, discussing, and responding to books. Noe and Johnson (1999) describe literature circles as guided by students, in small groups, responding in depth to what they have read. The heart of this approach is collaboration.

In an effort to encourage students to connect their thinking to difficult social issues in literature, we chose to look at the picture book *The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson (2001), in lab. Our goal was to see the kinds of personal connections children would make and the questions and wonderings they would form, as well as how long kids could talk about one idea. I had no idea what impact this book would make on my students. It ended up being a touchstone book for many discussions throughout the year.

After listening to the story, students were asked to respond using quick writes, 3-4 minutes of uninterrupted writing and sketching, on consensus boards in order to support their thinking about their responses to the story. The quick writes were to help students reflect on individual connections and thinking about the book. They also allowed all of the students' responses to be available on the table. There are always a few students who, for whatever reason, don't respond out loud. They are either too shy or can't push into the conversation successfully. With the quick writes on the consensus board, everyone's thinking and response was on the table for all to see.

Consensus boards are created on large sheets of paper with a large square or circle in the middle and four sections surrounding it. The circle contains the title of the book or a key theme from the book. In the individual sections, each person writes or sketches personal connections to that theme or book. The group shares these individually and then comes to consensus on the tensions, issues or big ideas they want to explore further. These tensions are written in the middle of the board. In this case, small groups were asked to decide what they still wondered about the story as a group after sharing their connections.



In small groups students shared the ideas they had recorded in the quick writes. As I moved from group to group some of the questions being discussed were:

- Why the girl crossed the fence when her mom told her not to?
- The differences in how the mothers responded.
- Why weren't they supposed to cross the fence?
- Why did they make the "stupid" fence in the first place?
- Why didn't the mother scold the girls for sitting together?

These comments clearly represented a lack of understanding about race relations and historical attitudes and laws about segregation. Students seemed truly perplexed as to why the fence was there and why the girls were told not to cross it. Their lack of awareness about racial issues was probably a reflection of the lack of diversity in my classroom with 3/4ths of my students coming from white backgrounds and the rest from Latino, Filipino, Russian, and biracial families. After students came to consensus on what they were still wondering, they recorded these in the center of the consensus board. They were then asked to come to the Story Floor and each group shared with the class. The wonderings were recorded onto a web.

As a whole group they wondered:

When did the story take place?  
Is the story true? Did it really happen?  
Why didn't they just get rid of the fence?  
How does a fence with big holes in it separate people?  
Why didn't Annie have friends?  
Why wasn't it safe to cross the fence?  
Why did the whites and blacks start fighting?  
Did they hate each other?

We wanted to see if students' questions about this book would take their conversations deeper. We decided to continue with *The Other Side* for the next discussion in order for students to be able to choose a topic from their web to discuss in depth.

In the lab the following week, our focus was to engage students in sustained talk in small groups around a specific question or tension. A copy of the Wonder Web from the previous week was placed on each table. In small groups students were asked to come to consensus on which question they were most interested in exploring. They were then asked to come to the whole group to think about that question and to look for ideas that would help the discussion as the story was again read aloud to them.

## Wonder Web



After the re-reading, students returned to their small groups to do a quick write and then turn and talk. They were then invited back to the Story Floor to discuss what of significance came up in their discussions. Although each group was supposed to share, students became involved in an engaged discussion around their new understandings, connections, and tensions. Afterwards, two girls complained that not all of the groups got to share, but what took place was a real literature discussion. Students made connections, built on each other's comments, and deepened their understanding of the big issues in the book. In the whole group discussion, Brody's group noticed that the fence really wouldn't hold anybody. Brody thought the fence was "symbolic," instead of physically stopping them. The fence pictured in the text was a wooden rail fence. Brody thought that the fence was meant to define divisions of property, stating, "For example: This is our side, this is yours." He mentioned that it wouldn't take much to knock down the fence, indicating that if you really didn't want it there it could be removed easily.

Sydney said, “Yes, but if you did cross over the fence you would have to ‘pay the price.’” She meant that there would be a consequence. Conner felt that whites could go over but not blacks without a consequence. He believed that it was blacks who were being discriminated against. Andrew said that this was not fair. There was a bit of outrage in his voice—fairness is very important to fifth graders. Conner wondered who owned the fence. Someone else suggested that maybe the government owned it. Evan said that maybe someone else owns the fence and made the rule that you can’t go on the other side. Maddy argued that they really didn’t want to keep people out and that they couldn’t stop them. The fence didn’t look that imposing to her.

In the text, the mother tells Clover that it isn’t safe to cross the fence. Students wondered why it wasn’t safe. The topic of forced integration came up but children didn’t use those words. Instead they referred to a time when children were escorted to school because some whites hurt blacks, referring to Ruby Bridges and her safety in attending an all white school. Most had seen the movie about this event at school the previous year. This connection led students to think that this book was set in the 1950’s during struggles around desegregation and civil rights.

One student wondered why there were no boys or fathers mentioned in the story. The students thought that maybe Clover’s father could have worked long hours. Another student asked, “Was he a slave?” Clearly students were confused about the chronology of African American history. Based on this comment, we decided to engage students in working on a timeline associated with African American history.

Racism was brought up as one student commented on the difference in the affluence of the two main characters and the opportunities available to them because of their skin color. They noticed the way the girls were dressed and the differences in their houses. As the students looked closely at the book for clues, they noted that the girls were wearing dresses to play in and thought this signaled a different time period. It was really hard for me not to jump in and make corrections in their thinking, but I tried to stay out of the conversation so they could talk this through on their own.

The students moved from these comments about race and historical context back to the idea that the fence was meant as a symbol or warning. They said that literal fences have barbed wire at the top, like for jails and at the border. This fence had big holes in it so it really couldn’t keep people out. They were now sure that the fence was a symbol.

Several students raised the question about why this particular fence had been built and whom it was trying to separate. They made a connection to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights conflict between blacks and whites. Several children thought that the fence was separating blacks and whites in that community to keep the conflict to a minimum. They believed that this fence was

not “real” because it didn’t have barbed wire, but was meant to be symbolic or used as a warning. One student argued that if the people who made the fence had really not wanted to have anyone cross over, they would have made the fence electric. Instead this fence was easy to cross, but served as a warning that you would have to pay the price if you went to the other side.

Some of the students thought that white people put up the fence, and wondered why white people and black people fought in the first place. Andrew noted that the Irish didn’t fight with the Americans when they arrived in the U.S., saying, “Why did the blacks and whites fight? We were peaceful with the Irish.” Cassidy offered that maybe it was because we knew something bad had happened in their country, so we said they could come here. Natali said that some people just came here and said when they arrived, “I’m here, whether you like it or not.” She obviously felt they had the right to be in the U.S.

Christian said that Annie crossing the fence was like people crossing the ocean. “Whites brought blacks here as slaves, and saw them as ill, and this added on to a bigger fight,” he commented. “They weren’t ill but whites made up that they were because they didn’t like blacks.” I could tell that he was talking to work through his ideas. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but was struggling to work out his understandings as he talked.

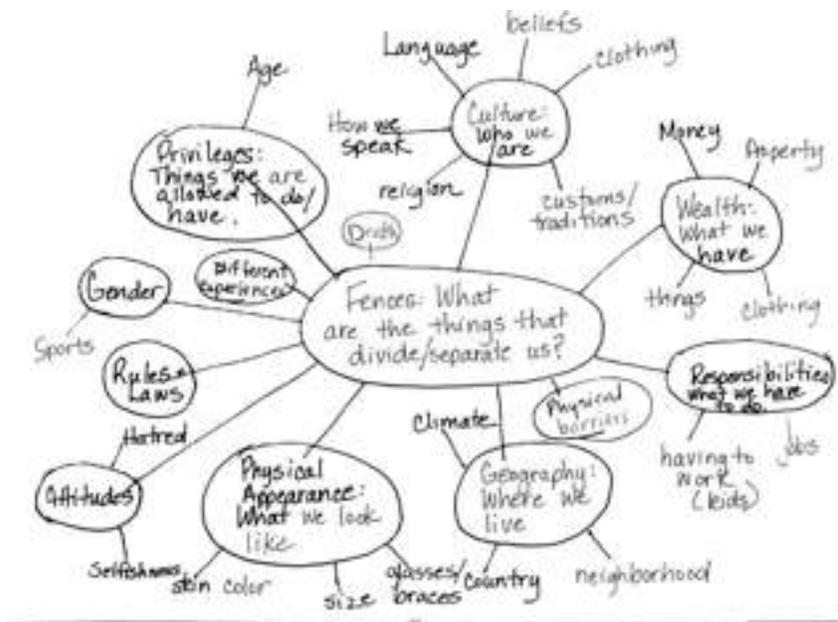
Conner commented that the girls in the story could stop the fighting because Annie and Clover didn’t know about the past fights. Christian continued with his thinking out loud by saying that whites had no respect for slaves and it got worse when slaves were free. He thought that whites still treated blacks as slaves. Whites did not want them to have friendships or relationships with others. Conner wondered why Clover’s mom didn’t tell her why there was a problem and connect her to the broader world. He also wondered if the girls would be different from their moms when they grew up and tell their kids to become friends. Ashleigh pointed out that the fence seemed longer because it made you want to go to the other side, but you weren’t supposed to. She made the analogy of knowing we can leave our room but if we were told we couldn’t, then we would see our room as small. She believed that the fence represented freedom through being able to cross the fence. “The fence was all about freedom. The fence was a trap because they couldn’t go over it – they felt trapped there. It separated them.” Although we had planned for this whole group discussion to be a short sharing from each small group about their focused question, the students instead engaged in dialogue with each other about issues that were continuing to trouble them. Students asked and answered questions, made connections to the real world, and built on each other’s comments. Sometimes students were confused as to the facts about race relations and historical contexts but the one overriding big idea that kept coming up was the fence as a symbol for something that divides us. The emergence of this symbolic theme was exciting to me as a teacher. The kids were thinking deeply and in symbolic ways using figurative language to express what they were thinking. It was exciting to see this happening before our eyes and it was all the more important to us as a team to know that the kids were

constructing their own meaning, not being “spoon fed” standards from an adopted curriculum.

In my classroom at that time, we were reading novels in literature circles with a focus on international children’s literature. We were reading *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), *Nory Ryan’s Song* (Giff, 2000), *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (Lord, 1984), and *A Single Shard* (Park, 2001). The common thread in these books is a main character who faces a challenge or something that separates them from something they want. The students were at the point of discussing these books in their small groups and so I moved from group to group checking on the progress of each discussion. As I listened to the group discussing *Esperanza Rising*, Evan asked, “I wonder if there are any fences in this part of the story?” I stopped dead in my tracks and asked him to repeat the question so that everyone in the class could hear. He said it again and everyone immediately knew what he meant. They had learned from our discussions in the lab that a “fence” was a symbol for something that divides us. Students had found a frame to use in connecting texts. This was a conceptual leap I had never seen students make as a group. I was so excited that I couldn’t wait to tell our instructional coach and the rest of the team.

Each literature circle group went on to share the “fence” in their particular novel. These fences were shared with the class and used to create a web of the different ways in which people are separated. Conner noted, “If there’s a fence in each story, there must be a ‘bridge’ too.” I could not have been more pleased. They were stretching their thinking in new ways to make meaning between texts. This was a teacher’s dream. The kids were learning to think beyond topics (“these books are all about dogs”) and reaching to complex links between texts through connections to concepts and larger social issues.

Since the concept of fences had become such a significant frame for the students in thinking about what divides or separates people, we created a class web to pull together our ideas and understandings. This web showed me that their connections had gone beyond the book, *The Other Side*, in conceptually understanding fences as a broad frame for thinking about life and other texts. Their web represented far more complex ideas and served as a tool and point of reference for further explorations in many other projects we did later in the year.



During the rest of that school year, my students referred to “fences” as things that divide and “bridges” as things that bring people together. The *Other Side* provided the defining moment in our literature circles and changed the manner in which the students looked at literature for the rest of the year. This was what I was hoping to accomplish with transitioning from book club to literature circles. These groups were student-centered, focused on exploring the concepts that lived behind the words, not just identifying the topics within them.

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## **A Rocky Road from Disaster to Dialogue and Back Again: Literature Discussion Over Time**

by Amy D. Edwards, Fifth Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 3 of 3

Teachers at our school work collaboratively with our Instructional Coach, Lisa Thomas, in a setting we call the Learning Lab. Classes come to the lab once a week for a lesson and then work on connected areas of study while in their regular classrooms. Kathy Short, a university researcher, participated in the lab one day a week and was part of the interactions with my class.

Our focus this year in the lab has been literature discussion, with our particular goal to teach students how to engage in meaning-centered thoughtful talk about their reading and how to move their discussions between conversation and dialogue. Conversation involves sharing their initial responses and connections and so the talk goes in many directions and is often tentative without careful listening to each other. We know that conversations are an essential part of a discussion because students need to share this wide range of connections to find issues that are tensions that they want to pursue in dialogue. Dialogue requires that students have a focus that they are inquiring about together and that they listen to each other's ideas and give consideration to those thoughts in their own comments (Short & Harste, 1996). As hard as we try, sometimes teachers struggle to achieve these goals even with their best efforts and support from other professionals.

As a classroom teacher I wanted to move away from teacher-led discussions where students passively waited for my questions. These discussions almost always resulted in conversations that did not go deeply enough or focused on the story elements and not the larger conceptual issues in the text. Conceptual issues enable us to think abstractly and to develop interpretations (Santman, 2005) taking conversations to a deeper level, thus shifting it into dialogue. But first students had to learn how to talk about books in a format that differed from the ones they were used to, such as raising their hands to speak. Teaching, engaging in talk, and debriefing the process of discussion were necessary for this goal to be accomplished (Noe & Johnson, 1999). Literature discussions depend on students' willingness to talk about the connections and tensions that really matter in their lives and so it was also important to set up a classroom where students felt safe to do so.

### **A Rough Start**

Our first literature circle in August was not a discussion. It was a disaster. In the lab they listened to a story about a practical joke that we thought kids would enjoy and easily make connections to. The students struggled to get started. They began sharing personal stories right away but were talking on top of each other with side conversations going on around the room. It was as if we had never engaged in a literature discussion in our classroom at all. I think that the

students' sense of place and expected behavior was confused between the lab and our classroom.

We reminded them that this was a whole group discussion, not small groups as they had been doing in the classroom. They started again, but the side talk and talking on top of each other continued. Finally one student spoke, saying loudly that she thought they were supposed to be working as a group. Conner tried to facilitate by asking who wanted to go next as they had been coached in class for small group settings. Students were trying to shush each other and suggesting that they take turns.

It was sad and embarrassing that they had to resort to formal procedures in an attempt to have a discussion. They seemed to have learned that procedure matters more than what others were saying. I could see that my firm procedures in the classroom would have to be set aside when it came to literature circles. Maddy suggested that they take turns and go in ABC order by their names, which they did, using student numbers to determine order of sharing. Students' comments were limited to retelling the story or memories but they made no connections to each other's comments. Some students choose to not comment at all. Others forgot what they were going to say by the time it was their turn. Some students just enjoyed the limelight and seemed to be performing for others. When they got through the whole order students began raising their hands to talk. Brody suggested they use the "popcorn" strategy we use in our classroom to choose a new reader where the person who shares chooses the next person to talk from among those who have their hands raised. Students complained that some people had had several turns already. This was not a discussion. Students were having a very controlled conversation that wasn't even close to becoming a dialogue.

In debriefing with students, it became apparent that they thought that having a conversation with a large group was difficult. They agreed that going in alphabetical order was too hard. Students were frustrated because some people shared three times and others didn't get to share at all. Lisa asked them what they do at lunch and how they know when to talk. Ashleigh responded that they just talk when there's room, "The conversations are all around and you just jump in." The students felt that it was easier when there were fewer people trying to talk with each other. Some students said that at lunch they all talk at the same time like they did today. We asked the kids to research how people talk in different locations and situations before our next meeting.

The next time we met in the lab students listened to *The Recess Queen* (O'Neill, 2002). As a whole group they started right in with number order again in their sharing. There was lots of talk about the book and about the theme of bullies. There were some connections but many important ideas were just passed by when others made comments that were unrelated as they took turns sharing. When Preston said that you could change people no matter how mean they are, no one picked up on his idea. Each student just made a comment and moved on

to the next person's turn to comment. They seemed to view literature circles as everyone getting a turn to talk but without any responsibility to build from each other's ideas or to collaboratively think with each other.



After giving them a chance to share, Lisa started webbing their ideas about the book and that's when the discussion became more natural. With some guidance, students shared their stories and connections as Lisa drew out the big ideas behind those stories. This was done to encourage students to dig deeper in order to move their discussions from conversation to dialogue. We knew that they would need to find a larger issue that they could focus on together for the shift to occur and move them beyond sharing stories to discussing issues. This was a start. Now we just needed to lose the number order this class felt compelled to use to get their discussion started.

#### Developing Tools for Our Journey

In our classroom, I reviewed the discussion methods from *Getting Started with Literature Circles* (Noe & Johnson, 1999) that had been introduced in August. I had focused on teaching students how to talk with others about books in ways that invited their participation around increasing their understanding of the book. Our class brainstormed ideas on guidelines for conducting a good discussion. Students came up with ones similar to those proposed in the book. This time I wrote the guidelines on poster paper to be hung in the classroom. They included:

- Get started in one minute after moving to your discussion space.
- Be ready to discuss when you come to the group.

No reading ahead.  
Listen to one another.  
Share your ideas.

Students used these guidelines throughout the week in our small group literature circles in the classroom. I also introduced some response tools (Noe & Johnson, 1999) to help keep a discussion going. These included:

Using sticky notes to mark important parts of the story.  
Using bookmarks that were large enough to record pages of interest.  
Using literature logs to record wonderings, golden words, and personal connections.

The following week in the lab, the students listened to *Be Good to Eddie Lee* (Fleming, 1993), about a boy with Downs Syndrome who is being teased. Lisa explained that they were going to work on connecting their responses to big ideas and would use quick writes and small group literature circles so that it would be easier to have a conversation about the book. The quick writes helped students get ready to share, cemented their thinking and gave them something to build on as others shared. The small groups seemed to be more beneficial, because these kids often controlled or monopolized conversation.

The first group that I observed talked almost exclusively about the frog eggs in the story. One child said he didn't like when the other kid said something mean to Eddie Lee and that it was a nice story. That comment went unacknowledged. The three remaining boys at the table continued their talk about frog eggs.

Another group wondered why Jim Bob didn't hang out with other kids. They noticed that he was mean to Eddie Lee. One student made a silly comment about naming a kid Jim Bob. This was the kind of comment that gets conversation off track, but luckily the others stayed focused on why the children were mean to Eddie Lee. Taylor wondered, "What's so different about him?" to which Sydney replied, "Being different is sometimes fun."

I noticed that kids were using the strategies we learned in class to get the conversation going in their small groups, such as "Who wants to start?" Also when the conversation lagged I heard someone ask if there was anyone else with a comment. Things progressed nicely.

As the students moved the discussion to whole group many more ideas were shared and connections were made. Big ideas that were webbed included:

Not treating others badly because they are different.  
Standing up for each other.  
Not judging a book by its cover, or a person by their appearance.

Getting to know someone is sometimes different than what you expect.

Good for everyone to be different.

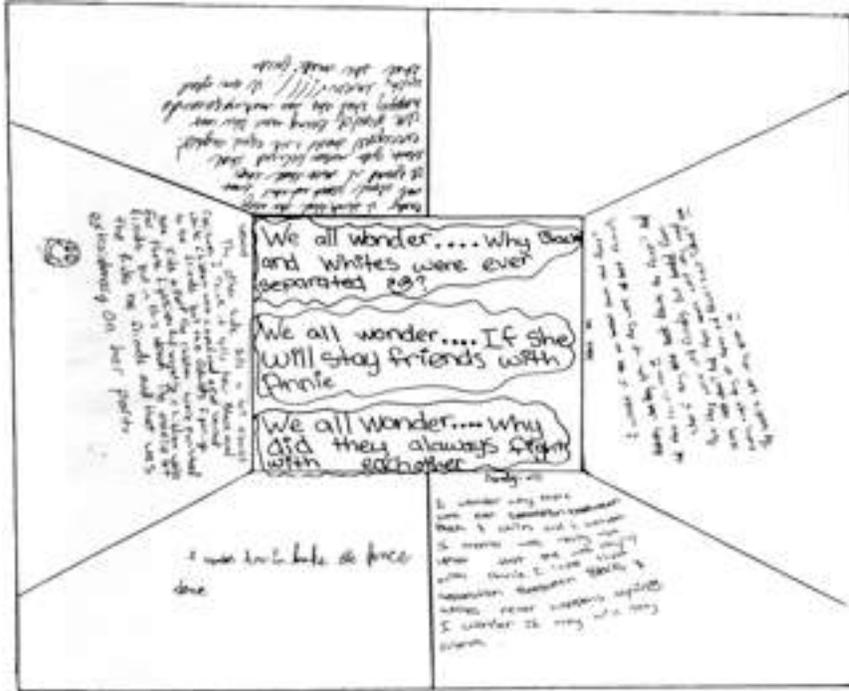
Do not take tadpoles away from their habitat.

Their ideas were still going in multiple directions and were sometimes off topic—a reflection of the fact that they were being typical fifth graders. At least they seemed to be more engaged in talking with each other rather than at each other. In debriefing, students were asked how their talk helped their thinking. They responded that students kept adding ideas and comments that they might not have thought of on their own. They recognized that when someone commented, it helped them think of something new. They felt that more people needed to get into the conversation because some people did not share at all.

They did a better job of turn taking without formal procedures; however, there were still some problems. They recognized that they went off topic at times. In comparing the small groups to the large group, students said that in the small group there were not as many ideas but it was easier to listen. In the large group, there were more ideas but it was harder to listen. Still, it was the end of September and they were making progress.

#### Crossing Fences and Bridges

A turning point in making real progress with literature discussion occurred as students responded to *The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson (2001) in the lab during October. This book is about the developing friendship between two girls, one black and one white, while sitting on a fence that racially separates their town. During the discussions of this book, students made the transition from conversation to dialogue, meaning that students were thinking more deeply and in conceptual ways about issues that were genuine inquiries, rather than just sharing comments on topics. This didn't happen overnight, but evolved slowly over October and into November. Our goal was to help students be able to sustain and focus their talk as they inquired around one issue rather than just naming topics or ideas in the texts. We supported students' thinking with quick writes, consensus boards, webbing their wonderings, and revisiting the text several times. We also arranged a wide reading opportunity for students to explore a text set of picture books dealing with black/white relationships throughout American history because they had some confusion about this history to sort out. The consensus boards were large sheets of paper with spaces where students could individually draw or write about their personal connections and a large center circle where they could write their continuing tensions or questions after sharing their connections.



During their discussion of *The Other Side*, the class concluded that the fence was a symbol of what separates people. In the following weeks students used the term “fence” while discussing other texts that they thought included divisions between people. This was an important shift in thinking for my class. They were so interested in this concept that we put together a text set of picture books with all types of symbolic “fences” that students had a chance to read and discuss to broaden their conception of the issues that divide people. This concept of a symbolic fence gave the students a framework for their thinking and showed that their connections reached way beyond the book itself. This was definitely progress.

Throughout the year in our classroom there were four literature circle groups with each group reading a different book related to our class focus. The structure for discussion was for all of the groups to meet at the same time while I visited each group as an observer and facilitator. I would journal about what the students were talking about and how the discussions were going as I visited each group. Students had to agree on the number of pages to read each week, could not read ahead, and were to develop a response tool to support their discussion, such as sticky notes, bookmarks, or logs. Occasionally I set up a tape recorder so that I could later listen to whole conversations. I usually started the session with a reminder of the discussion guidelines and ended with a debriefing session. By the end of November, the literature circles in the classroom were running smoothly with a few interruptions from students who had a hard time focusing on the task at hand. We read books that integrated the social studies curriculum with the reading curriculum, and so our books were novels about the Revolutionary War in the U.S. The students were adept at keeping the discussion going and making connections. At times it was like watching adults discuss in a

literary book club. At other times, it was a challenge to keep certain kids from playing with the tape recorder. Overall, these groups were running smoothly and the discussion strategies that they were displaying in class were carrying over into the discussions in the lab. Students were taking turns in a natural way, building on each other's ideas, and finding symbolic meanings that transcended texts. In late November our team decided to do a read aloud using *Seedfolks*, a short chapter book by Paul Fleishman (1997). We chose this book because it had a variety of significant social issues, including love, loss, death, sickness, learning to speak English, immigration, teen pregnancy, friendship, and caring for others. Each chapter is told from a different character's point of view about their work in an urban garden in a crumbling neighborhood. The garden brings all of the characters together despite differences. Each day in my classroom, I read aloud a chapter and students responded in their literature logs using sketch to stretch, webs, or quick writes.

The first discussion was held in the lab and went well considering that this was a new book and they had only heard the first chapter. This chapter focused on Kim, a young girl who misses her father, who died before she was born. Kim reveals that her dad had been a farmer and she decides to plant six lima beans that the family had saved to connect to him in some way. The students had a lot to say and were curious about how Kim's father died. Interestingly, since Kim was from Vietnam, they thought her father might have been killed in the war. They had a hard time with the chronology of historical events, but they were trying. They immediately identified the "fence" in this chapter as death. They saw the connection between planting and Kim's father, and kept trying to make sense of the six seeds and to attach significance to the number six.

In December, discussions continued as we tried to avoid the fact that the holidays and winter break were approaching. The students were on a roll and I was determined not to let anything interfere with the progress they were making. One particular discussion that stood out was about the chapter on Maricela, a pregnant sixteen-year-old girl who did not want her baby. They identified with Maricela wanting to have fun but could not believe that she wanted her baby to die. I was concerned about discussing the issues in this chapter as this topic was not one kids were used to addressing in a school setting. I was amazed at how remarkably mature ten- and eleven-year-old kids could be when you least expect it. I got a sense that they were surprised we were talking about such issues in school, but they took the challenge head-on and their tension about Mariciela's attitude toward her baby moved them into dialogue.

Conner said that he got a true sense of how Maricela was feeling right from the start when she introduced herself and said, "Just shoot me." He noted, "She thinks her life is over." Other comments flowed as students shared their thoughts and connections. Taylor shared that her parents told her she would ruin her life if she had a baby before she was 25. Brody thought that Maricela's parents must be mad at her. Natali talked about high schools where girls could put their babies in the day care center so they could finish school, but wondered how she would go

to college with a baby. Christopher thought that maybe she would put the baby up for adoption. Clearly these were issues that had been discussed at home with their parents.

Maricela worked in the garden as part of a teen motherhood program. At first she was uninterested in the garden but soon realized the connection between nurturing the plants and keeping her baby. Evan recognized that learning to care about plants made her want the baby more. Ashleigh shared that at first Maricela thought that the baby would ruin everything, then later after working in the garden, realized that her situation wasn't so bad after all. Esperanza noticed that Maricela was upset and angry about the baby, but that growing the plants gave Maricela faith to have her baby and made her think about playing with it and watching it grow up.

As the students talked about the change in Marciela's attitude, they commented on the connection that the garden had on the other characters as well. Conner noted that so far everyone in the story was connected by the garden, saying "The garden made everyone feel better and they all had problems to 'plant.' As they watched the plants grow, their problems seemed to be worked out somehow." Evan noticed that in each chapter there was someone who was angry about something. He suggested that the garden was an antidote for problems. Kaitlynn commented that all of the characters were of different nationalities and skin colors and that the garden brought them all together. Brody argued they were separated by their cultures. He said that maybe in the end they would realize they were not really different. Students recognized many "fences" in the story and Conner took this metaphor further when he said that the garden was a "bridge" for everyone, saying, "The garden connected them all because the plants made a bridge to help them solve the problems that they had in their lives."

#### A Curve in the Road

The discussion seemed to be developing well around these issues, but as students became more excited, things started to fall apart. As we were brainstorming ideas for responding to the book through art, students started to talk on top of one another. They had trouble waiting to push into the conversation and being heard was difficult as the kids struggled for control. Lisa stopped the group and discussed the problems they were having. They were talking on top of each other, not listening to each other, and they were thinking of what they were going to say when they did get a turn instead of connecting to others' ideas. We noticed that some students dropped out of the conversation and others kept pushing in to get their way. Kathy commented that it felt like a competition.

The kids discussed some possible solutions. For some reason, they suggested turn-taking procedures like they had done at the beginning of the year. Kathy indicated that they needed other ways to solve the problem because those procedures didn't fit the kind of discussion we were engaging in around books. We kept brainstorming and listed suggestions from both kids and adults in the room:

Leaving a silence before the next person talks.

Look at the person who is talking, so you know when they are done talking.

When someone has an idea and others have the same idea, connect the two by saying, “My comment connects to so and so’s.”

We moved to the art response and hoped that the breakdown in their ability to discuss meaningfully with each other would not be a problem in the future. It was frustrating to see this happen to students who obviously had many great ideas and wonderings and who had been engaging in productive discussions for months. I guess we had to admit that it was time for winter break.

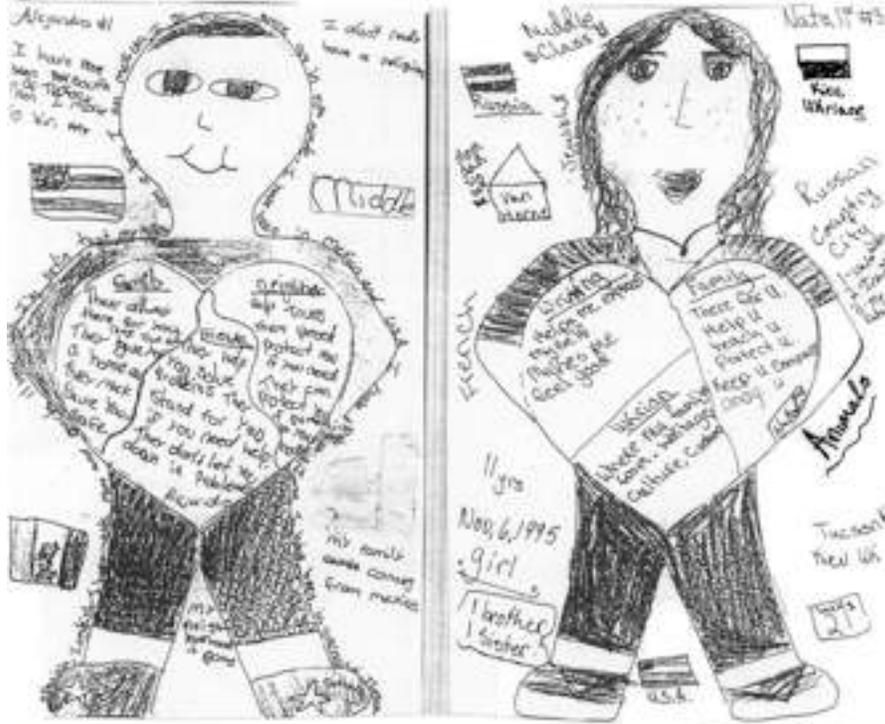
When we returned from winter break in January, I noticed that students were still having a hard time staying on task. I reviewed our guidelines for a good discussion and appropriate ways to respond and encouraged students to use response strategies that had been successful in the past, such as sketch to stretch and graffiti boards. The first semester the students loved using graffiti boards, a shared piece of paper to record pictures and words about their “in process” ideas and thoughts on a book. They also had earlier made powerful use of sketch to stretch, a reader-based response in which students create a graphic or symbolic drawing of what the story means to them. This is not meant to be an illustration of the story but rather the meaning they are constructing for the book. Students then share their sketches in small groups, letting others comment on the meanings they see in a particular sketch before the person who created the sketch shares the meaning he/she had been thinking about (Short & Harste, 1996). Even with these response strategies, their discussions remained loud and unfocused in our classroom.

#### A Change of Scenery

In January, we started a study of culture in the lab and engaged students in exploring their own cultural identities. We felt that for students to understand other cultures, they must first understand the significance of their own cultures in their lives. In January and February, discussion of literature was not a big part of this process and students completed other activities to work toward our goal of intercultural understanding.

Cultural X-Rays are pictorial representations of who we are culturally. Because culture is multifaceted, it is hard for students to understand the many characteristics of our cultural identities. This strategy demonstrates culture to students in a visual way so that students can build an understanding of culture as they are completing the X-Ray. Using a simple outline of a person’s body, showing a large heart in the center, students draw pictures or write words outside the body to tell what we are. We listed possible characteristics so that students had a sense of the nuances of some of the influences on culture, such as language, family structure, age, race, gender, nationality, education, country, state, city, area of the city, religion, social class, family heritage, and the kind of

neighborhood you live in. Inside the heart students show things they value and why they value those things using pictures or words. Things that are most significant are shown larger than others. Finally, students decorate the body outline to look like themselves, showing hair, facial features, and clothing. This strategy was helpful in teaching students about culture in a way they could construct for themselves. Once they had represented themselves, they used this strategy to explore characters in texts they were reading.



In the short discussions we did have, students had a tough time listening to each other. I wondered how a group who had it so together in making discussions meaningful earlier in the year could fall apart when they had support in both the classroom and the lab. They had made such strides that this downward spiral was disappointing.

#### Are We There Yet?

In March students started an inquiry study in the lab. Students researched an aspect of Korean culture in which they were interested, as well as participated in read alouds around a historical fiction novel, *When My Name Was Keoko*, by Linda Sue Park (2002). They had the opportunity to meet a young Korean woman to interview her about contemporary Korean culture and to learn a bit about Hangul, the written language. They also listened to her read Korean books so they could get an idea of how the language sounded. Later, she came back and answered questions about everyday life in Korea.

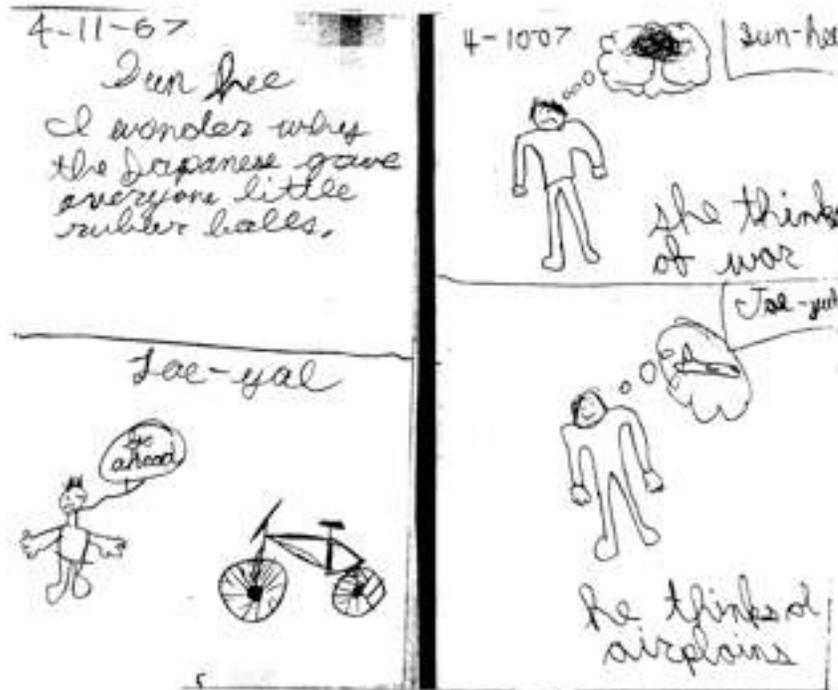
In the lab, students did wide reading of many picture books about Korea, both in English and Korean. After browsing these books students shared the things they noticed:

Korean children were entertained differently. Here we used a lot of violence for entertainment, there they used people and animals.

They had royalty.  
Illustrations in the books were different, more abstract and creative.  
They kneeled and ate at small tables.  
Clothing seemed mostly the same.  
Even if the books were written in Korean, they could tell what was happening.  
Family structures were similar.  
Children in Korea wanted to do the same work as their parents or grandparents.

In the discussion it was obvious that the kids were excited about the books. They talked about the bigger ideas and didn't just focus on the details; however, certain kids still dominated the talk and a lot of them pushed to get into the discussion by talking the loudest. It was competitive. As this happened others sat back, and so not as many students were involved in the discussion. As adults we wondered why this was happening. Part of the problem was likely due to the unpredictability and social dynamics of eleven-year-old kids about to be promoted to middle school. Another factor was that this group of students was particularly bright and perhaps not used to having to think with peers about issues because they always knew the answers on their own. We were asking them to unlearn habits they had developed in six years of school and to change their perspectives about each other's contributions to their thinking. We found ourselves starting each discussion in the lab reminding students to listen to each other and build from the comments of others.

The Korean inquiry was carried over to the classroom where students were gathering information to complete a collage demonstrating what they had learned from their individual research. At this time, students engaged in whole group discussion as I read aloud *Keoko*. The book contains two voices, a brother and sister, thus giving both the male and female perspective on the Japanese occupation of Korea right before WWII. The chapters alternated between Sun-hee and Tae-Yul and so we read two chapters a day to include both perspectives of the same events.



#### Still Off-Track

When we attempted a whole group literature circle in the lab about two of the chapters, the discussion was so disastrous that we had to stop and talk about the frustrations. Students came up with ways to solve the problem, including:

- Save the discussion for the classroom because they need more time to talk.

- Avoid using outside (loud) voices.

- Make sure you connect your thinking to that of others.

- Don't try to be funny to entertain and make others misbehave.

- Make time for everyone to speak.

- Pause before rushing in on someone else's talking.

- Share one person at a time.

- Don't talk loudly so others will back down.

- Pick someone to start.

- Write thoughts in class, and then discuss them in the lab.

Students knew how to conduct a discussion. It was so frustrating to see this happening. I strongly felt that part of the problem was that the students felt a time constraint in the lab. We also had some bright students with strong personalities who did, when pressed, identify themselves as tending to dominate the discussions. I later spoke privately with these students and asked them to be considerate of the others in sharing the talk time. I also believe that some students were trying to show off for Lisa and Kathy. We kept trying though, and eventually it paid off.

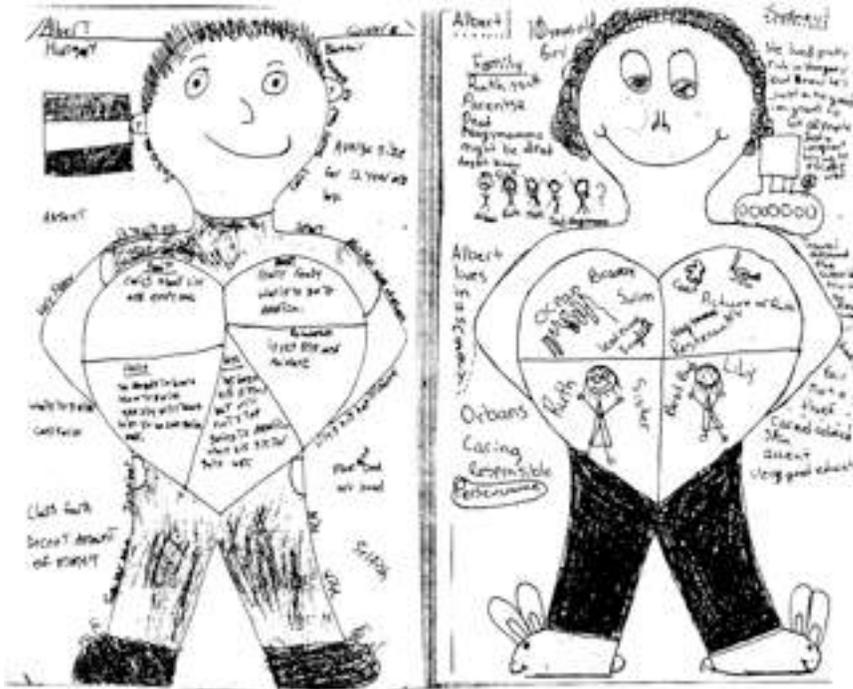
Meanwhile students continued with small group literature circles on Civil War historical fiction novels in our classroom. While conducting these discussions

things had returned to a productive status as groups discussed *Shades of Gray* (Reader, 1989), *Numbering All the Bones* (Rinaldi, 2005), *Bull Run* (Fleischman, 1993), and *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (Freedman, 1988). Student were doing a good job of taking turns, connecting comments and gaining a lot from what others had to say about these books. In an effort to keep the discussions fruitful, I pointed out whenever the process was working well for them.

### On the Road to Success

A breakthrough came at the end of March when discussing *My Freedom Trip* (Park & Park, 1998) in the lab. It was a story about a girl and her father who escape from North to South Korea but are separated from the mother who is never able to make it across the border. The separation of the girl from her mother caused real tension for the students because they expected a happy ending. They made connections with other texts and to each other, allowing some new voices to be heard. Students who had previously dominated, only shared once. It was a relief to see that they were taking to heart all of the work we had done to get to this point. I knew that this group was smart enough and had made some brilliant connections with symbolic language and meanings earlier in the year, but was frustrated with the lack of consistency in their ability to consistently manage a constructive discussion. Things were definitely looking up.

As we continued the discussions throughout the remainder of Keoko, the students continued to thoughtfully approach their responses. Literature logs showed deep thinking about the issues in the story. Students made many connections to other books we had read that were set in the same time period, such as *Lily's Crossing* (Giff, 1997). And because of the work they had done with their own Cultural X-Rays, they had a better understanding of the culture in which the book takes place.



The research projects that they completed were detailed and thoughtful. Students gained new understandings about Korean culture and continued to have more questions that interested them. Students who researched the same topics shared in small group settings and gathered even more information before sharing with the whole group. All of this information assisted in understanding Keoko and the Korean culture. It enabled students to not only understand the similarities and differences in our cultures, but they recognized that different cultures weren't strange and started understanding the concept of different perspectives. When a student commented that something was weird, Ashleigh piped right up saying, "That's not weird from their perspective. They probably think what we do is weird." That was when I knew that they were becoming aware of not making judgments from their own cultural perspective. Our study in cultural understanding of Korea was successful. Discussions were back on track and students were gleaning deeper understandings of our world as whole. My faith in this group had been restored, and we ended the year on a high note. It was a long bumpy road, but so worth it.

Literature circles should actively involve students in critically considering their differing interpretations of a book and in working through their personal transactions with literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). The heart of why writers write and readers read is to actively engage in thinking about issues that matter in their lives and world. Encouraging readers to discuss their ideas with others deepens understanding and opens new thought processes in ways that solitary reading cannot begin to promote. Having conversations about books where students share initial responses and connections is necessary to a successful discussion but conversation alone is not sufficient. Students need to move from conversation to dialogue where they focus on thinking together about issues and tensions that have significance for them. Through dialogue, they engage in critical thinking that is transformative, taking them beyond their current selves to new understandings and perspectives, both of themselves and of the world.

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## **When Literature Discussion Seems to Go Nowhere: Revaluing Teaching and Learning**

by Lisa Thomas, Instructional Coach, Van Horne Elementary, A Vignette

Teachers at my school are inspired by the “grand conversations” described in articles about literature circles. Students in these articles seem to consistently think critically and collaboratively about important life issues. They appear to engage easily in dialogue and work together to create and uncover deeper meaning (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). We are wowed by the ways in which these children think about their world. Their conversations not only deepen children’s understanding of the literature, but through dialogue, they also better understand their lives and their world. We wanted children at our school to have the same experiences, so we began literature circles.

However, at the end of a long and challenging year exploring literature circles with third graders, our initial sense was that we hadn’t made much progress. Moments of brilliance didn’t come to mind as we tried to remember what was said and whether their talk about books had changed over time. Before allowing ourselves to become completely discouraged, we decided to look closely at our field notes and the children’s webs and literature responses to see if our classroom engagements had influenced the children’s talk in any way and to examine if there were missed opportunities where we could have more effectively supported their talk.

### **A Starting Point**

I am the instructional coach at our school and teach collaboratively with the other teachers in the Learning Lab. The lab is a classroom where we explore teaching and learning. Participation in our lab experience is voluntary, but each teacher at our school has chosen to bring their students to the lab once a week. On Thursday afternoons the teachers and I meet with Kathy Short to study, reflect and collaborate about the lab experiences. We decided as a staff that we were interested in knowing more about literature circles and how they help children better understand themselves and the world. All of our study group and lab sessions for the fall focused on engaging children in meaningful talk about books. We knew it was important to first determine what the children already knew about engaging talk about books. We wanted to see the kinds of thinking children were already doing and the ways in which they interacted with each other without our control or involvement. We selected a short story for this assessment because it would take less time to read aloud and give the group more time to talk. I suggested one of my favorite short stories. I had read it to many intermediate students and the response was always enthusiastic.

“A Mouthful” by Paul Jennings (1995) is the story of a young girl whose father loves to play practical jokes on his daughter’s friends. One of his favorites is placing pretend cat poo on the friend’s pillow. When it is discovered, the father

disgusts the visitor by popping the pretend poo into his mouth. In the end, his daughter gets even by substituting real cat poo for the father's fake one. Each student helped themselves to paper and pencil as they entered our lab. I told them that I would pause a couple of times during the story to allow them to get their ideas down on paper. Then I introduced the idea of practical jokes and read the short story aloud. As predicted, their initial responses were emotional. Many were grossed out when they discovered that the father popped real poo into his mouth. They found the topic hilarious or bizarre and seemed surprised that we were reading about eating cat poo at school.

After reading the story aloud, pausing several times for them to write their thoughts, I told the third-graders that I wanted them to talk with each other about the story. I said that they didn't need to raise their hands to talk—they could talk when no one else was talking. I let them know that the adults in the room would not be a part of the conversation. We would move away to listen and take notes. Then I joined the other teachers outside of the group and waited to see what would happen.

Several kids turned to a partner and began talking. Others waited. Then a few decided that, to establish order and/or for the sake of fairness, they needed to come up with some system for taking turns.

“Let's do popcorn.”

“We could just go around the circle.”

“I think we should just talk. Who's going to go first?”

There was a brief sharing time. The comments were related to the story, but were not connected to what others were saying. Most simply read or told about what they had written on their papers. Many mentioned poo and fathers who play pranks. Soon they become frustrated with the lack of organization. Several complained about people talking when it wasn't their turn. One child said, “This gives me a headache.”

We wanted to see if they could solve these challenges together, without our intervention. It was difficult, but we kept ourselves from stepping in. We knew that their previous second grade teacher had a “share chair” in their classroom. Students were invited to sit in the chair at the front of the room and present their work to the rest of class, who then celebrated with applause. One child proposed this structure but I told them that we wanted them to talk with each other, not present and applaud. It was very clear that they had less experience with the interactive nature of literature circles. They knew how to talk, but had less experience with listening to and building from one another. Certainly they didn't yet have a vision of dialogue as thinking together in a struggle to understand significant issues within a book. They were not even at the point of having a conversation with each other; they took turns each making a comment and then considered their turn over.

Finally, I stepped in. “When you’re eating lunch in the cafeteria and having conversations with your friends, how do you know when it’s your turn to talk?” The kids had had plenty of experience talking to friends during lunch.

“Someone comes up with an idea, then we all listen and then talk.”

“We just talk about things, but we don’t go in order.”

“We just talk to one another.”

I asked them to do a little research before our next time together. I wanted them to pay attention to their talk during lunch and see if they could come up with information that would help our conversations in class.

Upon reflection, it was clear to us that stories that entertain don’t necessarily support deep thought and discussion. Students had trouble remembering anything but the gross parts. I had intentionally introduced the concept of practical jokes as a sheltering strategy for students learning English, but this seemed to draw attention away from other big ideas within the text such as father/daughter relationships and embarrassment. Next time we would choose something less sensational and I would not introduce a particular frame. We were aware that we should begin our journey by encouraging the children to pay attention to their personal connections. We needed a story that contained issues that were important to children—things they could relate to but, more importantly, mattered to them. It was the beginning of the school year and we didn’t know the children well enough to know yet what mattered to them. But, we knew from past experience with third graders that issues of friendship were significant to children this age and so looked for books about friendship.

#### Taking Turns to Share Personal Connections

For learning to take place, we need to make connections between new experiences and what we understand about our world (Short, 1993). Real meaning arises when readers are able to structure it themselves, to interpret ideas in light of personal experiences (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). We wanted children to attend to what they were experiencing within the text but we also wanted them to use their personal experiences to interpret the text as well as to use their experiences with the text to re-interpret their lives. We believed that being able to talk about the text in personal ways would help children explore the personal significance the text had for them as well as more critically engage in interpreting the text (Eeds & Wells, 1989).

At our next meeting I told the kids to pay attention to their thinking as they listened to the story. I especially wanted them to see if the story reminded them of anything that had happened to them—to pay attention to their personal connections. I read *Best Friends* (Kellogg, 1986). Afterward, we engaged in a quick write (2-3 minutes of independent writing) of our thinking about the book. After the quick write, the adults in the room demonstrated by sharing the connections they had made as they listened to the book.



When it was time to discuss, I reminded the kids that they didn't need to raise their hands. They would know it was their turn to talk when no one else was talking. The kids connected easily to the story. Many told about their own pets. Some connected to the concept of friendship. Nathan shared sadly about a time that he beat a friend at Chicken Fights and how the other child got upset about losing and decided not to be his friend anymore. Another student said that the characters used their imagination just like her and her sister. They seemed more comfortable this time. They interrupted less and didn't talk on top of each other quite as much. No one complained of headaches. Following our discussion, we created a web of the connections that were made.

We celebrated that the students connected to the story so easily. Many of their quick writes showed connections to the story—some showed multiple connections. We felt that we would need to support the children in connecting their personal stories back to the book. They took turns more easily, but didn't build on the ideas of each other. Some still read directly from their quick writes, while others just talked about their ideas.

It was interesting to us that the children who seemed most comfortable with talking naturally about the book and their connections were not the students that the classroom teacher described as the "top" students academically. These were students who often struggled with reading and writing. Maybe listening instead of reading and speaking instead of writing freed their thinking. We thought that possibly those who tended to get top grades and score higher on tests were still trying to figure out what the teacher wanted them to say or what the right answer might be.

We felt that the next step would be to engage the children in small group discussions so that more children would have a chance to participate. We also decided to ask them to explain how their personal connections related back to the book. The children seemed drawn to the idea of struggles between friends and so we looked for a book that would help us explore this issue further.

At the beginning of our next class, I introduced graffiti boards (Short & Harste, 1996) to the third graders. A graffiti board is a big sheet of paper that is shared by

a group sitting at a table. Each person uses a corner of the board to write or sketch her thoughts in a random or “graffiti” like fashion. I told the children that after our story they would be moving to the tables to show their thinking using words or picture on the graffiti board.

I read *You’re Not My Best Friend Anymore* (Pomerantz, 1998). The students moved to the tables to show their thinking on the graffiti boards. When they got there, they immediately began talking about the story with the other children. We asked them to first get their ideas on the board—that they would have a chance to talk about them afterwards. The children were uncertain about what to do and how to share the paper. As we walked around we encouraged them to show more than one idea or connection on the board.

After a few minutes I asked them to turn and talk about the book at their tables. They finished talking quickly. Most went around the table in a sharing like fashion—each commented and then it was the next person’s turn. When we came back to the Story Floor, I asked them what they discussed at their tables and recorded their ideas on a web.



At first their personal connections were genuine—but some of the children began inventing connections, and the stories became increasingly sillier and more entertaining. The children seemed to be attempting to “one up” each another hoping for a bigger laugh. We wondered if they were doing this purely for entertainment purposes or because they didn’t feel that their real life stories were worth sharing. We also noticed that the children still seemed unclear about how to use a graffiti board and how to discuss. We decided that they probably needed to watch others use a board to figure out what to put on it and how to use their graffiti to support a discussion with each other.

Our decision to use *Evan’s Corner* (Hill, 1993) grew from the children’s interest in family conflict during this discussion. *Evan’s Corner* is the story of a young boy who shares a small home with his family. He dreams of having a space of his own, but as he creates this personal space in the corner of his house, he grows to understand that he’s lonely away from the others.

Before reading the story aloud, I invited the children to be researchers. I asked them to listen to and watch the adults as they responded to the book on a graffiti board. Afterward, we would work together to describe what we saw.

As I read the book, Mrs. Ford, Dr. Short, Mrs. Nichols and our principal, Mr. Overstreet, sat on the floor around an empty piece of chart paper and a collection of markers. They responded using words and pictures during the story and then talked about the book.

Following the discussion, I asked the kids to tell me what they noticed. I recorded their responses on a chart:

They all wrote about connections to loneliness.

They talked about the same thing—some listened.

They recorded what they were thinking on the paper.

When one person made a connection it helped the others to connect.

They had similar connections.

They waited in the beginning to write.

Sometimes they paused to listen.

They started sharing connections and then connected to the characters.

One person shared, and the others talked about the same thing—built on it.

When they stopped talking, they went on to a new idea.

They didn't take turns.

Their graffiti are sketches.

The children identified the critical differences between the adult discussion and their own from the previous week. We wondered if this experience would make a difference in how the students engaged in literature circles next time.

The next week, we had the students gather at their tables. Each table had a blank piece of chart paper and some markers. We reminded them about their observations the week before and called their attention to a chart that listed a few of their ideas that we really felt they needed to focus on.

Start with connections to the story.

One person shares, then everyone talks about that idea.

When that talk finishes, someone shares a new idea.

Mrs. Ford read *Evan's Corner* again. The other adults joined a table and participated on the graffiti board along with the children. As she read aloud, everyone began showing their thinking on the graffiti boards using words and pictures. Then we asked the small groups to turn and talk. The role of the adults was primarily participant, crossing over to facilitator if necessary. Much of the talk at the tables was about personal connections to the pet or to sibling conflicts. Children noticed differences in their lives and the way that Evan lived, which made them think that the story was from "long ago". One student was surprised that Evan's parents let him go to the pet store by himself.

Child Mortality Rate			
Somalia	225	Cambodia	140
Bolivia	66	Mozambique	158
China	37	Guatemala	47
Afghanistan	257	Japan	4
Iraq	125	Israel	6
Sweden	3	USA	8

Afterwards, we gathered at the Story Floor and the children shared their perceptions of the conversations at the tables. The kids said that it was frustrating when someone said something and changed the whole subject. They also shared that some didn't seem to have much to talk about; they finished quickly and then just sat.

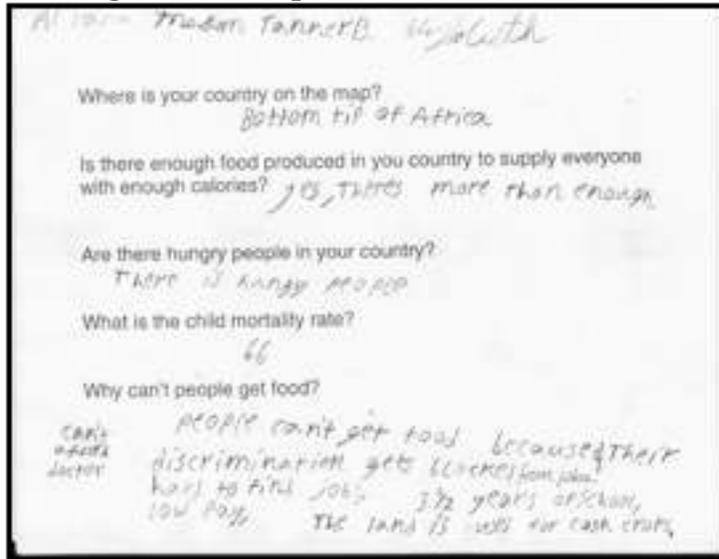
We noticed that shifts seemed to be occurring in their talk. Children were becoming more comfortable with talking about their ideas instead of reading them from their quick writes and were attending to others better. Some of their connections seemed to be invented, but they were much more fluent in sharing those connections. For the most part, their connections were to details within the story. Evan had a pet, so did they. We wanted to push them to connect to the bigger ideas and issues and we wanted them to stay with an idea and work it through together. We noticed that when one child shared a connection, it didn't necessarily cause others to build. It was simply a personal story—when it was over, nothing more needed to be said. When someone was confused or surprised by something in the story, the tension that existed caused others join in, attempting to help solve the puzzle or answer the question. We realized that we needed to add wonderings to the kinds of thinking we asked kids to pay particular attention to. We also needed a book that would allow children to further explore their interest in struggles with family and friends.

#### Sharing What We Wonder About

In thinking about a literature circle, we realized that if you don't wonder about something, there is little to talk about and try to work out together. To have dialogue there has to be tension, and one way to get to tension is through wondering. Wondering about the issues addressed in stories is natural. We wanted children to pay attention to a way of thinking that we knew they were already doing.

*Stevie*, by John Steptoe (1969), is a story of a boy's resentment toward the younger boy that his mother babysits. In the end, Stevie moves away and Robert realizes that he misses having him around. Before I read the book, I introduced the response sheet that we would be using to gather our connections and wondering about the book. The sheet was a half piece of paper with spaces labeled "connections" and "wonderings." I had completed one of the charts in response to Evan's Corner to model its use for the children. I read *Stevie* to the

children at the Story Floor, and then dismissed them to tables to reflect on their thinking on their response sheets.



After kids had time to get their ideas down, we asked them to turn and talk. At one table a student wondered if Robert's mom missed Stevie's mom and where Stevie moved to. Another wondered if Robert would have treated Stevie differently if he had been his brother or cousin. One child made a connection, sharing that his mom watched a kid who drove him crazy by getting into his things. Eventually the children moved into stories about big brothers and sisters. When the children came back to the Story Floor, I asked them to share what they were still wondering about. One issue that immediately came up was why Robert's mom didn't do anything about Stevie doing bad things. The students explored different reasons for her behavior, including:

- It just wasn't her personality.
- He was too little.
- She didn't see him do it.
- He didn't know the rules—maybe it was O.K. at his house.
- It might make him cry.
- Maybe she heard Robert being mean to Stevie.

It was the kind exchange we had been hoping for. Students were working together, using their experiences and understandings to make sense of issues in the story. They went on to question the change in Robert's feelings and to wonder what might happen if Stevie came back. Several shared personal connections about being angry and how they acted.

Then I made a fatal error. I shared a connection about a time I had to share my mother with a child she watched. I told them about my anger and that I remembered wanting to bite the girl. What followed were biting stories. The group abandoned the book and began entertaining one another again. I learned that a teacher's role in discussion is fragile. While the children and I are working

through our understanding of literature circles, I need to be careful about when and how I join in. I decided to lean away from talking and toward listening and taking field notes.

We were curious what the children thought about their talk and so I asked, “Which helped your discussion more—connections or wonderings?”

Connections. I said a connection and others added theirs, like a chain reaction.

Connections. We talked about fighting and not liking a person. We gave our opinions. There was one story and lots of opinions.

At first we were surprised by their responses. We had observed that their wonderings had created tensions that allowed them to sustain their talk. Then we realized that the children probably identified connections as being more helpful because connections were more personally significant to them. They may have felt that connections were more useful because they could tell one story after another, after another. Perhaps their responses showed that they were beginning to understand the value in talking for longer periods of time, but they didn't yet see the need to talk longer about one idea in order to build new understanding together.

We wanted to help the children focus on an issue that mattered to them. Anger, pestering, and sibling relationships kept coming up and were certainly possibilities, but we also sensed that some children weren't really interested in what others had to say. For them to engage in a meaningful conversation around any topic, they needed to understand that how they listened to and thought about the ideas of others was as important as the contributions they made themselves. Our focus wasn't teaching them polite forms of interaction—we wanted them to experience how their thinking and understanding was expanded through interaction.

#### Listening to One Another

The real power in a conversation is in the mind of the listener. The words of the speaker matter less than the way in which you listen (or don't listen as you plan what you are saying next). We wanted our students to see literature discussion as a way to explore problems rather than avoid them and to imagine alternative ways of thinking rather than dismiss them (Blau, 2003). We wanted them to come to know and value learning with and from others through dialogue. To do this, they would need to know how to listen in a way that would open their minds to new thoughts and understandings about the world.

We considered introducing language that would cause the children to connect to one another's ideas. Phrases like “I agree/disagree,” “That makes me think about...” or “I want to add on to...” can give children the interim support that they need as they develop more natural habits of mind. But these phrases assume that listening is already occurring. If not, the phrases run the danger of becoming

artificial transitions between isolated ideas. We felt that, at this point, we needed a structure that would give them a genuine reason to listen to one another. The next week we broke into two groups. Our thinking was that each group would listen to a different but related story. They would have a brief discussion and then sketch or write about their thinking to prepare for sharing with a partner from the other group. The partners would talk about their stories and compare the two for ideas that connected both books. Then we'd come together and compare the stories.

We chose *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really Angry* (Bang, 1999) and *Angry Dragon* (Robberecht, 2004) to build on the previous week's discussion of anger. Mrs. Ford read one and I read the other. The students struggled a little when asked to talk about the story and so Mrs. Ford gave them a chance to sketch or write first. She noticed that this seemed to free their thoughts and they talked more easily afterwards. When the children met with a partner they did talk and listen more carefully. Some tried to compare without first telling each other the stories.

When we came back to the Story Floor we created a chart.

#### Similarities

About Anger

Both going somewhere using their feet

Both were not about being sad

Both got mad at someone in the family

Both wanted to hurt someone or something

Both had animals

Both had toys

#### Differences

1 boy/1 girl as characters

1 book about a dragon

1 about climbing a tree

1 mad about being told "no"

1 mad because sister took the gorilla

The animals were different

One played with toys, the other ate them

The kids talked and listened to one another more effectively, but clearly they were not addressing the big ideas. This structure gave them real reasons to listen to one another, but made it difficult for them to think together and build on one another's ideas because they hadn't heard the same story. We wondered about the talk in the small groups and whether the small groups were engaging more kids in talk. We decided to use the same structure, but this time look closely at the talk between the students in the small groups.

The stories that we chose were about anger between parents and children. *Daddy is a Monster... Sometimes* (Steptoe, 1983) and *Harriet You Drive Me Wild* (Fox,



didn't always treat them with the patience and maturity that the third graders expected of parents. It was difficult for them to decide whether the father was a good or bad guy. This created a tension that fueled a genuine need to resolve their confusion. We also, for the first time, saw children make a personal connection that was focused on trying to figure out the book, rather than just sharing a related story.

We created another comparison chart for these books as a group, but these comparisons stayed on the surface and did not get into the issues we saw emerge in the small group.

#### Similarities

Both parents got mad at kids  
Both were about someone getting mad  
Both had kids in them  
Both have people, not animals  
Both say sorry  
Both feel bad

#### Differences

One had 2 kids and other had 1  
One parent was a dad, 1 a mom  
One was about a dad turning into a monster  
Dad got mad about ice cream, mom got mad at all kinds of things  
Mom tried to control her anger and dad just got mad every time  
Mom got sad, dad didn't

The injustice that the children felt in the way that the father treated the children in *Daddy is a Monster... Sometimes* certainly sparked a brief but focused conversation that fostered listening and group problem solving. At the same time, we knew that the children would be more likely to be able to sustain their talk and build on one another's ideas if those ideas were bigger. We wondered whether having the children web what we knew about relationships would provide a broader conceptual framework to support their thinking and talk. We decided to follow this webbing with a book that is intentionally ambiguous—open to interpretation and debate. We wanted to create more tension.



When we met the next time, all of our previous read-aloud books were on the chalk rail and we asked children to brainstorm with us about the different ideas

and issues related to relationships and how people treat one another that had come up in the books.

We then read aloud *Fox* (Wild, 2006), a fairly disturbing story about an injured bird who can't fly and forms a symbiotic relationship with a dog who can't see. A fox lures the bird away from the dog and leaves her to die saying, "Now you will know what it's like to be truly alone." In our adult discussion of this story it had provoked strong and uneasy attitudes and interpretations. We hoped it would spark tension and promote dialogue among Mrs. Ford's third graders.

The children first discussed in small groups and then we gathered at the Story Floor. As they began to talk, students briefly shared personal connections to incidents in the book. Some said that the book made them feel lonely or sad. They were also intrigued by the illustration style and handwritten print and felt that the print made the book more upsetting and angry. But their talk quickly moved to their opinions about the characters and attempts to explain their behavior.

"Fox was mean. He wanted dog and bird never to see each other."

"I think fox really liked bird. He was jealous so he kidnapped her."

"He left her to teach her a lesson—sometimes you have to be lonely."

"Maybe he wanted to see if she could find the way back."

"Fox really wants to be friends with dog."

"No, he's jealous of dog and wants to make him mad."

"Fox took the bird away from dog so that she could learn to make it without him."

It was interesting that many children didn't view fox as evil and attempted to justify his behavior. Some explanations even sounded noble—to teach a lesson or help bird become stronger. Maybe they had a need to soften the story since the stories that they know tend to be kinder with happier endings. Perhaps they hadn't experienced or didn't recognize intentional meanness. Their search for the good in fox was unexpected and not at all the way the teachers felt about him when we discussed the story in study group.

The children's talk was more focused and certainly more connected than we had seen previously. Although their thoughts about fox were broad and varied, they weren't wild and random. Their attempts to explain his behavior were original, reasonable and grounded in their life experiences. Although they still tended to make comments rather than engage in discussion together, there were certainly "moments of brilliance" that we had overlooked until we looked closely at our notes from the literature circle.

### Sustaining Talk around an Issue

It was time to move into a chapter book. The length and complexity of a longer story would not only give the children more to think and talk about, they would have more time to ponder and explore their ideas. We had been working with books about relationships and Mrs. Ford indicated that many students lived in less traditional family structures. We thought that *Journey* (MacLachlan, 1991) might invite students to talk about families and relationships in broad, meaningful ways. I introduced *Journey* in the lab and Mrs. Ford continued reading and engaging kids in discussion in their classroom. We created logs for the children's response and taught them about sketch to stretch as a response strategy. Sketch to stretch focuses on symbolic meaning and involves creating a visual image of the meaning of the story, not an illustration of an event from the story.

*Journey* is the story of a brother and sister who are abandoned by their mother and are being raised by their grandparents. The younger brother, Journey, is angry about being left and believes his mother is coming back for him. After reading the first two chapters I asked the children what they were thinking. It made sense that their comments focused on what they were wondering about. They were clearly puzzled, in particular they were very concerned about why the mother left the children with their grandparents and were struggling with whether or not the mother would return.

"Maybe the mom will come back and Journey will be happy."

"It's sort of sad. He doesn't know where she is and why she went away."

"I wonder why the mom looks back?"

"Maybe the mom will come back and then leave again and not come back."

"Why didn't the mom leave a note for Journey?"

"Why did she give them money?"

"Maybe she cared about them and wanted them to find her."

"Why did the mom leave and throw the jacket down?"

"Maybe she had a job and needed to leave."

"She could have gone looking for the father."

"Maybe she got in trouble and didn't want the family to know."

"Your momma always wished to be someplace else.' Why does the grandfather say that?"

"She wanted to kill herself."

"She dreamed of being someplace else—maybe she didn't like where she was as a kid and so when she grew up she left."

"Maybe she got tired."

"She got bored of the children."

"She didn't like doing things with the kids."

"Maybe she went some place she had always dreamed of."

"She went to get a break from everyone."

"A vacation day."

“Maybe she was depressed.”

“She took a permanent vacation, doesn’t work there anymore. She left her job.”

This was by far the longest exchange about one issue that we had observed with this class. We wondered what kinds of life experiences and previous texts the children pulled from in suggesting these possibilities. Looking at their talk now, we realize that for the first time, they used their life experiences to think through their interpretations of the story, not just to tell stories. Their comments weren’t judgmental like those toward the father in *Monster* and they didn’t try to rationalize the mother’s behavior as they had with Fox. They seemed to genuinely puzzle through the possibilities for why a mother might leave her family. They expressed hope that the mother would return but their hesitancy indicated that they were afraid that she would not and that this story might not end “happily ever after.” Interestingly, there was no acknowledgment during the discussion of Journey’s anger.

Over the next few weeks, they continued to listen and respond to *Journey* in their classroom and occasionally in the lab. They attempted to figure out the reasons for the characters’ actions in literature circles. They relied, as readers do, on their own life experiences to make sense of the character’s decisions. At times, these experiences added to their confusion. It made no sense that Journey’s sister would refuse money that her mother sent—Who would refuse money? They also struggled throughout with their hope that Journey’s mother would return and the realization that she probably wouldn’t. Initially, it appeared as though they didn’t want to voice this possibility out of fear that it might happen, but gradually the issue became part of their talk. Their tension over the mother’s actions and the children’s reactions to her abandonment became a sustaining issue that they continued to explore. While they were often tentative in their talk, for the first time they built upon their thinking with each other.

### Revaluing Our Teaching and Student Learning

In the end, we were encouraged to see the children’s talk had grown over the year. Our initial impression that not much was accomplished probably stemmed from an unrealistic vision of literature circles with young children combined with our tendency to remember the students’ struggles better than their successes. We wondered whether the articles that had inspired our work highlighted students’ best work and so didn’t include the struggles and range of thinking that occur in any classroom.

The power that comes from the ability to revisit the work that we do as teachers was evident in our experience with these third graders. Our collection of student work and teacher field notes proved essential in our ability to determine our progress throughout the first semester. Without these artifacts, we would have been left with the false impression that growth hadn’t occurred. It’s tempting for us to draw conclusions based on our memories and sense of our experiences with

children. The artifacts became evidence that informed our conclusions in more objective and concrete ways.

We remain committed to literature circles and our third graders will return to us next year as fourth graders. The time that we have taken to study the artifacts of student responses and to think critically about children's understandings and the ways in which our teaching influenced their interactions will inform our curricular decisions. We will continue to support these children in using their connections and wonderings to think about literature and their lives. We will search for books that create in students the tensions that encourage dialogue. And as teachers, we will continue to collect and reflect together, allowing our students' responses to guide our decisions.

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## **Exploring Culture through Literature Written in Unfamiliar Languages**

by Lisa Thomas, Instructional Coach, Van Horne Elementary and Kathy Short, Professor, University of Arizona, A Vignette

“Oh, that looks like Chinese or Japanese writing,” was the first comment we heard as children browsed the picture books about Korea at their tables. We had integrated a few picture books written in Korean into our study of Korean culture because we felt it was important for children to see the language even though none of them could read it. We believed that language is an essential aspect of cultural identity and so wanted children to be able to see the language as part of exploring culture. We also felt that books written in Hangul, the native alphabet of the Korean language, would help the kids see the culture as “real.” We expected confusion about this unfamiliar language; what we did not expect was that the children would respond with such excitement and interest to these books.

Our study of Korea was part of a school-wide inquiry to explore how to engage in thoughtful cross-cultural studies with kids. So often, studies of other cultures remain surface level with a focus on food, fashion, folklore, festivals, and famous people while ignoring the central values and ways of living and thinking within a culture. Children gain facts about a cultural group or country, but little in-depth understanding of that culture. The result is often a tourist-level curriculum and the development of stereotypes, not intercultural understanding.

We were particularly interested in the ways children’s literature about and from other cultures support students in developing understandings of those cultures. We gathered all kinds of books about Korea, many of which came from Kathy Short’s extensive international collection at the University of Arizona. Some books were family memories of Korea written by Korean Americans, others were books written by Korean authors. The majority of the books were in English and were published in the U.S.

We knew that language needed to be part of our exploration of cultural identity because the way people view and interpret their world is reflected in their language (Banks, 2001). We purchased only a few books in Korean, because we did not expect these books to play a major role in our inquiries, given that none of us, teachers or children, could read or speak the language. We thought that children would find the books intriguing, but did not expect the level of interest that children evidenced, nor that they would return to study these books over and over. The children’s responses challenged our assumptions and led us to inquire into the ways in which literature written in an unfamiliar language can be integrated into a cross-cultural study. Our explorations of the possibilities for engaging children meaningfully in books written in languages they do not understand led us to new insights about the role that these books can play in any study of a cultural group.

### Integrating Hangul Literature into Browsing

The first way we used literature in Hangul was to integrate a few picture books into the Korean text set that we used as an initial experience to interest the kids in Korean culture. We introduced students to the text set by asking them to browse the books. We wanted to see what they noticed. We hoped they would browse to gain initial insights and impressions about the culture and later use these books for more in-depth explorations of the culture. As we expected, they commented on the similarities and distinctions that they noticed between their own culture and the cultures represented in the books. What we didn't expect was how significant the few books written in Hangul would be for the children. The value of this literature as a part of the collection went beyond awareness of the language as an aspect of Korean culture. They continuously referred to these books as we webbed their impressions and questions about Korean culture. Over several weeks of using these books for browsing and initial discussions about Korean culture, the books written in Hangul were clearly the most popular with children. They spent a great deal of time looking carefully at the details of the illustrations. For the children, these books were "real" and they saw them as more authentic representations of Korean culture. Also, we realized that the majority of books about Korea written in English were traditional literature or historical fiction, while the Hangul picture books portrayed contemporary culture, which was of greater interest to the children. We immediately purchased a larger set of Hangul picture books and borrowed others from a Korean graduate student who graciously shared her collection.

The children's interest in the written language in these books was immediately evident and continued over time. As the students browsed the first time, Demetri took out a small slip of paper from a fortune cookie that she had in her pocket and compared the Chinese on the slip to the writing in the books. Kelvin, a kindergarten student who moved to Tucson from China, thought that the writing might be Chinese. One student commented that even though she couldn't read the words, she could tell what was happening from the pictures. We had the sense that, while the children could make some sense of the books through the illustrations, their interest lay in the text itself and that they were intrigued with Hangul and so we decided to spend some time exploring the language.

### Investigating Written Language

Even though we told the children that these books were from and about Korea, many commented that the books were written in Chinese. We thought that this might be because their experience with written Korean was limited and that they associated the Hangul symbols with the Chinese characters with which they were more familiar. Several children who had investigated Japanese culture in their classroom wondered if the language was Japanese. We knew that it was important to develop an awareness of the distinctions between Korea, Japan, and China and thought we could begin to build this understanding by determining the differences between the three written languages. Kathy gathered collections of Japanese and Chinese literature to add to our Korean books. We labeled the books according to the language and asked the children to study the text carefully

and see what they noticed about the similarities and differences between the languages.

We suggested that the children choose books from two of the languages and place them side by side so that they could compare them more easily. At one table, Michael told Kathy that the Japanese books were backwards. Kathy pointed out that it depends on whose perspective we are looking from—the Japanese would say that our books open backwards. The realization that what is the “norm” depends on whose perspective is used to view an action or object was a new insight for the kids and one that was often referenced throughout our cross-cultural study. We did not want to fall into the trap of viewing our own culture as the norm against which other cultures are judged as deficient or “weird” in some way.

When the students gathered at the Story Floor, we created a chart of what they had noticed:

Chinese has symbols and there are some small symbols between the big ones.

Japanese symbols have more lines in them.

More detail and strokes in Japanese and Chinese.

Japanese moves top to bottom instead of left to right.

Korean and Chinese are the same as English—left to right.

Some Chinese characters have house shapes.

Korean symbols seem more complicated.

Japanese has more variability.

There are some similarities between Korean and Japanese symbols.

Japanese is all mushed together.

There are more words in Chinese than Korean.

Japanese has small symbols next to large ones.

We simplified this engagement for our kindergarteners by having them compare only two languages. Because Kelvin was familiar with Chinese, we asked them to compare Chinese with Korean. Their comments included talk about Korean having more words on a page than Chinese and Chinese having more lines in the symbols.

The kids were often not sure how to verbalize their observations and did not have the terminology to label the differences but they were looking closely and clearly recognized that the three languages were distinct, but shared some characteristics. To further our investigation of Korean written language we explored its structure and organization and practiced writing in Hangul.

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Hangul is a relatively new written language with an interesting and well-documented history. Not surprisingly, Kathy had a book, *The King's Secret* (Farley, 2001), about the history of Hangul and King Sejong, the man responsible for its creation. She told the story of how this enlightened ruler developed a phonetic system of writing to replace the complicated Chinese characters that the Koreans had been using. He felt Koreans should have a written language that matched their spoken language in order to make reading and writing accessible for all Korean people. The kids were fascinated with this story and with the idea that someone would create an alphabet.

We invited Yoo-kyung Sung, a Korean graduate student from the University of Arizona, to introduce Hangul to the children. She showed them, using magnetic symbols, how each shape represents a sound and how to position the symbols to form a word. Then Yoo-kyung gave each student a chart of Korean symbols and their sounds to use as they explored writing Hangul. Because of the way Hangul was created, the sound/symbol relationships are systematic and easy to learn. Many of the children were most interested in writing their names using the Korean symbols. Some attempted to translate by trading one Korean symbol for one English letter. They struggled with the idea that the Korean symbols represented sounds found in Korean spoken language and that our English spelling patterns wouldn't apply to Korean writing. For instance, Ashleigh struggled until she realized that she only needed one Korean symbol to show the sound of "eigh" in her name.

Some students tried to apply what they knew about the sounds that the symbols represented in decoding the words from the books. They were confused because they could sound out the Korean words but didn't know what they meant. They were expecting English to emerge from the Korean text. It was interesting to see how this engagement allowed the kids to explore Korean but also to develop deeper understandings about English and the connections between written symbols and sounds within a language.

Kids continued to explore Hangul through comparing several sets of books that we found in both their original Korean text and in English. Kane/Miller is a publishing company that obtains the rights to books that originate in other languages and cultures and translates them, retaining the original illustrations, for U.S. distribution. We purchased the English translations (Bae, 2007; Kwon, 2007; [Lee, 2003](#); Lee, 2007) and Yoo-kyung helped us find the original Korean version. Kids spent hours comparing the books, reading the English and then closely examining the Hangul text to see if they could recognize words.

Understanding Contemporary Life

The Korean text set was intended as a vehicle to a deeper and more complex understanding of Korean culture. As we began to pull individual books to read and discuss at the Story Floor, it became clear that the Korean books that were available in English depicted historical Korea and traditional stories, both of which showed Koreans in traditional dress and in village settings from long ago. The only books we found that depicted contemporary life in Korea were written in Hangul. We had to find ways to support students in deriving meaning from the Korean language books or their understanding of Korean culture would be outdated and inaccurate.

Furthermore, we wanted children to realize that cultures have a past and a present. We wanted them to understand that the way people live changes over time. We knew that children often assume that other cultures are the same today as in the past, unlike the U.S. We wanted to challenge this ethnocentric perspective. It made sense to introduce this concept close to home. We used two books set in Arizona, one in the early 1900's and the other more recently, to ask the children to think about whether the stories took place in their past or present and how they knew this. We then asked them to sort the Korean texts according to historical and contemporary settings. We hoped that this experience would frame their thinking as they continued to explore the texts in search of information about life in Korea.

Many of our students were surprised to learn that children in Korea not only had televisions, video games, and cell phones, but that many of the sophisticated electronics that we have in the United States were developed and manufactured in Korea—and available there long before here. Upon reflection, this misconception makes sense given the resources that teachers have available to them. If children's experience with Korean culture comes exclusively through historical and traditional literature, they would assume that Korea today looks

like Korea in the past. We found it interesting that the U.S. publishers sense a market for historical and traditional books about other cultures, but fail to translate books about contemporary society. We found this trend also true with chapter books, finding only historical fiction about Korea available in English. We used the books on contemporary life in Korea in several ways. They were integrated into our text sets so that kids continuously interacted with them, often primarily focusing on the illustrations, as sources of information about contemporary life for their own inquiries. We also chose several of the books and asked Yoo-kyung to provide an English translation for those books so that we could use them for read-aloud and response engagements with the younger children. For example, one Hangul book told the story of an older sister who has to take her bratty younger brother on the subway to visit her grandmother. We knew that the children would have many connections to this book from their own lives, but that there would also be some interesting cultural differences. One that the kids noted right away was that the two children were allowed to go by themselves on the subway. We read the book aloud in English and then read it a second time and invited children to respond through a graffiti board where they could sketch their connections and thoughts about the book through visual images and words. The kindergarten children sat on the floor around a large sheet of paper and sketched and then later dictated comments to add to their visual responses.



### Exploring Cultural Differences and Anomalies

The books in Hangul raised interesting cultural differences and anomalies for children. One book in particular became an exploration of cultural and age differences for children and teachers. Kathy shared a book that she found particularly puzzling with the teachers and children. The book, written in Korean, was about a boy who is looking for his mother. He waits at a train stop. The illustrations indicate the passing of time. Each time a train stops, the boy talks to the conductor and the train moves on. The boy waits, and waits, and waits, but no mother appears. In the end, it looks like the boy is still waiting, as a snowstorm

swirls around him. No one has arrived to pick him up. Teachers were outraged. How could this small boy be left alone at the end of the story?

We needed to comprehend the print so that we could better understand the story. We thought about having Yoo-kyung translate for us, but Kathy found the book in English at a bookstore in Australia, titled *Waiting for Mummy* (Lee, 2004). In this version, an illustration had been added to the final page showing the boy walking hand in hand with his mother through the snow—the happy ending that we craved. This book led us into an interesting discussion as we explored differences in cultural values and why this book would be seen as a seminal piece of literature within Korean culture while we found it troubling as American adults.

We wondered how the children would respond to the story, so I read and showed the English version while Kathy showed the Korean version. Then we asked them what they thought about the story. There were clear differences in the responses based on age level. The fourth and fifth graders responded similarly to the adults with an immediate concern about the child being left without his mother. In fact, as I finished reading the book aloud, one fourth grader audibly gasped, saying “He never found his mother?” and the rest of the class looked visibly concerned. The kindergarteners were not as concerned about the ending; they seemed to have a young child’s faith in mothers and knew she would come eventually. They were more concerned about the ways that the conductors treated the boy and how he was separated from his mother:

How come they won’t let him inside?  
Why do the conductors talk so mean to him?  
Why is his nose red?  
He still didn’t find his mom.  
There are some houses that have Korean writing.  
I wonder if his mommy is on one of the trains.  
The guy told him to stay and wait – he didn’t want him to get hurt.  
When he went outside to play, he went to a different city and got

lost.

When reading the book aloud to the fourth graders, Sheshna noticed something that all of us as adults had missed—the mother and child are in the Korean version on the final page but their image is very small in the middle of a double-paged spread of a snowstorm. What was interesting is that the editors of the Australian version lifted that small image of the mother and child and put it by itself on the final page of the English version to make it obvious to readers that the mother had come. Clearly, they shared our cultural values and needed to be sure that children would realize that there was a happy ending.



The difference in the emphasis that each book made on the mother returning made us wonder what this said about Korean culture. The children had some ideas about why the mother's return was less conspicuous in the Korean version:

- Korean books like to leave people guessing.
- It breaks people's hearts—they don't need happy endings.
- Yoo-kyung told us that Koreans don't often say I love you, they aren't as expressive.
- Australians need happy endings.
- The book made us think and focus on problem solving.
- Koreans like puzzles and the book left us puzzled.
- They want you to look at the visual images more closely to figure it out.

This experience was significant for teachers and children in beginning to probe the deeper differences in cultural values between American and Korean cultures. The discussions were thoughtful and tentative, but did not focus on one culture as "right." Instead the focus was on understanding the differences in values and we found that these explorations continued after this experience with much more

thoughtful consideration of understanding Korean cultural values and not assuming they were the same as ours.

#### Assessing Children's Understandings of the Culture

Another use of these books occurred at the end of our study as a way to assess children's understandings of culture. Our kindergarteners had been given multiple opportunities throughout the course of our cross-cultural study to explore the Korean text set. They made many connections between things that they find in their own culture, and things that they saw in the books. We wanted them to move beyond "things" that are the same and different to experiences and stories that connect and distinguish cultures. They had primarily focused on responding to read-alouds with personal connections to the daily lives of children, pets, and families—the things that are important in their lives. While the older children engaged in inquiries to learn more about particular aspects of Korean culture, our focus with the younger children was on reading aloud books about everyday life in Korea and encouraging them to respond with their comments and connections.

One day, very late in the school year, we spread the text set on tables throughout the room. Lisa asked the Kindergarteners to gather with her on the Story Floor and told them there were books in English and Hangul on the tables. She explained that they had seen some of them, but that we had added others. Lisa invited them to move to a table, choose a book that they found interesting and "tell themselves a story" using the illustrations.

Lisa discovered that there is simply no way to predict how five and six year olds will respond to anything. She wasn't sure if they would engage with the books for any length of time at all. She had markers and crayons ready if needed, but instead we all enjoyed a magical time telling stories together. The children spent a few minutes negotiating which book they wanted to enjoy. Most chose one for themselves, some decided to share with a buddy. Many moved from table to table searching for just the right book. But soon they settled in, opened their books and began telling stories.

Lisa worked with a pair of boys at one table. They had chosen a historical book. The boys carefully explored each page looking for details within the illustration to guide their words. "Long ago in Korea..." began Jesse. Together they identified each character. They had a villain, the boss (you could tell he was mean by his face), and a hero, the farm worker. The boss wasn't nice because he didn't pay the farm worker enough money so he couldn't buy food for his family. At one point, they noticed a celebration. They decided it was a wedding and that the evil boss turned nice and allowed the farm worker to go to the wedding and get married. "And they lived happily every after. The End."

As Lisa glanced around the room, every kindergartener was engaged with their book in the same way, using what they knew about story in conjunction with the illustrations to "read" their book. Their stories showed us many things. We

learned very quickly they knew a great deal about how stories are structured but we also learned what they had come to understand about Korean culture by what aspects of that culture were or were not incorporated into their stories. By recording quick notes about their stories, we were able to assess their understandings in the same way that the presentations of the projects by the older students reflected their understandings.

### Final Thoughts

We were struck by the significance that the Korean language books played in our understanding of Korean culture and culture in general. The tension that existed as students attempted to make sense of books written in a language they didn't read or speak led them to look more carefully and to think more critically about the texts and the culture. We came to believe that books written in native languages are critical in text sets that support cross-cultural studies. These books are significant not only because of the importance of language to culture but also because of the role they can play in inviting children to explore deeper aspects of cultural ways of living and thinking. Without these books, children could easily have formed many misperceptions about culture, particularly about contemporary life.

In reflecting on this experience and thinking about the implications for future cross-cultural studies, we developed the following recommendations:

Locate as many books in the native language of the culture as possible. One source of these books are international students at the university, particularly education majors. Even if they don't have the books, they can access websites in that language to purchase materials and can help send interlibrary loan requests. Many libraries participate in worldwide interlibrary loan agreements and so can make requests for books in that language. You do need to know the book information in that language and so need help from a native speaker to make the request.

Books in the native language can often be purchased on web sites that are available to speakers of that language in the U.S. You don't necessarily have to get the books shipped from the country because often a group has already imported the books, thus avoiding large shipping fees. The major issue is that the sites are usually in that language, not English.

Invite speakers of the language to come to the classroom to read books in the language to children and to teach a few basic principles of the language. They can also be tremendous resources later in the study as children have specific questions that cannot be answered in available materials.

Ask native speakers to tape record themselves reading several books.

If possible, locate some books that are available in both English and the native language so that children can compare the books.

Ask a native speaker to translate several key books so that they can be used as read-alouds for response engagements.

Integrate the books into all aspects of a cross-cultural study, not as a separate experience, but as part of the text sets of books that support a range of experiences from browsing to literature discussions to small group inquiry projects.

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