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READING CRITICALLY THROUGH GLOBAL INQUIRY

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Reading Critically through Global Inquiry

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

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Introduction: Reading Critically through Global Inquiry

Reading literature to think about and transform oneself and the world involves reading to inquire into issues in children’s life experiences and in the broader society. These experiences support children in becoming critical and knowledgeable readers and thinkers. Readers are encouraged to engage deeply with the story world of a text and then to step back to share their personal connections and to reflect critically with others about the text and their responses. They engage in shared thinking about ideas based on critical inquiries that matter in their lives and world. This process of thinking is the focus of Van Horne Elementary School, which has a school-wide emphasis on global inquiry. Teachers and students work together in critically considering the world and their roles and responsibilities as global citizens.

Children at the school engage intensely with fiction, picture books and novels, to think deeply and critically, lingering longer in these texts to consider multiple layers of meaning and ideas. They also engage with nonfiction literature and read critically to compare information and issues across texts and learn facts about the topics as well as to consider conceptual issues. Literature is a tool for understanding the world and considering broader social and scientific issues as well as a means of facilitating children’s interest in a topic.

Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and oppression. Readers are challenged to critique and question “what is” and “who benefits” as well as to hope and consider possibility by asking “what if”

and taking action for social change (Freire, 1970). Through critical literacy, children learn to problematize and develop a critical consciousness—to question the everyday world, to consider multiple perspectives, to examine power relationships within sociopolitical issues, and to consider actions to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, 2002). This issue of *WOW Stories* is focused around these four dimensions of critical literacy.

The first section contains vignettes that highlight the ways that teachers support children's thinking about literature and literacy to encourage them to question their "everyday" experiences through new lenses and to consider multiple perspectives. These vignettes include response strategies that teachers use to challenge children to think more deeply about literature and the kinds of tools, such as flowcharts, that facilitate children's thinking. Other vignettes in this section share the engagements teachers use to immerse students in multiple perspectives through using a range of texts and a study of world languages, as well as through a focus on inquiry.

The second section contains vignettes that highlight ways of engaging children as conceptual thinkers about difficult sociopolitical issues. Teachers write about the instructional engagements they use to encourage students to think conceptually, in this case about power, hunger and poverty, and in making local and global connections to these issues. The third section contains vignettes in which teachers reflect on how they build on students' conceptual thinking about difficult issues to move into taking action to promote social justice. Students first need to understand the issues and uncover the causes of difficult social issues before they are able to take action in a thoughtful manner.

The vignettes in this issue show teachers' struggles to support students in global inquiry as well as the transformations in student thinking and their deep engagement in these inquiries and global literature. The thread that runs across all of the vignettes is the belief that readers have the social responsibility to negotiate personal and cultural meanings from literature that create the possibility for social change in both their immediate and global communities.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.

Lewison, M., Flint, A.S., & Sluys, K.V. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 415-424.

Kathy G. Short, Editor

Thinking About Thinking with Young Children

by Kathryn Bolasky, Kindergarten Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

When I moved from teaching third grade to kindergarten, I had to develop a whole new set of

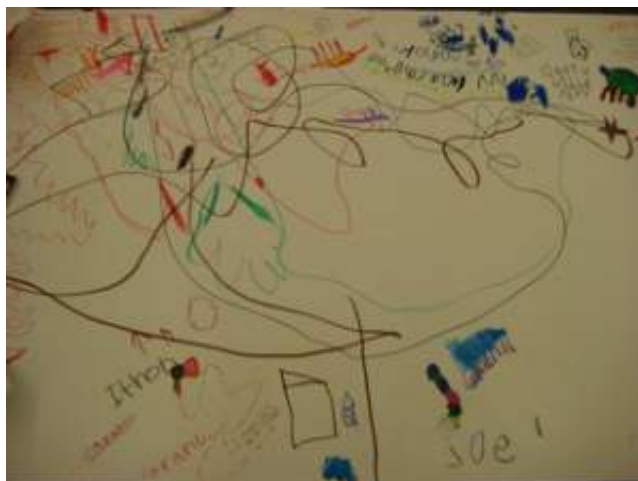
expectations for the ways in which young children think about and respond to literature. Now, as I look back over my first year of teaching kindergarten, I am impressed with the progress my students made in their ability to think. Every child walked into my classroom with the innate ability to think and make sense of their world, but they left my room at the end of the year able to think about their thinking and to use literacy to create meaning. When I reflect on how this development occurred, there are several key instructional experiences that supported this shift. Throughout the year I wanted students to engage in reading as a meaning-making process that went beyond learning how to read, the typical focus of kindergarten classrooms. I wanted my students to experience reading as a process of constructing meaning for purposes significant to the reader (Goodman, 1996). In order to accomplish this, I worked to create a literacy rich environment where we learned to read, but also used reading to learn about our world. My students engaged in consistent instructional experiences that allowed them to talk about their thinking and to facilitate their thinking through sketching.

The particular experiences in this vignette occurred in Learning Lab, where I am able to observe and take notes of students' responses and where I have someone to think with to make sense of their understandings. The Learning Lab is a place of learning and inquiry for us as teachers. We each take our students to the lab once a week for specific instructional engagements and then meet in a teacher study group every other week to analyze student work and think about where we will go next in our inquiry. The Learning Lab is facilitated by Lisa Thomas, our instructional coach, and the work in the lab is determined by our professional learning focus as a school. In this case, we were looking at issues of power through literature.

The first instructional experience with my students was unforgettable -- for the wrong reasons. My students gathered on the story floor and Lisa explained that she was going to read a book and then ask questions. In an attempt to have students explore the concept of power, she read aloud the picture book *Fred Stays with Me!*, by Nancy Coffelt (2007). My students squirmed, giggled and commented on the illustrations during the read aloud. When Lisa finished the story, we discussed the choices that the character in the story had the power to make and the choices her parents had the power to determine. The students were then posed with the question "Who has the power over your choices at school?" The discussion led to their determination that some choices are made by students and some choices are made for them by others. Lisa supported the discussion by asking questions such as, "Who decides what you do at free choice time?" The students were able to distinguish between a choice they made for themselves and a choice that was made for them.

After the discussion, the class responded to the story on a large graffiti board. They moved to a large piece of butcher paper on the floor that had markers scattered in the middle, arranging themselves around the paper. They were asked to draw something from the story. I was elated that at one point all of my students had a marker in their hands and were drawing images on the paper.

As the students drew, Lisa and I took dictation from them about what they were thinking. It was not long before markers began to fly and large scribbles appeared on the graffiti board. It was clear that our first instructional experience was coming to an end.



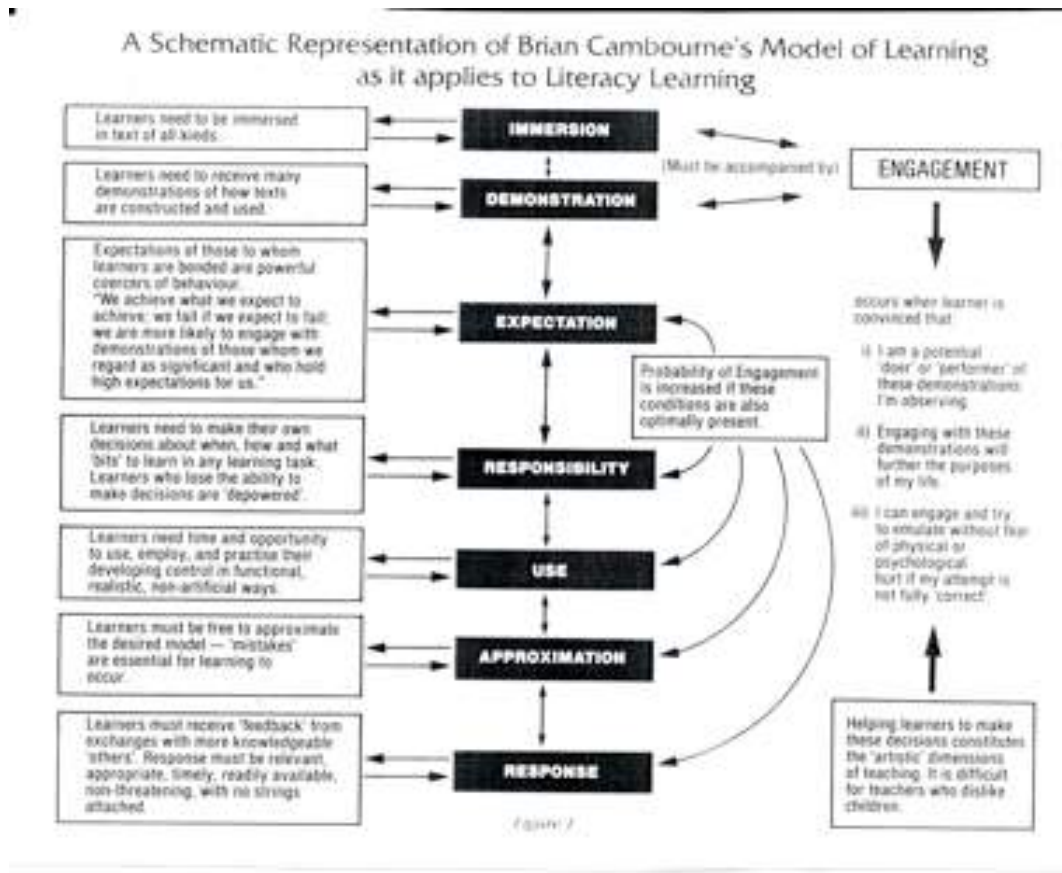
Each week we spent time reading a text, talking about it, and responding through drawing. Although the individual sessions were centered on different ideas about power through the read alouds, the structure of the instructional experiences stayed the same. This was significant because the routine assisted in developing their thinking. Students could anticipate what they were going to be asked to do and so could focus on their thinking instead of the procedures. Dictations changed from “I liked the silly part” to retelling key points in the story. Initially, we were just happy if they stayed with the task and responded to the book instead of wandering off, but gradually we noticed that students were engaging with the story and going beyond retellings or telling what they liked about the story.

After several months of reading, discussing, and drawing, there was a visible shift in students’ abilities to think about and respond to literature. At the end of March we were exploring the concept of hunger and the power of food. When looking at how weather affects food sources, Lisa read aloud [*Peach Heaven*](#), by Yangsook Choi (2005) in which farmers lose their crop when a huge rain brings peaches down the mountain to the town below where children eagerly eat the expensive treat. After the read aloud we had a discussion and I remember thinking for the first time that we had moved past discussing what they liked about the story into thinking about the important events from the story. I was excited to see this change. The sketches that the students produced were also beginning to reflect their thinking about the stories we were reading.



As I reflected on these changes in my students as thinkers, I found that Brian Cambourne’s Model of Learning (1988) was useful in understanding why these experiences were valuable. Cambourne’s model identifies the natural environmental factors that contribute to a learner’s success in attaining oral literacy and how these might be applied to written literacy. In my classroom these environmental factors were present in our quest to develop the ability to think about our thinking, particularly in response to literature. In the model there are eight concepts or conditions that are imperative for the learner’s development: Immersion, Demonstration, Engagement, Expectation, Responsibility, Use, Approximation, and Response. These eight factors helped me explore the academic experiences of my students and consider their role in helping students begin to think

about their thinking. Cambourne (1988) represents his model in this diagram:



Immersion, Demonstration, and Engagement

Exposure to new learning experiences is a constant factor in kindergarten. As Lisa and I created new learning experiences for students, it was clear that immersion, demonstration, and engagement were vital components that needed to be addressed to assure success. When trying to develop student thinking, immersion does involve flooding them with books but must also include access to engagements that challenge students to think and respond. Susan Kempton (2007) argues that "Kindergarteners, especially early in the year, can understand much more complex texts than they can read" (p.104). To honor that notion my students were immersed in experiences to develop their thinking from the very beginning of the year. I wanted them to have a full picture of school as a place to push their thinking.

Often kindergarten teachers believe that they should start with simple routines and expectations and hold off reading complex books and asking students to respond and talk about books until much later in the year. Each week Lisa and I set aside time to read a selected book and gave my class a chance to interact with the text. We started this from the beginning of the year and did not wait until they were older because I wanted my students to become accustomed to the expectation that they are thinkers. Even if their initial responses were a few retellings and "I like" statements, we were creating the expectation of thinking and talking about literature.

Careful consideration went into selecting a text to read aloud to students. A key aspect of immersion is to create quality experiences that expand their life experiences. My students came with a wealth of knowledge and I wanted to give them the chance to use what they already knew in order to gain more insight about their world. One way that we accomplished this was by creating sustained immersion experiences. Lisa would read a text with a complex issue and then give students the chance to talk about the book. After the discussion, students responded on paper using sketching to continue their thinking about the story. Students were involved with a single text for close to fifty minutes during these instructional experiences. That is a major feat with five-year-olds, especially my class of 17 boys and seven girls.

Spending time every week on these experiences not only gave students the opportunity to be immersed in literature-rich experiences, but the time spent also served as a demonstration of the thinking process. This demonstration came in many forms. According to Cambourne (1988), demonstrations can be “actions or they can be artifacts” (p. 34). The first demonstration the students experienced was the teacher language and dialogue that was facilitating their talk. Lisa and I did not speak to or treat my students like they were little kids; instead we referred to them as thinkers. We shared our thinking about a story as a demonstration for them, but were careful not to lead them to believe that our thinking was what they should be thinking. We diligently fostered an open dialogue that accepted all thoughts so students felt safe to share their ideas without fear of judgment.

Immersion and demonstrations are only successful if the students are actively engaged in what they are doing. Cambourne (1988) argues that while learners are subjected to thousands of demonstrations, “a high proportion of these demonstrations merely wash over them and are ignored” (p. 34). To keep the students engaged, time spent during these literacy experiences was completely focused on the students and their thinking. Apart from the read aloud, the experiences were student driven. Students voiced their opinions and connections during discussions and recorded and developed their thinking in artistic responses. Of the 50 minutes that we spent in these experiences, 35 of them were devoted to active participation by students. The experiences were structured to give ample time for them to talk and explain their thinking. It was important for students to discover their thoughts and not for Lisa or I to lead them where we wanted them to think.

Expectation and Responsibility

The high level of engagement that my class exhibited during these experiences was closely related to the expectations I had for my students. Brian Cambourne (1988) explains that “expectations are subtle and powerful coercers of behavior” and that through these expectations “young learners receive clear indications that they are expected to learn ... and that they are capable of doing it” (p.

35). Simply setting aside time in our week to engage in literature experiences was a significant aspect of developing the expectations I had for my students, and a strong signal that I valued this thinking time. I demonstrated to my students that what we were doing was important enough to spend a significant amount of time doing it week after week. Each time my class engaged in a literature experience, they understood that what they were being asked to do was meaningful and, more significantly, attainable. By routinely engaging in literature experiences, my students were able to build a sense of confidence about their abilities as thinkers. During these experiences, my students knew that they were going to be responsible to share their thoughts, and knowing they had something to share validated their thoughts.

Use

These weekly experiences also gave students ample time to use their thinking. Cambourne (1988) argues that “learners need time and opportunity to use, employ, and practice their developing control in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways” (p. 33). Each week students had the opportunity to hear a text and engage in meaningful response strategies that enabled them to make meaning. One response strategy that was particularly effective for my students was graffiti boards. This response strategy is a flexible and so was easily adjustable to fit the needs of my students. At the beginning of the year Lisa and I had my class respond together on a large piece of butcher paper on the floor. By having a single board we were able to keep them in close proximity as they explored using markers to record and facilitate their thinking about a story through sketches, words, and dictation. As the year progressed the graffiti boards changed from being one large piece of paper to small group boards and eventually to individual pieces of paper. As my students started to gain ownership of their thinking it was important to support them by giving them more individualized way to respond.

In January, students responded to *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1983), a picture book about a young boy who is not allowed to have a dog because times are tight, but who brings home a starving kitten he finds in a trash can on the same day that his father loses his job.



Approximation and Response

Graffiti boards were successful throughout the year not only because they were flexible response strategies, but because there was not a targeted answer. From the beginning of the year Lisa and I accepted any response the students gave as meaningful. Of course the responses that were given at the beginning of the year were simple when compared to the more complex responses at the end of the year, but that was to be expected. Lisa and I made it a point from the beginning of the year to

value students' understandings and resisted the desire to talk them into a thought.

Lisa and I wanted to understand the ideas we were exploring in literature through their eyes. We achieved this by accepting and celebrating their work and ideas, even at the first when their responses were short statements and retellings and it would have been easy to be discouraged. Their early responses were approximations of responses to literature, but we responded to them as meaning-makers who were working to make sense of text. Cambourne (1988) discusses approximation as related to children who are learning how to speak, stating that “there is no expectation that fully developed ‘correct’ (fully conventional) adult forms will be produced. He points out that adults expect baby talk from young children and it is “warmly received and treated as legitimate, relevant, and meaningful” (p. 37). The students' responses on the initial graffiti board were, of course, raw and simplistic, but they were still representations of their thinking. It was important initially to accept these responses as they were in order to promote their confidence for the next time they were asked to respond. By validating their thinking, I sent my students a strong clear message that they were thinkers and they had the skills to engage and be successful in these literacy experiences. This was the most important teacher response I could have given.

Conclusion

Looking back on the school year through the frame of Cambourne's work, my actions as a kindergarten teacher seem purposeful and effective. At the time, however, Lisa and I were both struggling and often questioned ourselves on how to most effectively invite students to respond to literature and to be aware of themselves as thinkers. What we did not want to do was to give up or wait until later to signal that we expected them to engage meaningfully in our work around literature. Out of desperation, we developed a routine of read alouds followed by talk and response and kept that routine, no matter how discouraged we were after a particular session. I realize now that it was this consistency of engagement and expectation of thoughtfulness that created an effective learning context for all of us.

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Retellings as a Valuable Response to Literature

by Kathryn Bolasky, Kindergarten Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

Retellings are the most common way in which kindergarten students respond to a text, often by excitedly sharing their favorite part of the story. Educators and researchers view retelling as a beginning, or less sophisticated response, at the bottom of the hierarchy of types of responses. Retellings are seen as reflecting only surface level understandings of a text through fairly literal recountings of what students have read (Miller, 2002, p. 163). When looking at my students' responses to text across the year, I realized that retellings served a wider range of purposes for my students and were a meaningful response that was pivotal in developing their thinking skills. In examining their retellings, I found six different categories of the kinds of thinking that my students engaged in through their retellings. Each type of retelling provided different insights on how the students were making meaning of the texts in which they were engaged.

Recounting Individual Plot Events

Many of my students responded to stories by recounting an event from the story. These retellings were straightforward and literal. The events that the students depicted were not events that were not necessarily central to the story plot. They were details of the story that they remembered. For example, after hearing *Tight Times*, by Barbara Shook Hazen (1979), about a family experiencing difficult financial struggles, Matthew drew a picture of the cat eating lima beans and the mother in the story giving the son a candy bar when his father is upset. He dictated, "This is the cat eating lima beans. The mom is giving the boy a candy bar because the Dad is sad." Cherise responded similarly to *Smoky Night*, by Eve Bunting (1997), about riots in Los Angeles. Cherise drew a picture of a house burning and the church that served as a shelter. When I asked her what she was drawing she said, "This is the fire on the house. This is the church that the people slept at."

Although these retellings might not appear to reflect deeper understandings of the books, they do provide insights into what the students attended to or remembered from the story. Students were not able to tell why they chose these details, and so I still wonder whether these details might be connected to deeper understandings than initially appears evident.



Enjoying Humorous Plot Elements

Retellings can sometimes demonstrate parts of the story that the students thought were funny or humorous. After hearing *The Book of Mean People* by Toni and Slade Morrison (2002), Nicholas responded to the part of the story when the character, a bunny, takes off his clothes. When asked about his drawing, he said, “I liked the part where he took off his clothes and stretched because it was funny.” Similarly, after the read aloud of *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979), Anton responded by depicting a humorous part of the story. He drew a cat eating lima beans and dictated, “This is the part when the cat likes lima beans.”

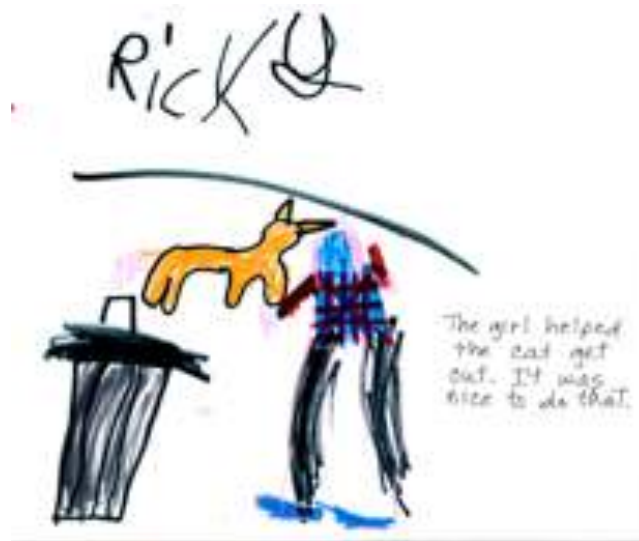
Neither Nicholas nor Anton responded to a central part of the story or in a way that related to the overall theme, but they were able to communicate their enjoyment of the story. They were able to share events in the story that they felt were funny, which in turn helped me to better understand what they enjoy as readers. I was able to use this information in my planning and in book selection.



Connecting to Personally Significant Plot Elements

Many of the retellings that my students created depicted parts of the stories that they found personally significant. Students produced responses that indicated what they saw as the most important part of the story. More often than not the students' opinions of what was important were events that adults might easily dismiss or overlook. Their responses provide a lens to understand what my students were thinking about the story. *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1979) was a particularly significant text in changing the way that I viewed my students' responses. Many of the students created responses around the part of the story where a woman helps the young boy rescue a stray cat from a garbage can. This event was not the most significant event in relation to the theme of the story, a family dealing with job loss and tough economic times, but it was significant for the children. When Ricky and Hayden decided to draw a picture depicting the woman helping the boy, they were demonstrating their connection to this event. They understood that the cat needed help and that it was both the woman and the little boy's responsibility to provide that help. Ricky said, "The girl helped the cat get out. It was nice to do that." Hayden said, "The lady is getting the cat out of the trash can. It's important because it's nice."

These responses might be easily dismissed as simple retellings of an event from the story, but I feel they are powerful. Although the students did not relate to the problem of tight economic times, they did connect to another type of problem, providing help to someone in need. Both boys demonstrated an understanding of a problem to which they could personally connect. I believe that they responded to this event, and not the father losing his job, because they could easily see themselves helping an abandoned cat, but not helping their fathers find a new job. The father being laid off was an abstract concept, but helping an abandoned cat was concrete for the boys. Given our school focus on kids taking action for a better world, focusing on a child taking action in their retelling takes on even more significance.



Highlighting a Turning Point or Important Plot Elements

As the year progressed, I noticed a shift in the students' retellings. Students began to identify major turning points in the plot development in their responses. This was an important step in their thinking in the sense that it showed me that they were able to identify important parts of the story, even though they were not able to explain why the event was important. Reyna's shift in thinking occurred after listening to *Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting (1994). She responded by not only drawing

an important event from the beginning of the story, but also one from the end. Her paper was divided by a fold vertically down the middle. On the left side she drew a picture of the people rioting and stealing from the houses and businesses. She dictated, “They are taking a door and a TV.” On the right side of the paper she drew a picture of firefighters returning the cats to the young boy and his neighbor. Her dictation for this picture was, “This is when the fireman brought their cats back.” Reyna’s ability to depict two important events from one story showed me that she was beginning to think about the read alouds more deeply. She was not just thinking about which part she liked or thought was important. She was thinking about what was happening in the story and what parts were important to the central focus of the story.

Anton created a significant response to *Smoky Night* by drawing a multi-color picture of the two cats. When asked what he was drawing he responded by saying, “This is a picture of the cats getting to know each other.” As I was reviewing this response, I realized that his comment was not an actual event from the story. Anton understood that the event at the end of the story when the cats are friendly was significant. He took that event and his own experiences of getting to know someone and created an implied event in his response. He was able to think about the process of becoming friends and use it to think about the cats getting to know each other. This was significant in the sense that the cats becoming friends reflects the main theme of the story. By responding to this important event, Anton demonstrated his understanding of the big idea of the story, not judging others before you take the time to get to know them, without putting the idea into those exact words.





Narrating the Main Points of the Story

In some cases responses that are retellings can be narratives of the main point of the story. LaFon Phillips (1999) argues that students can create retellings through narratives and storytelling (p. 368). In many cases the dictations I was taking from students were narratives that they created to explain their thinking about the story. Not all of the narratives were long and involved; they ranged from one to three sentences. For example, after reading *The Book of Mean People*, Sarah drew a picture of a sad boy. She dictated the following sentences that narrated her understanding of the story, “This is a picture of the boy being sad. Someone was mean to him.” These simple sentences tell the main point of the story. Another example of a narrative retelling is Zachary’s response to [Peach Heaven](#) (Choi, 2005). He drew a picture of the girl standing with peaches and said, “The girl was smiling because she was kind of happy. She was kind of happy because it was raining peaches and she was sad because the farmers worked so hard.” Zachary demonstrated a sound understanding of the big idea of the story through his retelling as well as comments on both the villagers’ and the farmers’ perspectives.

Garrett used retelling to explain his understanding of malnutrition. After hearing *Tight Times*, Garrett responded to the popular part of the story, the cat rescue, but he took it one step further. Like many of his classmates, Garrett drew a picture of the cat in the trash can and the boy and the woman helping get it out. Garrett’s dictation demonstrates his understanding when he says, “The boy found the cat. If he didn’t find it, it would be lost forever and never get found. It could get very sick if it doesn’t get any food.” Garrett was able to get past just saving the cat because it was a nice thing to do. He explained that the cat was in danger of starving or getting sick if left in the trash can. This retelling connected not only to the story but to the concept of hunger which we were studying at the time.

Exploring Cause and Effect through Retellings

A few of my students were able to show cause and effect relationships between events in the story

through retellings. Cause and effect relationships are not easily identified by kindergarteners, making these responses significant. After hearing *Smoky Nights*, Hayden, Abdoul, and Damon responded by showing the cause and effect between events from the story. Hayden divided his paper in half vertically and showed the cause and effect of the rioting. On the left side, he drew a picture of a person and dictated, “This is the bad guy who took the money.” On the right side, he drew a dark wall and a door and explained, “This is an empty house after the bad guy took everything.” Hayden was able to understand that “the bad guy” caused the house to be empty. Abdoul depicted the house burning and the people having to escape, saying, “The house is on fire. These are the people running scared and hurt.” This response was powerful and significant for Abdoul in the sense that he is an English language learner and rarely completed responses to read alouds. He demonstrated that he understood that the fire was what caused the people to leave their houses. Damon also responded to the burning buildings and explained his drawing by saying, “These people broke the house and put it on fire. They got a lighter and burned it. These are the people escaping.” Both Abdoul and Hayden were able to show that they understood that other people, the rioters, caused innocent people harm. Identifying cause and effect relationships is a difficult skill to learn, yet through these retellings I am able to see evidence that a few of my students understand the concept.





Conclusion

For my students, retelling was more than just repeating lines or parts of the story, it was a way to make meaning of the text that we were reading. Responding through retelling allowed my students to demonstrate what they thought and learned from each story. As a teacher, it was important for me to return to each book as a context for reviewing and understanding their retellings. Without thinking about the big ideas from the story or the reason for using a text, the retellings can be easily confused as basic summaries. I realized that there are a tremendous range of types of retellings and that closely examining each retelling provides insights into how my students are thinking about and connecting to literature. Each type of retelling served as a valuable planning tool due to the insights I gained into their thinking.

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Exploring Flow Charts as a Tool for Thinking

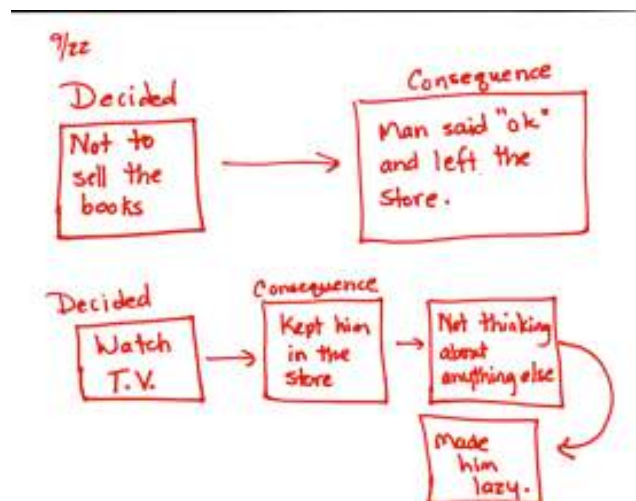
by Jaquetta Alexander & Jennifer Griffith, First/Second Grade Teachers, Van Horne Elementary School

We consider ourselves fortunate to teach at a small urban elementary school because our staff of

eight teachers allows for a high degree of collaboration. Our school year begins with a retreat in which we work together to establish a school-wide concept that every grade level uses as a framework for the school year. We decided on "power" as our concept because of the relevancy to our curriculum and student interest in issues of power the previous year. Within that framework we strive to challenge student thinking and find meaningful ways for them to respond to literature to deepen their understandings.

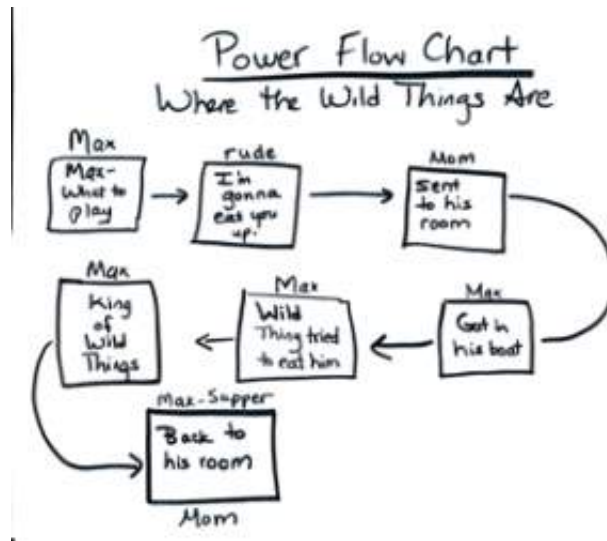
In our teacher study group, we discussed our observation that first and second graders could identify the beginnings and end points of story plots and character actions, but sometimes missed the events in between that influenced those plots and actions. We identified the need to enable students to see sequences and the relationships between cause and effect. Moline (1995) argues that flow diagrams are useful to show change, growth/development, and cause and effect. Once we made the connection between our desired outcome and Moline's work, we began using flowcharts with students.

Our Learning Lab teacher, Lisa Thomas, introduced the students to flowcharts after reading *The Pink Refrigerator* by Tim Egan (2007). During this lab session we focused on the power of consequences. Bailey portrays her understandings by stating, "I noticed that he made the choice to do what was on the refrigerator, but then he didn't know what to do when the last note was there so he learned to do things by himself." When the students were asked to think about everything that happened in the book, Lisa depicted their thinking in a simple flowchart that reflected Dodsworth's decisions and the consequences that resulted. The simple diagram shows how one idea connects to another and creates a chain reaction. This diagram allowed the students to explore cause and effect by stating the decision and the consequence.



In our next lab session Lisa read *The Wild Things* by Maurice Sendak (1963) and we focused on the power we have over other people and the power they have over us. The impact of our previous discussion about decisions and consequences was apparent in the literature discussion. Morgan

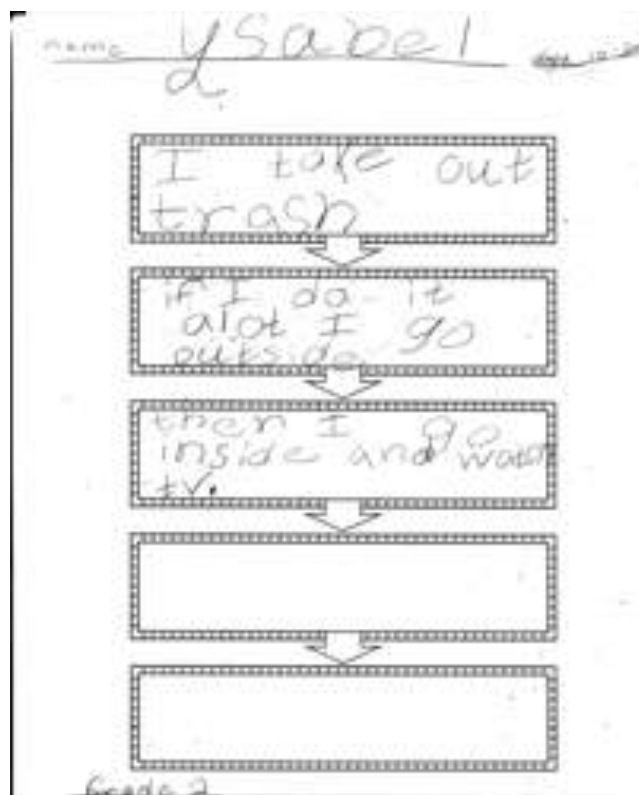
stated, “They are mad and for a consequence they showed their teeth.” Carah said, “Max had power over the monsters -- he told the wild things what to do.” The class created a flowchart together depicting the elements of power in the story. The students easily identified the shifts in who had power at this point, which are represented in the writing above the cells in the flowchart.



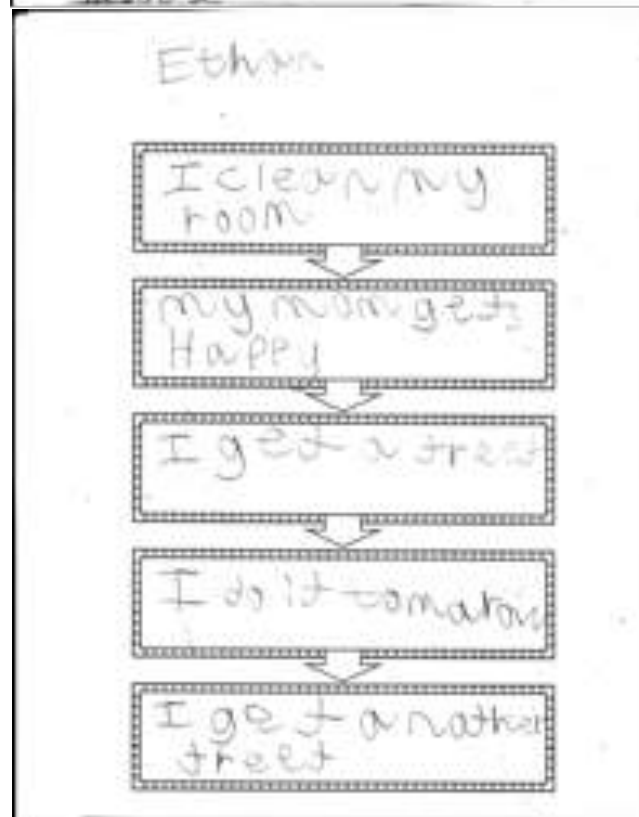
The Learning Lab is often a catalyst for our teaching in the classroom. With their knowledge of flowcharts and seeing where the kids were at with their understandings of power, we knew it was time to move our thinking into our classroom. Knowing that kids like to look for beginnings and endpoints, we chose to use a simple version of a flowchart that allowed kids to chronicle the important events from a book. This type of visual organizer allows kids to think about the sequencing of a story and focus on the causes and effects of decisions made by the characters. We used stories from our reading series, both fiction and non-fiction. With second grade we read the story *Helping Out* by George Ancona (1985), a photo essay about young children helping out adults at home, at school, and in the community, and the rewards of helpfulness. We created a class flowchart on ‘what do we do at school to help out.’ The kids were able to take their thinking about flowcharts from the learning lab and our discussions to create a flowchart about how they help out at school. Moline (1995) states that the use of flow diagrams allows kids to organize information in meaningful sequences. Because we were focused on cause and effect relationships, their simple idea of “We help out by listening” grew to be as complex as, “We could help out by making the world better if other schools were like ours.”



It was obvious that using the response strategy of flowcharts was starting to make sense and deepen their understanding. We felt that we were providing them with a tool for their thinking. With each new discussion, we were constantly connecting to our concept of power. When asked who had the power to help out our school their response was, “We do!” It was exciting for us to see their thinking begin to evolve, however, the flowcharts that we asked the students to create independently were not as successful. After we completed the class flowchart of helping out we asked the students to complete a flowchart showing cause and effect by selecting a chore that is completed at home. They were asked to show the consequences of their helpfulness. These flowcharts were evidence that they were on the edge of grasping the strategy, but still needed guidance and practice.



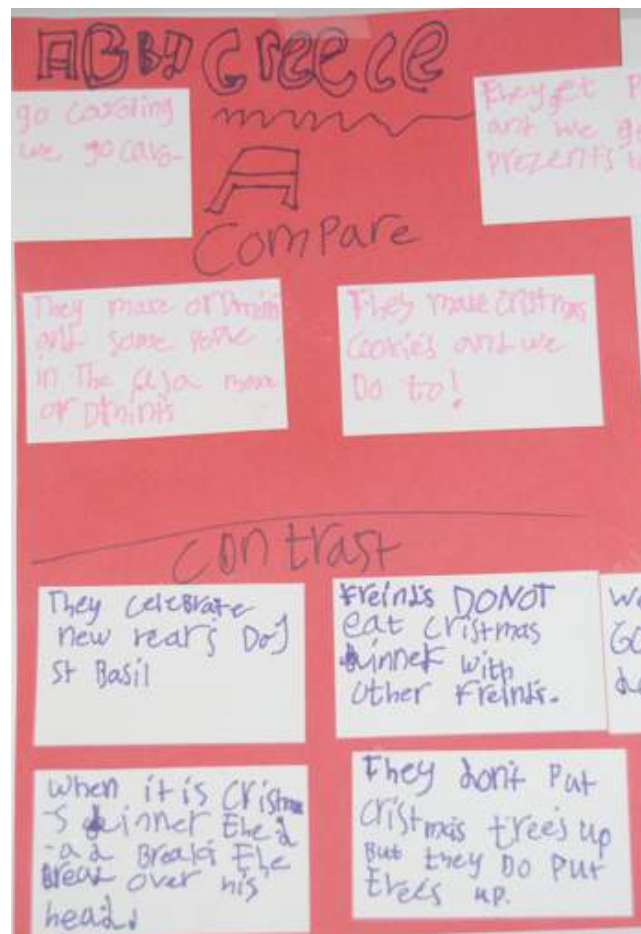
Grade 2



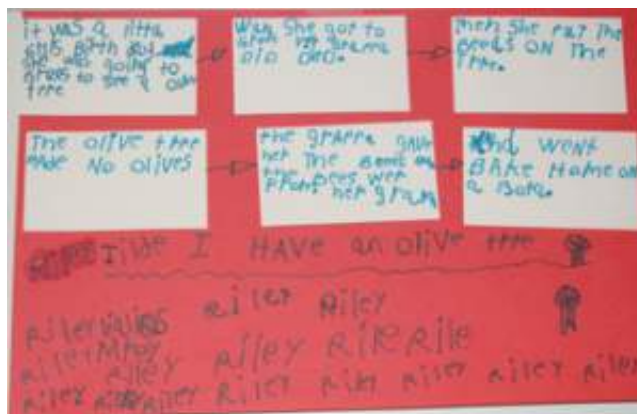
After using simple forms of visual organizers with various stories from our reading series, we knew we needed to challenge their thinking in regards to responding using this tool. As the winter holidays approached we struggled with an inquiry to undertake that would support our work in the Learning Lab with our concept of power and use of flowcharts. We value inquiry as a stance on the significance of how we learn, not only because this stance influences student learning of content, but also because it influences who learners become as human beings (Short, 2009). Our

collaborative efforts with our students led them to decide on a country inquiry about Greece and India. We delved into understanding the holiday traditions of each of these countries through guest speakers, read alouds, songs and non-fiction texts.

We referred back to Moline (1995) to review the types of visual organizers for an idea of where we wanted to head with flowcharts and organizers. We knew the kids were learning about the similarities and differences between the Greek and Indian cultures so finding an organizer that supported that thinking was challenging. We wanted kids to develop the recognition that other cultures are similar and different to their own and have a respect for others' stories. We also wanted children to have choice in their learning and offered them two varieties of organizers. One was an organizer to compare and contrast a country's holiday traditions to their own traditions. Flowcharts tend to illustrate a flow or sequence of a story and in this case, kids needed to think about comparing and contrasting and so using a comparison organizer seemed the perfect tool to support their thinking. After searching for the right one we decided to create our own version of a comparison chart, one that helped organize their thoughts in a way they were familiar with after working with flowcharts. The result was for them to split their paper in two with the labels of compare and contrast and on note cards write their comparisons and contrasts of the country they chose. The note cards limited their space and forced them to write concise statements similar to the boxes they had grown used to in the flowcharts we had worked with over the last months. We were impressed that kids took their time and wrote insightful similarities and differences. Introducing the comparison chart was a great tool for supporting their understanding of comparisons and contrasts. Abby chose to create a visual organizer of comparisons for Greece.



The second type of organizer we offered as a choice was a familiar type of flowchart -- a linear chart that sequenced the significant events in a story. To support our inquiry study of Greece and India we read international literature that gave the kids a glimpse of life in those countries as well as non-fiction texts. Kids who were drawn to a particular story had the option of chronicling the events from the story into a linear flowchart. Linear charts help kids organize their thinking in a sequential manner, allowing them to go from the beginning to the end of a story. Often, young children need a tool that supports this thinking, allowing them to visually see the whole story. Riley chose to create a linear flowchart on a story from Greece, *I Have an Olive Tree* by Eve Bunting (1999). She carefully chose the important events to chronicle on her flowchart. Once again, the use of note cards limited the kids' space so they had to select their words carefully, a skill that can be challenging for young kids.

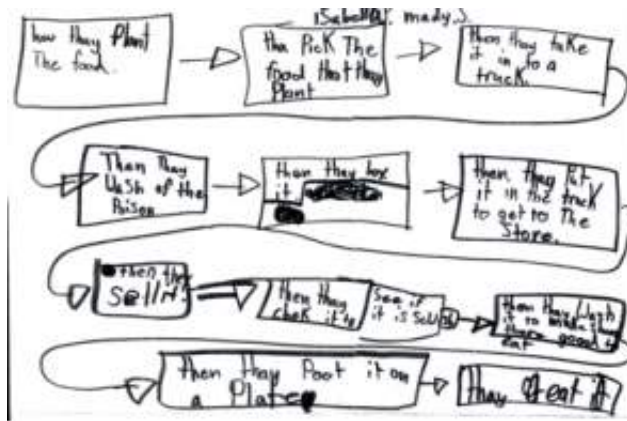


Kids need to have freedom when choosing their tools for responding so that they have ownership and take pride in their work. All the students took their time and really thought about what they were writing. When kids chose to create a flowchart in response to a read aloud, they thought about the significant events and chronicled them in their own words. It was at this moment that we saw how powerful flowcharts were in providing kids with an organizational tool for their thinking about a book. Instead of merely summarizing what happened, they were supported in focusing on the relationships of cause and effect and sequencing. In their early experiences with flowcharts, a lot of our time was focused on the procedure of how to create the chart and kids' questions of what to do. Their work with these charts indicated that our students had officially moved from focusing on the procedure of flowcharts to becoming fluent with their understanding of them. They could now use them as a tool for understanding.

After winter break we decided to continue with flowcharts. We knew from experience and research that kids learn best when they are able to focus on the same response strategy over time so they really come to understand the potentials of that strategy and can use it flexibly as a tool. Our work with flowcharts was having an impact on their thinking and their ability to organize ideas, events, and processes in the literature and inquiries we were exploring. The more we offer them the opportunity to work with a particular type of response strategy, the more fluent and flexible they become in using this strategy. Our goal was for kids to acquire enough experiences with visual organizers to use them independently by the end of the school year.

After the fall our school-wide concept shifted to thinking about the power of food for the spring semester and our kids became excited about gardening and the life cycle of plants. The classroom became inundated with texts and posters illustrating the life cycle of plants and the importance of gardening. We had a guest speaker teach us about the proper way to garden in the desert; the kids were engaged and eager to plant their vegetables. Upon doing this we decided that we needed to bring in flowcharts that would help them illustrate their learning. In the Learning Lab the kids had been studying the process food goes through to get from the farm to the table, using charts that were similar to the ones we had been exploring in class -- simple flow diagrams that illustrated the process of how food gets to your table. Although these flowcharts were effective in supporting

sequencing, we knew it was time to introduce more complex organizers to build their repertoire of different types of flowcharts.



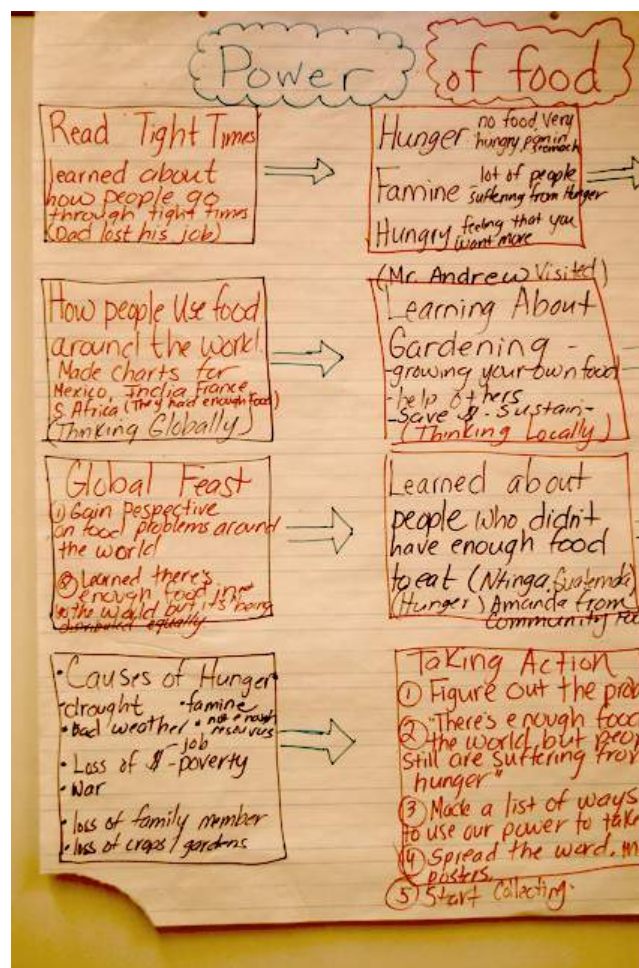
It seemed natural then that we push out kids to expand their use of flowcharts within our study of the cycle of plants. We referred back to Steve Moline (1995) where he talks about cyclical flow diagrams and how they are best used in describing continuous processes such as cycles. This was a flowchart we hadn't experimented with yet and it seemed to fit perfectly into our inquiry of gardening. We challenged our students to think about what we had been learning about the planting process and how they could represent that in a flowchart. After engaging in a conversation, we decided to create a flowchart of our learning as a class. The process helped the kids see the cycle visually and they seemed to grasp the concept quickly.



Our understandings about gardening enhanced our conceptual understanding of the power of food. It was that time in the school year to take action based on our learning. Our Learning Lab experiences were filled with stretching our thinking about the concept of taking action. We had finally moved into more complex flowcharts according to Moline (1995). We decided to use concept webs, a tool used to make connections between concepts, when discussing the meaning of taking action. In the Learning Lab Lisa had the kids stretch their thinking out of their comfort zone of cyclical and linear flowcharts to creating a concept web on taking action. This type of web encourage them to think about what taking action is, what it looks like and what it means to them. Their ideas are surrounded by the center concept of taking action. Webs were not something new to our students, but using them in the context of flowcharts as a concept web was new. The kids were able to come up with several ideas that fit into the web.



Our exploration of power had taken us on quite a journey; a journey we knew needed to be recapped in order for our taking action piece to be meaningful. It was important to us as teachers for our kids to revisit our process of taking action related to the power of food. We were hoping to integrate a visual organizer into our discussion but knew that the kids needed to lead and that we should not set it up for them. We came together as a class, asking them to think about what they learned about the power of food. It was natural for them to start with the story *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1983), that had been read in lab to begin our thinking about the power of food. Once they decided to start with this story, the class decided to create a flowchart of our learning for the semester. We were excited to see our kids naturally drawn to creating a linear flowchart, a sequencing of our significant moments in learning about the power of food.



After reflecting on the different flowcharts that we had created across the year, it was exciting to see the evolution of the kids' thinking and understanding related to this response strategy. Flowcharts is a strategy that allowed our kids to see the whole picture when reflecting on a piece of literature, concept, or process. Their evolution began with a simple format where they summarized a story or event in chronological order, moved to writing their thinking in concise statements and comparing and contrasting, and finally creating cyclical diagrams and concept webs. The one area where we wished we had spent more time was in having kids independently create flowcharts so that this strategy became a natural part of what they did on their own as inquirers to make sense of ideas.

We saw two main areas of learning for our students. One was the use of flow charts and other visual organizers as a tool for thinking about relationships, such as sequencing and cause and effect. These visual organizers provided them with a way to sort out and show how ideas or events relate to each other in some kind of order or chronology. The second was that they identified conceptual patterns to look for in other engagements and texts. They were beginning to understand, for example, that cause and effect and the way that decisions lead to consequences is a pattern they can look for as they read or engage in activities in order to make sense of those experiences.

Often, students are introduced to a response strategy and then quickly moved to another one without having the opportunity to really explore that strategy in meaningful ways and in enough depth that they develop flexible understandings of its potentials. We have learned as educators that children need time to explore and become fluent with a response strategy. Otherwise, their focus remains on the procedures of how to do the strategy, rather than on using the strategy as a tool for thinking. Our goal is for students to view our classroom as a place for thinking and for life work, not just for completing tasks and school work.

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Creating a Context for Understanding in Literature Circles

by Amy Edwards, Fifth Grade Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

My mother always told me that knowledge is power. As a fifth-grade teacher I want my students to gain as much knowledge as possible before they move on to middle school and forget everything as the hormones take over, however, I don't want them to be dependent on me for that knowledge. As a teacher I prefer the role of "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." In recent years I have made great efforts to move from a teacher-centered classroom to student-centered strategies. Probably the thing I most want kids to take from my year with them is a love of literature and to value the experience of reading. Rosenblatt (1938) states that students acquire experience as well as knowledge through reading. Literature provides the experience of "living through," not just knowledge about, the story world and lives they enter in a book. Reading thus allows students to gain both literary and social perspective. This is what I envision for my students while participating in literature circles. They are immersed in a range of text experiences to build knowledge and understanding that they then hopefully will use to connect to their own problems and needs.

My intention was to start the year by teaching about global issues, since Van Horne's focus is to effectively engage children with international literature to build intercultural understandings.

Through the world of books, students are invited to gain insights into how people around the world think, feel, and live (Short, 2008). I decided to start with literature circles of books that were set in China because the Beijing Olympics had just ended as our school year began. I assumed that with the television coverage, at least some of the students had been exposed to Chinese culture. My expectations didn't match their experience and this mismatch led to tension throughout our inquiry.

I started the literature circles by reviewing the guidelines for literature discussion since students had participated in them during the previous years. Since this would be their first time discussing literature together with a new group of kids, I knew this step would make the discussion groups go a bit smoother. We had a whole group discussion of a picture book, [*Ruby's Wish*](#) (Yim, 2002), a book about a little girl in historical China who wanted to go to school. Afterward we debriefed as to how the discussion went and came up with a list of guidelines for literature circle discussions. This list was similar to the guidelines my class used last year, however, I felt it was important for this group to create their own guidelines for discussion so that they had ownership in the process.

The books we read were [*The Diary of Ma Yan*](#) (Yan, 2002), [*Red Scarf Girl*](#) (Jiang, 1997), [*Chu Ju's House*](#) (Whelan, 2004), and [*Dragonwings*](#) (Yep, 1975). In introducing a new set of books, I always tell students about the authors for each novel so they get a feel for their perspectives. It is important to know the backgrounds of authors and whether they are an insider or an outsider to the culture. I had cut out a few news articles about Beijing; few were about the culture and most focused on the games and how the Americans were performing. I also had a range of books about China, both fiction and non fiction, available for independent reading. Other than that, there was little background building before reading to teach students about the culture.

Each week the students participated in literature circles using several discussion strategies. Some of the strategies for facilitating discussion were Graffiti Boards, Save the Last Word for Me, and Consensus Boards (Short & Harste, 1996). Graffiti Board are where students in a small group respond to literature using pictures or words written randomly on a large piece of brainstorming paper much like graffiti on a wall. Graffiti boards let students respond to a story before and during their discussion. As the discussion unfolds, the events of the story take a back seat to the issues, tensions, and problems that students connect to within a book. I like this strategy because it allows even the most reluctant students to share their thoughts on the paper for all to see.



Figure 1: Graffiti Board of Red Scarf Girl

While listening to the discussions of *Red Scarf Girl*, I noticed that there was a great deal of confusion about the Cultural Revolution in China. The time period was a bit of a mystery to my students. In the forward, the author explains that the Cultural Revolution started in China in 1966 but that 17 years earlier, in 1949, the revolutionary leader Mao Ze-dong led the communist party to power as the new leaders in China. This important information was missed by some students because they skipped the forward, thinking it was not important to the story. I quickly realized that I needed to sit down with this group and talk about the difference between democracy, which we were learning about in social studies, and China's government, communism, which they were unfamiliar with. What I didn't realize at that time was the extent of their confusion about historical China as compared to contemporary China. I also noticed that students were spending so much time puzzling through what was happening in the book that they were not as engaged with the issues and ideas as I had expected.

After responding to the story by adding to their graffiti boards several times as they continued reading chapters, they looked for issues they saw as significant in the books. They identified these on a consensus board. On a large piece of paper with sections for each, they individually listed the issues that they felt were important in the text. They then had to come to consensus about what they all thought were the main issues in the book and list those in the center of the consensus board.

After the groups completed this discussion, we charted the issues found by each group as a class. The issues that students identified across the novels about China were:

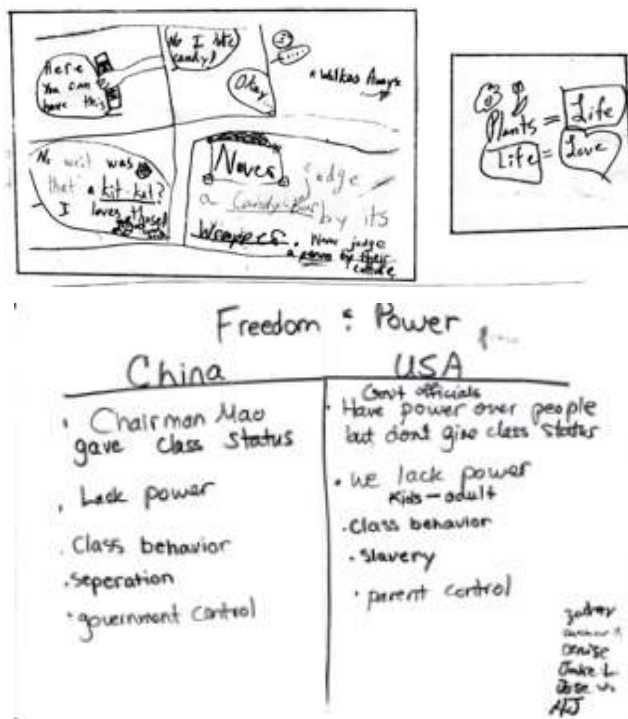
- gender preference
- population-one child limit
- adult/child relationships
- lack of resources for families: \$ and time
- sick parents

-
- The sketch map shows a village layout with various sections labeled in Chinese and English. The sections include:
- Top Left:** A large area labeled "Village" with a note "The village is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The village is a very old one and has a long history." and "The village is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Top Right:** A section labeled "School" with a note "The school is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The school is a very old one and has a long history." and "The school is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Center:** A section labeled "Church" with a note "The church is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The church is a very old one and has a long history." and "The church is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Bottom Left:** A section labeled "Market" with a note "The market is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The market is a very old one and has a long history." and "The market is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Bottom Right:** A section labeled "Bazaar" with a note "The bazaar is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The bazaar is a very old one and has a long history." and "The bazaar is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Right:** A section labeled "Cemetery" with a note "The cemetery is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The cemetery is a very old one and has a long history." and "The cemetery is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Left:** A section labeled "Public Hall" with a note "The public hall is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The public hall is a very old one and has a long history." and "The public hall is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Left:** A section labeled "Police Station" with a note "The police station is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The police station is a very old one and has a long history." and "The police station is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Right:** A section labeled "Post Office" with a note "The post office is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The post office is a very old one and has a long history." and "The post office is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Center:** A section labeled "Municipal Office" with a note "The municipal office is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal office is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal office is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Left:** A section labeled "Municipal Council" with a note "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Right:** A section labeled "Municipal Committee" with a note "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Bottom Left:** A section labeled "Municipal Board" with a note "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Bottom Right:** A section labeled "Municipal Council" with a note "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal council is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Bottom Far Left:** A section labeled "Municipal Committee" with a note "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal committee is a very old one and has a long history."
 - Far Bottom Far Bottom Far Right:** A section labeled "Municipal Board" with a note "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history." Below it, a note "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history." and "The municipal board is a very old one and has a long history."

As I read through their list of issues from the books about China I became worried that the students thought China was a terrible place. I didn't want to demonize Chinese culture because of misperceptions brought about by reading these historical novels. I wanted the students to realize that at least some of these problems existed in our country historically as well and so asked them to look at the same issues in the United States. In small discussion groups, students chose one issue and created T-charts listing the problems related to this issue and whether or not these issues were exclusive to China or also appeared in the U.S., either now or historically. We then shared in a whole group setting. Through this experience, students realized that these problems were found in the U.S. as well as China. The issues the four groups chose to compare with the U.S. were:

- 33

- freedom and power



A common problem with international studies is that students assume that the target country still exists in the past. It is difficult to find current, up-to-date, contemporary texts on many cultures and countries. This was true throughout this study. There were a lot of misconceptions about contemporary culture in China. Students were discussing events as if nothing had changed in China since the 1960s and the Cultural Revolution. Students needed to realize that much had changed in both the U.S. and China since 1966. For instance, one of the issues that came up in several of the novels was that children were disciplined using corporal punishment. Students couldn't believe that kids were hit by adults as a means to teach them how to behave. We discussed how children at our school are currently disciplined and that sometimes they are asked to take a time out or "Think Time" in a special location in the room, an adjoining room, or the office. I explained to the students that in my school years, small slaps were administered by adults to children who misbehaved. Robert confirmed this practice because his dad had shared that if you were swatted at school, usually the parents followed up with the same discipline at home just to make sure you got the point. We talked about the fact that what is considered appropriate changes over time in all societies throughout the world and that we no longer consider it appropriate to slap or swat a child in school. Since most of our books were historical, this practice could have changed in China as well. Robert pointed out that maybe someday in the future sending kids to other rooms for "time out" won't be considered a good thing to do to kids.

The issue of hitting children also came up in the *Diary of Ma Yan*, a contemporary story about China. This story takes place in rural China as does *Chu Ju's House* where children who are living in an orphanage are hit as a form of discipline. In thinking things through, students realized that

changes in attitudes sometimes take place slower in rural areas than in cities.

To challenge some of their misperceptions about contemporary China, I invited a Chinese doctoral student from the University of Arizona, Ke Huang, to visit our classroom to discuss the present day culture. I wanted the students to be able to interview an insider to Chinese culture to counter some of the stereotypes I was afraid they were developing. The students asked many questions especially about her experiences with school and childhood in China. They asked about some of the issues they were seeing in the literature and she was forthright in answering tough questions about population control, corporal punishment, and governmental philosophies. She knew about the time period of the Cultural Revolution, but was too young to remember it. This was a valuable addition to the unit and Ke was an amazing resource.

Near the end of the literature study I searched for articles on contemporary China through the Scholastic web site. I found some interesting pieces appropriate for fifth graders on issues such as population control, China's need for hydro-electric power and the resulting damage to the environment, governmental shifts from communism to free trade, and gender issues. Students read and discussed these short pieces in small groups and shared the big ideas and information with the whole class. This experience gave students a much better understanding of Chinese culture, both in the historical setting of the novels and in contemporary times. In fact, students were fascinated with understanding communism and it became a topic of interest throughout the school year. Some of the students even went snooping to the end of the Social Studies textbook in chapters on the Cold War and Vietnam. They did this again and again and found other texts that mentioned communism on my nonfiction shelves. They had created a context for the ideas behind communism and wanted to know more.

In reflecting on this experience, I felt positively about the ways in which these engagements challenged the misconceptions and stereotypes my students were developing through their discussions in the literature circles. I felt tension, however, about the need to counter their misconceptions and wondered what I could have done differently in setting up this inquiry.

Many times I pull sets of related texts, maps, newspaper articles and other artifacts related to the critical issues or the geographic area of study to enhance the experience for the students. I hope these artifacts will spark an interest in some aspect of the culture. I don't want to pre-teach the concepts, but build experiences and knowledge so the students can puzzle through the text while building their own meanings and understandings. Rosenblatt (1938) states that background materials often receive too much attention and can become an end to a means. She feels that background knowledge has value only when students feel the need for it and when it is assimilated into a student's experience with a certain piece of literature.

It had not crossed my mind that I needed to immerse this new group of students into texts about China and the Cultural Revolution before reading these novels. All but one student had been at Van Horne and had worked with concepts of internationalism and culture for two years. I made the mistake of thinking these new kids had the background, experience, and connections that my previous class had left with in May. I felt they didn't need the additional information and that their experience with the novels could be damaged by giving away too much before reading. I wanted them to glean the information about China and the Cultural Revolution from reading, not be spoon fed the ideas from the teacher. Looking back I realize I could have helped them understand better if I myself had known more about the topic before getting started. In other words, I could have done my homework a bit more thoroughly.

Sylvia Edgerton is a teacher who believes that the more she knows about a topic the more her students will learn (Smith, Diaz, & Edgerton, 2008). Before she starts an inquiry unit she reads newspaper articles, views video clips from the internet, watches the nightly news to increase her awareness of state and federal legislation that might be related to the topic, and interviews anyone who might be knowledgeable about the topic that are getting ready to study. During the study she deliberately plans reflective activities so students can have opportunities to revisit texts and make connections between and among them.

The problems encountered during our literature circles on China taught me firsthand to consider the experiences with a range of texts that students might need both ahead of time and during the study. In this case, they needed ways to more effectively build a context within which they could construct meaning and explore issues from novels. Smith, Diaz, and Edgerton (2008) believe exposure to multiple texts helps build connections and deeper intertextual understandings. They describe intertextuality as the ways that texts -- whether written, visual, or spoken -- are interpreted, one in light of the other. Intertextuality is more than trying to find a personal link while reading or connecting one text to another. It is a cognitive strategy that, linked with intentional thinking, can progressively transform readers and their understandings. They believe this collection of texts should be explored both at the beginning and throughout an inquiry-based study. As students explore multiple texts in multiple settings they spin a web of understanding. Connections are then made from student to student and text to text, creating layers of meaning and new understandings.

After working through the struggles that students had with the concepts and issues in the books relating to China, I am now considering when to prepare kids ahead of time for reading a particular set of novels and when to just immerse them in the novels and let them figure them out the confusions on their own. I now know that I need to continuously struggle with the balance between supplying experiences and texts before literature circles and letting students make their own meaning during the study with intertextual materials that facilitate connections gained through

dialogue with other students and between texts. Clearly, there is no one right way to approach this balance and I need to know the literature and my students to make these decisions with each new set of literature discussions.

Our first literature experience of the year wasn't a failure from a teaching and learning standpoint because I learned a few things about my students and my teaching. It was a learning experience I didn't expect but nonetheless was still very valid. Students learned that they can't judge another place by its history and realized they needed to challenge their assumptions and recognize that other countries are not still operating in the past. One of the most valuable things they learned was how to sustain themselves as readers even when they don't understand the content. They may not have engaged in the in-depth discussions of issues that I had hoped would emerge from these novels, but they learned to puzzle through and develop valuable understandings and knowledge from confusing texts. I know that the knowledge they gained was powerful for them because of this struggle. Tension provided a generative point of learning, both for me and for my students, even though that learning was not what any of us had originally intended.

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Integrating Fiction and NonFiction Texts to Build Deep Understanding

by Lisa Thomas, Project Specialist, Van Horne Elementary School, and Kathy G. Short, Professor, University of Arizona.

Howard Gardner (1991) argues that the purpose of education is to enhance understanding. This straightforward statement challenges the current emphasis on testing and standards in schools and the resulting focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills at the expense of understanding. This loss of focus on understanding is particularly problematic since understanding involves “making connections among and between things, about deep and not surface knowledge, and about great complexity, not simplicity” (Perrone, 1994, p. 13). These beliefs about the value of deep and complex understandings lie at the heart of our work at Van Horne, with a particular focus on developing conceptual understandings about culture and global issues.

We rely heavily on fiction to help students develop global perspectives and intercultural understanding. Stories that are authentic representations of cultures allow students to live through the characters and go beyond superficial understandings of culture. Literature can help children see how people within that culture actually think and believe and how they view their world. They can see how their own lives and needs for belonging and safety connect in fundamental ways with children in another part of the world as well as what makes those children’s lives and ways of thinking unique and distinctive. When we identify confusions or misperceptions in students’ understandings, we almost automatically search for a piece of fiction that we think will push their thinking.

Our inquiry into global issues of hunger began, like most of our work, with fiction. We knew that that students needed to develop a deep understanding of the causes of hunger to recognize possible solutions and take thoughtful action. Without a deep understanding of the complexity of the causes, social action often ends up taking the form of charity -- giving handouts to the “poor” to meet immediate needs without addressing the larger societal factors that produce the need or supporting the individuals involved in taking action for themselves (Cowhey, 2006). We consulted a range of resources, particularly a teacher resource handbook, *Finding Solutions to Hunger* (Kempf, 2005), to help us think about the causes that needed to be considered, and gathered picture books and novels that included food or hunger in some way within the plot.

As we discussed the causes of hunger and looked at the books, we realized that we would need to access a broader range of texts to support students in developing a depth of understanding about hunger. In particular, we needed to move from our dependency on fiction to more nonfiction and multimedia texts. We had only located a few fiction books that addressed hunger, but more importantly, we realized that students needed access to a range of resources if they were to really understand the different reasons for hunger.

Story provides a single point of view, one family or character, but our students needed a broader range of texts in order to develop an understanding of the extent of the problem in our world. Nonfiction would provide students with definitions, terminology, and facts to make the issues real;

not just an interesting story, but something actually happening in the world. Through story, students come to understand the human emotions and struggles related to issues, but not necessarily the broader world context of those issues. Students needed to explore the extent of the problem of hunger in the world, especially since most had not experienced hunger themselves. Hunger affects many people in the world and the results are dire, going far beyond the stomach rumblings that our students associated with being hungry. We had also noticed that the characters in fiction usually found solutions to hunger that did not reflect the realities of ongoing chronic hunger.

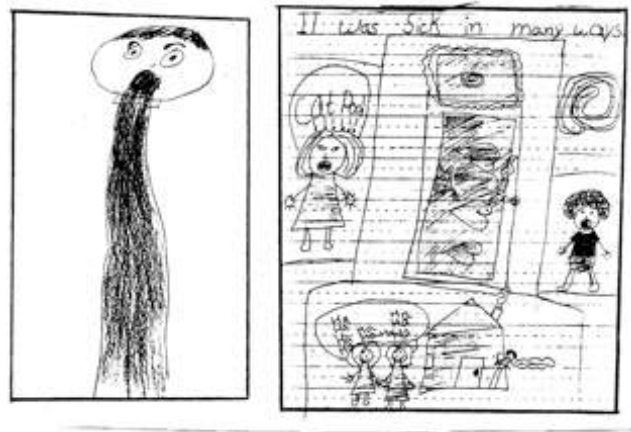
Our professional inquiry as teachers focused on the roles and use of different types of nonfiction and fiction texts within the children's inquiry into hunger. We saw nonfiction as helping students develop an understanding of the extent and severity of the problem and the lack of easy solutions, along with a recognition that the problem exists in their own community as well as in other places around the world. We believed that story humanizes numbers, but recognized that students needed the numbers in this inquiry -- they needed to know the facts. Through story, they might come to feel empathy and sympathy for those who go hungry, but still not feel the need to get involved or be socially responsible without also understanding the extent and causes of the problem.

Locating accessible nonfiction texts remained a difficult issue throughout the inquiry. The majority of nonfiction texts on the causes and experiences of hunger are written for middle school and high school students, which we took as an indication that many have underestimated the ability of young children to consider complex social issues. We found some nonfiction; mostly series books that provide information but are not particularly well written. We also found it interesting that most of these books were written and published first in the U.K., not the U.S., another indication of how American society underestimates the ability of children to consider and understand complex issues. We also located other types of texts, many of them real world materials, such as newspaper articles and brochures from agencies as well as films and guest speakers.

One source of information on causes of hunger is the nonfiction series books that are available in libraries to support students in researching a topic. These books are not well-written powerful nonfiction literature -- they are written to inform rather than to engage and so the writing is fairly pedestrian. Even so, these texts do provide access to a range of information and photographs. We used excerpts from these series books because they were the only nonfiction books that we could locate that we thought were accessible reading materials for students.

One series book that was particularly useful was *Famine: The World Reacts* (Bennett, 1998), which is organized around major aspects of hunger and famine around the world. Each section briefly introduces the facts related to that aspect of hunger, followed by a specific example from some part of the world. We made multiple copies of the sections that addressed the causes of hunger, such as

poverty, natural disasters, war, foreign debts, cash crops, and inequality in food distribution. Students worked in small groups of four with each group reading a different section. We encouraged students to discuss the reading in their group and decide together what was most important for other students to know. The groups then each created posters to illustrate and present the important points of their section. These posters were shared in a gallery walk where students moved from table to table to examine what the other groups had learned. Through this process students were introduced to a broad range of issues on hunger as well as to the language that we would explore in depth throughout our study.





Another nonfiction text were fact cards used to support students in understanding that hunger is world wide and that food scarcity is not the primary cause of hunger. The most common myth about hunger is that people starve because there are too many mouths to feed and not enough food in the world. The reality is that there is more than enough food produced around the world to feed everyone; the issue is not the production of food but sharing that food more fairly. We borrowed and adapted an engagement from *Finding Solutions to Hunger* (Kempf, 2005). Students were introduced to the child mortality rate as a means of measuring the extent of the problem of hunger within countries around the world. The child mortality rate is the number of children out of 1000 who die of hunger and hunger-related diseases before the age of five. We showed students a chart of child mortality rates in ten countries and talked about what those differences meant.

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

Students then worked in small groups, each focusing on a fact card from a specific country. They had to determine if enough food could be produced by the country to support its population, how significant the hunger problem was within that country, and why people were going hungry. They read and discussed the fact card together and recorded their thinking about these three questions. Each group shared their findings with the class so that students could then compare issues across countries. Students were surprised to find that even in countries that they had seen as impoverished, such as India and Rwanda, enough food could be grown to feed everyone but that the land instead was used for cash crops like coffee or tobacco or the food was not equally

distributed among the people of that country. They also realized that people can work hard but not be paid enough to buy the food they need and that some governments sell their food to other countries, even though that means their own people go hungry.

A101 - Madan, Tanner B. 14/10/18

Where is your country on the map?
Bottom tip of Africa

Is there enough food produced in your country to supply everyone with enough calories?
yes, there's more than enough

Are there hungry people in your country?
There is hungry people

What is the child mortality rate?
66

Why can't people get food?
PEOPLE CAN'T GET FOOD BECAUSE OF THEIR
discrimination gets blocked from jobs
hard to find jobs 3 1/2 years of school,
low pay. The land is used for cash crops.

CARL
MADAN
JACKSON

Group #2

SOUTH AFRICA Child Mortality Rate – 66

You live in the most highly developed country on the African continent. Enough grain is grown in South Africa to provide every person with at least 3,000 calories a day. That's a lot of grain! Many people, including you and your family, cannot afford to buy that food. Your skin is black and your country has had a long history of apartheid. You earn only 1/5 what white workers earn and this is not enough to live a healthy life. When you become sick it is nearly impossible to find a doctor who will care for you. Half the black children in your country suffer stunted growth because they cannot get enough food.

Many of your friends are having difficulty finding jobs. There just aren't enough to go around. Seasonal work can be found in the fields of large, wealthy landowners who grow tobacco, cotton, sugarcane or grapes (for wine). These cash crops are shipped to other countries. This work is hard and the pay is not enough to support a family. You would like to see more of the land that is used to grow cash crops used instead to grow food for hungry people.

It is unlikely that your friends or you will find work. There are few jobs available and there is little chance of being trained for a better job. The average South African receives only 3 1/2 years of schooling over a lifetime.

Is there enough food?

Are there hungry people in South Africa?

Why can't hungry people get food?

Another key engagement was creating a drama text where students took on roles within a global banquet. Students were assigned to three groups and given food at the banquet that reflected the world's population -- those who have more food than what they need (15%), those who have just enough food (60%), and those who never get enough and are always hungry (25%). The 25 students who received only one small bowl of rice to share watched as 12 students each received a large pizza and another 60 sat in small groups with their own bowls of rice and beans. This drama text provided students with a concrete visualization and experience to understand that enough food does exist in the world but is unequally distributed.

These engagements provided students with information that challenged their misconceptions related to hunger and with facts about the many different reasons for chronic hunger. They helped kids understand that chronic hunger over long periods of time was the major issue, not famine and starvation. We wanted kids to do more than know that there was a hunger problem -- we wanted them to care that people are hungry in our world. We knew we needed to return to story as a way to humanize hunger.

We had not found any strong picture books with stories focused around hunger and so looked for other types of texts that might humanize hunger; specifically we looked for movies that would offer a glimpse into the life of an individual or family struggling with hunger. We decided to use excerpts from the movie *Cinderella Man* — the story of a boxer who loses his job during the Great Depression in the U.S. and goes from great wealth to devastating poverty. We showed three short clips from the movie. In the first, the students watched as the mother added water to the milk to make it stretch further and the father gave his share of breakfast to his daughter because she was still hungry after finishing her portion. The second clip showed the father walking past a homeless camp to a factory gate where he waits in a crowd of other men all hoping to be chosen for a day's work. The last was a scene where the father is angry with his son for stealing salami from the butcher until the boy admits that he stole to try and keep the family together. His fear was that the father would send the children away to a farm family. Following each clip we asked the students to show their thinking through words and pictures on a large graffiti board at each table. The movie clips were a powerful text because the actors and story line drew the children into the situation. They empathized with the struggles of this family and the deep silence that filled the room after each short excerpt as children quickly wrote and drew was an indication of their emotional involvement.

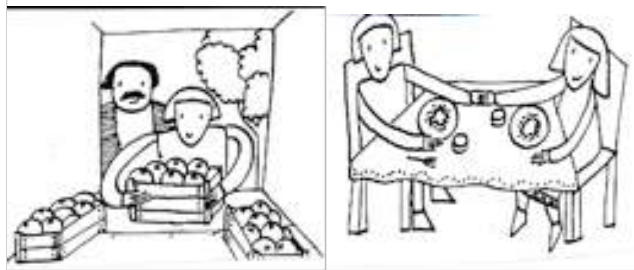




After the third excerpt and response on the graffiti board, we talked together about their observations. Students' comments focused on the father's desire to work but inability to find a job to feed his family. They stated that he was not lazy and condemned the business owner who only hired nine workers when there were so many crowded at the gate. Other students pointed out that if the owner hired everyone, his own family would go hungry. They noted that the family didn't have enough food; they had just enough to get by but were still hungry. One group of students had a major debate about stealing and whether it is better to steal than to die from hunger. The full extent of the impact of this movie became clear as they continued to refer to the events from the movie months after viewing the clips. They *felt* the family's pain and hunger in ways that they could not put into words but that stayed with them throughout our inquiry.

Another nonfiction text was an oral story related to food distribution and food safety. This story was told through the use of visual picture cards similar to Kamishibai and a flow chart that focused on the steps involved in growing tomatoes and taking them through the food system to eventually getting them to someone's dinner table.

Thomas9



The students then broke into five small groups with each small group discussing on what had to happen and what could go wrong in the five stages of food distribution -- getting ready to grow food, growing the food, moving the food from the field, processing and selling the food, and buying, preparing and eating the food.

Growing the food	
What has to happen?	What could go wrong?
You <u>have to</u> water your plants.	You could not get your water like as water the plants.
Get the seeds and soil.	You might not have money to get the soil.
You need to get keep the birds away.	The birds might eat the plants.
Water the plants every day and they need sun light.	Farmers might get hurt.
You might not have the space or land.	You don't have space or land.
Not enough money to make	

Students had been collecting newspaper articles about food or hunger and posting them on a bulletin board in the hallway. They examined a number of the articles to think about what aspect of the food distribution process was breaking down -- drought that was affecting a country's ability to grow food, salmonella in peanut butter processing factories, farm foreclosures, and truckers unable to afford gas to transport food.



We continued to use fiction texts throughout the study in a variety of ways. We read and discussed stories in whole group that addressed specific issues that might cause hunger, such as *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1983) about a family experiencing job loss and economic difficulty and *Sami and the Time of Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland, 1992) about a family involved in war and conflict. We gathered a text set of picture books about families facing tight times. Students read across the texts and recorded their thinking. As a group, they then created a continuum of wants and needs to show which families were doing without things that they wanted (new shoes, a pet, or a favorite food) and which were doing without needs (food, shelter).

of taking action.

When it was time for students to make decisions about how they might take action to address hunger in our world, we turned to the internet. Using links to websites from a range of organizations, students discovered that some organizations addressed only the surface issue of money to buy food to meet an immediate need. The organizations they found compelling were those that focused on children and involved donations to purchase seeds for gardens or animals like goats and chickens as ongoing sources of food and income for families to provide for themselves.

This experience demonstrated for us the importance of using more nonfiction and multimedia texts as a way to connect the classroom with real life -- to make the context of global issues real for students and to provide the information they need to understand the causes of those issues. We also recognized that an overemphasis on fiction can cause other problems for students as readers and inquirers. Stephanie Harvey (2002) points out that 80-90% of the reading we do as adults is nonfiction -- newspapers, magazines, memos, manuals, directions, and informational books -- while elementary classrooms typically have over 80% of their reading as fiction. She argues that kids need more time to read nonfiction in classrooms to learn how to read it and make sense from it as well as to feed their curiosity, passion, and engagement with the world.

The use of such a wide range of types of texts, including drama, visual images, film clips, fact cards, guest speakers, nonfiction excerpts, and picture books provided students with multiple perspectives on the causes of hunger. This range of texts supported more diversity in the types of engagements with these texts and the use of tools to organize information, such as flow charts and T-charts. More significantly, the integration of fiction and nonfiction created a powerful context for students to build deep understanding and knowledge. They were able to connect emotion and reason, the heart and the mind.

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Exploring World Languages in an After School Language Club

by Lisa Thomas, Project Specialist, Van Horne Elementary School

Language is at the heart of the human experience. We know that understanding language is an important part of understanding cultural identity because the way that people view and interpret their world is reflected in their language (Banks, 2001). For three years we have worked at Van Horne to develop intercultural understandings using children's literature. As we gather books to support our inquiries into other cultures, we intentionally include texts in the languages of those cultures. We learned early in this work that students find the world languages represented in these books compelling and return to them over and over to try to make sense of the symbols and structures and to compare the new language to what they know about English.

Our students' interest in world languages has caused us to inquire into language study practices in other elementary schools and to consider expanding our curriculum to include language study. We found several models that schools use to engage students in world language study, choosing the one that best matches their resources, beliefs, and goals. One model is Language Immersion which provides content area instruction in specific target languages. Students are taught math or science in a target world language for between 50 and 80 percent of their school day. A second model is a FLES program where language is taught as a separate subject. World language classes in FLES programs are typically taught for about 30 minutes a day, three to five days a week. A third model is a FLEX program which focuses on exploring target language/s through a collection of group engagements and independent activities. Many proponents of foreign language instruction dismiss FLEX programs, arguing that Immersion and FLES result in greater language fluency. While we agree that students won't become fluent speakers of a new language through a FLEX program, the after school FLEX classes at our school are valuable learning opportunities because they compliment and enrich our cultural studies and generate an interest in studying a range of languages.

We decided to begin our world language exploration at Van Horne by creating an after school language club. Holding the club after school was less disruptive to classroom schedules but meant that we had to create, structure, and plan engagements that were appropriate for children who had already been in class all day. Our students work and study hard during the school day and we believe that, because they are children, their after school time should be playful. Participation in the Language Club was a choice and so we hoped that children would want to join us and look

forward to attending each week. We intentionally planned experiences that children would find interesting and fun.

Our focus in the club was on language exploration within a cultural context. We envisioned a club where children were invited to sample a range of languages across multiple aspects and across multiple cultures. Their experiences in the club would be broad and varied; an opportunity to consider and compare. We knew that the language club experiences would only touch the surface of culture, but would compliment the deep explorations of culture that our students experience as part of our regular school curriculum.

We also didn't expect that students would become fluent speakers of a new language during the club. Our goal was to promote interest in world languages through games, cooking, songs, story and drama. Our hope was that this interest would result in a more focused study of a world language in the future. We saw the language club as the school's first step toward more comprehensive language study opportunities in the future.

Jenny, arts integration specialist, and Lisa, librarian, organized and facilitated the Language Club. We are both native English speakers so we needed guest experts who were native speakers of world languages. We employed the help of international students from the College of Education at the University of Arizona. Three graduate students expressed an interest: Ke, from China, was our Mandarin expert, Junko, from Japan, taught Japanese, and Dan, who moved to the U.S. from South Korea as a teenager, taught Korean. It was significant that our students had the opportunity to work with and learn from these specialists over time. In school settings guests typically visit for one day. This can result in the sense that they are on display and leave students feeling as if these international visitors are exotic. Working with the language specialists over time gave our students the rare opportunity to develop relationships with people from other countries and cultures.





In introducing herself at a conference, Korean-American author, Linda Sue Park, said, “My parents are from Korea. It is near China and Japan but it is NOT China or Japan.” This point of view resonates for us as we work to help our students understand that countries that are close to each other geographically may share some physical and cultural characteristics but each is distinct. Outsiders to those cultures tend to generalize and stereotype all people from Asia as one group. In the beginning stages of our planning we thought that it would be effective to have language specialists from different parts of the world. It was a happy accident that the graduate students who first showed an interest all came from different countries in Asia. As our students developed relationships with Ke, Junko, and Dan, they began to see the connections and distinctions between the peoples and cultures of China, South Korea, and Japan. Later, when another university student from Taiwan visited the club, they realized that there are differences within Chinese cultures.



Students in first through fifth grade were invited to participate in the Language Club. We limited participation to 50 students and the spots filled up quickly. The tuition was fifty dollars for ten weeks but we were able to offer scholarships to families that needed them so no one was turned away because of their inability to pay the tuition. The club met on Wednesday afternoons for 90 minutes. Each meeting included a story time, language lesson, and centers.

We began each club meeting with a snack and whole group story time. We selected literature written in the native languages of our specialists. Dan, Ke, and Junko helped us locate books that were originally published in China, Japan, or South Korea with stories that authentically represented the cultures within these countries. Some of the books had been translated into English, some were in the original language, and some were bilingual. The students enjoyed listening to the stories in their original language, relying on the illustrations to make sense of the story. At times we read the book in both the world language and English. The children were curious about the patterns and repetitions that they heard as the specialists read and they asked many questions, trying to make sense of the structures and sounds within the language. It was evident that they were connecting the new language experiences to what they knew about English.





The students were divided into three smaller groups for language lessons. Each group was taught by a different specialist. Ke, Junko, and Dan planned lessons that introduced specific types of vocabulary or engaged students in a more focused look at some aspect of their native language. During the first three weeks of language club students rotated through all of the languages get a taste of each and to allow them to see the distinctions between these three different, but connected, languages. After this introduction we asked the students to choose the language that they most wanted to study for the remainder of the club. This gave our specialists a chance to connect one week's lesson to the next and provided more focus and continuity for the children.

During language lessons, Junko, Ke, and Dan taught the words for family members using family tree diagrams, introduced games that required students to combine number words with words for facial features and body parts, taught word patterns that are used for large numbers, and shared the origins of the written symbols, encouraging students to form the word with their bodies. Students learned songs that the specialists had sung as children, practiced writing their names in the languages, wrote words that are commonly used at school, and read simple phrases, stories and poetry in the new languages.





After the language lessons we invited students to choose from a range of small group language centers. This was a chance to explore across the languages and cultures represented by our language specialists through art, games, music, movement, technology and cooking. Each individual center emphasized one of the three languages or an engagement from one of the countries and students were free to go to the centers that they found most intriguing. We relied on our specialists to plan center engagements that were culturally relevant and tried to choose experiences that encouraged students to speak or write a new language in some way. Each language specialist worked at one of the centers, while Jenny and I facilitated the other choices.

During center time the children were invited to learn about the Chinese art of cut paper with Ke. They dressed in traditional Korean clothing with Dan. They learned to use chopsticks with Junko. Students played games from each country, surfed websites, prepared sushi, mandu and egg drop soup, created a range of folded paper art, wrote using bamboo brushes and ink, and created watercolors inspired by music and images from all three countries.



Many of the center engagements came from the childhood experiences of our language specialists, making them more than fun activities from a strange land for the children. The songs, games and projects were an authentic part of the identities of our specialists and a reflection of what was important in their lives. The personal stories they told around the projects that the students did at each center deepened the cultural significance. Using chopsticks is a part of Junko's identity, so learning to use them from Junko gave students insight into her as a cultural being. As Dan helped the students try on his own children's traditional Korean clothing, they came to understand how Korean traditions play a role in his life as a Korean American father. Using short video clips from YouTube of Chinese students doing morning exercises, Ke shared her experiences as a young school girl in Beijing. Students associated the center engagements with the identity of the language specialists rather than seeing them as exotic, isolated practices from another part of the world.

Our students didn't become fluent speakers of any of the languages that they explored during the Language Club and we didn't expect that they would. (They did learn and use more words in each language than the Jenny and I!) But, this introduction into the language and culture of these three countries accomplished what we hoped -- our students recognized similarities and distinctions across the cultures. They had the opportunity to meet and develop a relationship with people from other parts of the world. Finally, students developed an awareness of and interest in a world language that might lead to deeper language study in the future.

The parents in our community were pleased that their children had this opportunity to explore

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Many have asked us to offer the after school language program again. We are interested in finding languages specialists from other parts of the world to expand our students' experiences with world languages.

The success of our brief exploration of language inspired our staff to look closely at ways to develop second language fluency in students at Van Horne and we began reading professional literature about world language instruction. We learned that in addition to opening the door to other cultures and helping a child to understand and appreciate people from global cultures, becoming bilingual and biliterate would benefit our students in a number of significant ways. Cognitive research shows that second language learning has a positive effect on intellectual growth and enhances a child's mental development. Students who learn a second language develop flexibility in thinking, greater sensitivity to new language learning, and a better ear for listening. Students who study a second language in elementary school have improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills (Suarez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007).

Technology and economic interdependence have made the world a smaller place. Never before have so many people from different countries been able to come together to share knowledge and do business (Stewart, 2007). We want the students at our school to be able to interact successfully in this interconnected world and we believe that the ability to speak more than one language will help them achieve this success.

We are in the process of securing the resources necessary to offer Spanish and Mandarin language immersion programs at Van Horne so that our students will have the opportunity to become fluent in a second language. In the meantime, we will continue to offer our afterschool language program and give our students a chance to play with a wide range of languages taught by people from around the world. This experience will broaden students' experiences and open their minds to the world.

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Understanding by Looking Below the Surface

by Kathryn Tompkins, Third/Fourth Grade Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

By my eighth year of teaching elementary school, I assumed that I had pretty much figured out

children by the end of the first day of school. With Elise, I learned how wrong my initial impressions could be. Elise not only taught me the importance of carefully observing a child in multiple contexts, but also the significance of curriculum that really engages children as thinkers. I think we often underestimate children, particularly children who are quiet or unpredictable in their responses. This experience forced me to be a “kidwatcher” as I got to know Elise in as many contexts as possible and came to see her as a unique and valued person (Goodman, 1978).

Elise started out as quiet, almost withdrawn. She was the type of child who disappeared in a large group of students, especially my classroom which was dominated by a group of boys who were highly verbal and loved to hear themselves talk, whether or not they had anything to contribute. She was probably also somewhat intimidated by the fact that she was a third grader in a third/fourth combination classroom and so younger than many other students. Elise was not a typical quiet child, because she would fly off the handle at things that seemed minor -- someone knocking her paper off her desk or brushing by her too closely. She would yell and dissolve into tears, asking to be left alone. It was almost as if she allowed her resentment to build up inside like a pressure valve that would suddenly blow over something relatively minor. I was worried how I would work with this young lady for nine months.

When we started to look at the world through literature, a different side of Elise began to emerge. I recognized a sense of compassion like none I had ever seen in a child. Elise sees the bigger picture in life. I would describe her as someone who “gets it” in the sense that she understands how the world works and the larger social issues that influence our actions and thinking. She thinks about the “why” behind actions, not just what is happening and that’s unusual at this age level. As sensitive and bright as she was, she still held back in class discussions. She would make one or two comments that would blow me away, but never monopolized a discussion with her thoughts. Her connections were always to the bigger issues in a story, not the details, and she often took a stance that was in opposition to the popular view being expressed by other class members.

For example, after listening to *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1983), about a family where the father loses his job and tells his son that they cannot afford a pet, many children focused on the cat the boy found in a garbage can or the family’s lack of money in their sketch to stretch responses. Elise’s sketch highlighted the economic system and how the closure of stores affects people in losing their jobs and therefore not having enough money for food. She also noted that while people can lose their jobs, animals never do.



Even in relatively straightforward projects, Elise's thinking stood out. When class members drew two plates with their choices of food on one plate and what their parents would choose for them on the other plate, most drew hamburgers, pizzas, sodas, and ice cream. Elise's plate held broccoli, dim sum, mango nectarine. Horchata popsicles, and yogurt.





I began to see her as a child who was constantly engaged in deep, complex thinking and who could see the underlying interconnections between events and people. She thought about how people thought and why they took particular actions, but she had also learned, for a range of reasons, to only occasionally share that thinking with others. Elise seemed to think and feel deeply but to suppress much of those feelings and thoughts within her, only occasionally letting them emerge; the problem was they did not always emerge in socially appropriate ways. She was often overlooked by other children in the classroom because she so rarely took initiative. All of that changed at our global banquet.

For our school's global banquet we decided to have the students separate into three different groups to represent the world's population. There was the very small blue group that represented the wealthy. They each received a large pizza to eat. The largest group was the yellow group and they had bowls of rice and beans. The red group represented the 25% of the population in the world that never gets enough to eat. They had one small bowl of rice to share among 25 children.

Elise was a member of the red group. The red group, consisting of first through fifth graders, sat on the floor in a circle around a tarp. They watched as the other two groups got their food, eagerly awaiting their portion. When the small bowl of rice was set in the middle of their circle, they were very disappointed. Several of the older students edged their way to the outside of the group, staring longingly at the pizza being devoured by the blue group.



One of the dominant fourth grade boys from my classroom grabbed the bowl for himself and another friend, turning their backs on the group and stuffing the rice in their mouths. Most of the students just stared in shock. They weren't about to say anything, but. Elise wasn't like most students. With her emotions raging, Elise jumped up, grabbed the bowl out of his hands and carefully began passing the rice out to each member of her group, making sure that each got a handful. She stood up for what she thought was right, is a rarity among elementary-school aged girls.

At the end of the banquet, the students were asked to each write a reflection before leaving to go back to their classrooms. Elise's reflection indicated her understanding of the interdependence among different groups of people and the problem of the "haves" getting more and more so that the "have nots" continue to get less and less.

I think why people
have more food than
others is because the rich
have jobs poor people can't
get jobs because the jobs
are already taken.
The rich are taking more
than they need.

Back in the classroom, we talked about what students would like to do to help fight hunger. Elise said that it was important to take action because "it helps people in need and makes the world a better place." She also thought it was important to learn and tell people about it in order to "form a group" to work together.

At the end of the school year, the students each created a sketch to stretch using visual symbols to show the meaning of taking action. Elise told us that her sketch focused on the need to help the hungry and that everyone in the world, whether from the yellow, blue or red group, has to help. The light bulb signified the need to know about hunger and what causes hunger to figure out how to help others, and the heart signified that people have to want to do it by caring and making a

choice to help. This sketch reflected her understanding of the complexity of the issues involved in taking action on the global problem of hunger. Her understandings of the need to connect the heart and mind and to hold everyone responsible for action are impressive, especially given that she was only nine years old at the time. Elise sees the bigger picture in life and wants to work with others to make positive changes in the world.



What I found interesting was that this experience seemed to help Elise find her voice in the classroom. I noticed that she spoke up more frequently in whole class meetings and was more likely to express her perspective. She was willing to publicly take unpopular positions in discussions and to explain her thinking. When the dominant boys tried to override her voice, she asserted herself to make sure her perspective was heard. Taking such a public stand against greed and inequity in the global feast seemed to have given her a sense of personal empowerment and she continued to act on her own sense of power. The tears and outbursts almost completely disappeared as she expressed her thinking rather than holding it inside her.

I believe that our classroom learning environment played a key role in supporting Elise in developing this sense of empowerment. In a more traditional setting, I think she would have remained silenced, keeping her thoughts and feelings inside. Elise flourished in a classroom where her thinking was challenged and where she could engage with critical and complex issues about the world. Another essential aspect of this environment was that we valued multiple perspectives, never settling for one “right” answer or response. We always for a range of perspectives on any issue or piece of literature and this supported Elise in being willing to make her ideas public. We were inquirers, more focused on creating new understandings and asking new questions about complex issues, than on finding a simple answer. In more than one way, Elise taught me to look below the surface -- of both children and ideas.

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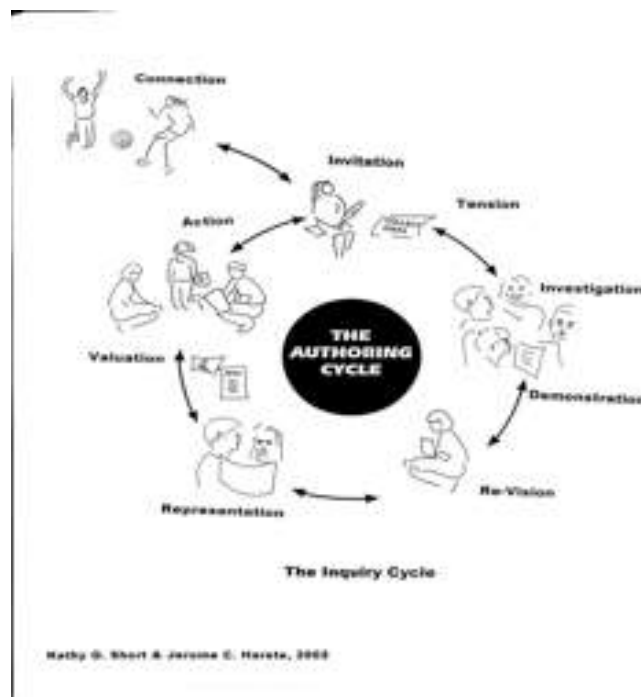
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Using the Inquiry Cycle with Young Children: A Global Study of Fairy Tales

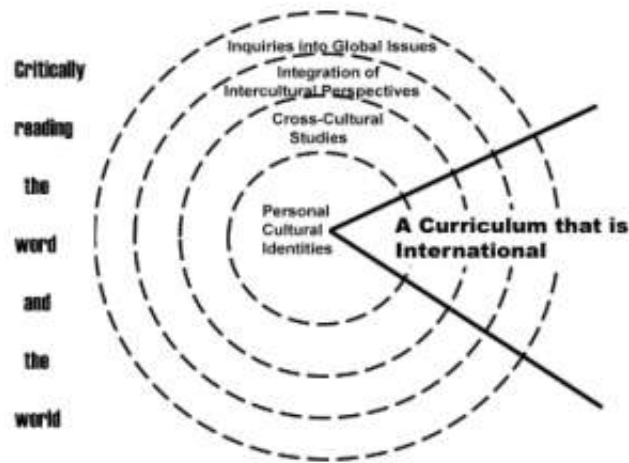
by Jennifer Griffith, First Grade Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

We met as a staff in January for our annual winter retreat to reflect on the fall and decide where we want to head with our kids related to our school-wide concept. In the fall we chose the broad concept of power and at our winter retreat we saw the need to bring our concept back to the forefront. We were familiar with utilizing inquiry studies, a philosophy of building a curriculum with kids, and were excited about exploring this option in both the Learning Lab and our classrooms. First we knew it was important to define inquiry for us to have an understanding of where to go with our students. Kathy Short (2009) defines inquiry as a collaborative process of connecting to and reaching beyond current understanding to explore tensions significant to the learner. Inquiry is natural to how we learn, based on connection, problem-posing and problem-solving, conceptual understanding, and collaboration within a community of learners.

Jaquetta Alexander and I had been team-teaching first and second grades and we knew moving into an inquiry study with 60 students was going to be a challenge but we were up for it. We had recently been to NCTE in San Antonio where we listened to Brian Edmiston talk about dramatic inquiry with fairy tales and young students. We were intrigued and excited about bringing fairy tales and inquiry into our classroom. We knew we needed a framework, something to provide a bigger picture for our work, and in our study group we were re-introduced to the inquiry cycle, an authoring process where learners engage in authoring or constructing meaning about themselves and the world (Short, 2009). It was this framework that set up our work with fairy tales.



Not only was the inquiry cycle a focus for us, but Van Horne Elementary had been involved in working with Kathy Short from the University of Arizona for three years, focusing on international literature and weaving it into the curriculum so this piece of our study was just as important. She has created a framework that supports a curriculum that is international and we referred back to this model to help us set up the international piece of our inquiry.



A Curriculum that is International (Short, 2008)

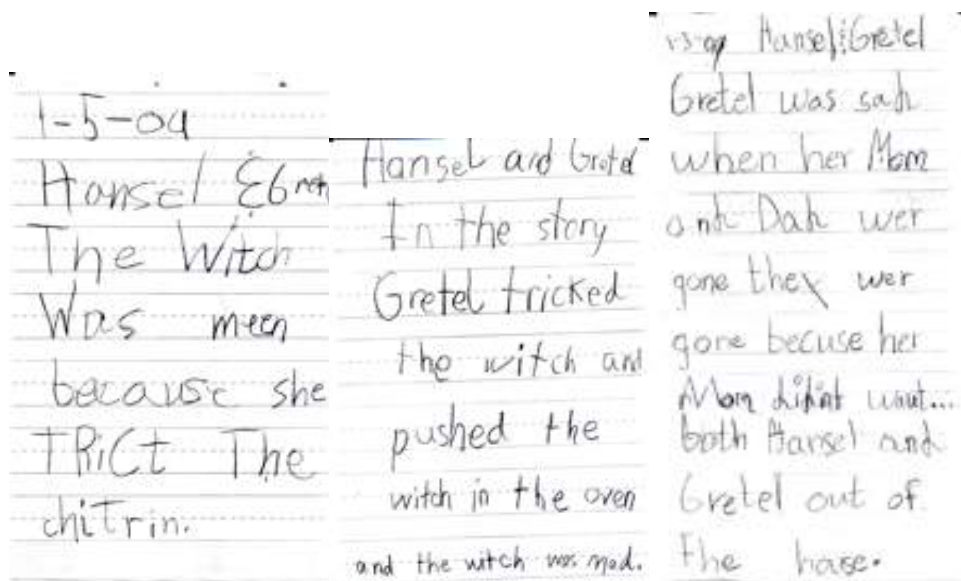
Using international literature with young children can often be challenging to find the "just right" book for their level but international fairy tales were easily accessible. We were excited to work at the integration of international perspectives, where cultural views are woven into an inquiry. According to Short (2008) integrating international perspectives encourages more complexity in the issues kids consider. They are challenged to move past their own cultural perspective into more of a world view.

Our inquiry of international fairy tales began by using the inquiry cycle as our framework. There is a beginning point to the inquiry process and that is connections to children's lives. According to Short (2009) connection helps kids get at the why rather than the what of a unit. Our goal was to immerse students in engagements with fairy tales so they could explore their current understandings. Our students had a background with fairy tales so we chose to spend the first week by exploring a variety of familiar fairy tales. We began our inquiry in early January, by reading Hansel and Gretel as our first fairy tale. Jaquetta and I were eager to bring in dramatic inquiry, an inquiry that invites kids to use drama to engage with a piece of literature by taking on the roles of the characters and engaging in problem solving. Edmiston (1993) argues that, "Drama enables students to respond thoughtfully and insightfully to literature" (p.250). We decided to focus on the emotions of the characters to get the kids connecting to the characters.

After every read aloud Jaquetta and I gave kids an opportunity to process and buddy buzz, a strategy that has kids turning to a partner to share their thoughts about the story -- what they noticed, connections and wonderings. After a few minutes of buddy buzz, students shared their

thinking with the class. As a group we discussed the emotions the characters showed and how that might look in drama to connect with a story. Kids were engaged with this activity, always wanting to show the emotion and what it would look like. To connect to their own life experiences, we asked them to connect the emotion of the character to a time they had experienced that same emotion. We created an emotional word wall that the emotions we found that first week in our introduction to fairy tales.

Not only did we discuss the read aloud as a class but we felt it was important for kids to have an opportunity to self-reflect on the story and make connections and noticings. We introduced them to their response logs, a place for them to do their own thinking and writing about the fairy tales. Abby wrote about how Gretel was sad when her mom and dad were gone and then went on to explain why they were gone. We had been pushing the kids to explain their thinking in order to go beyond what they thought and explain the why. It was encouraging to see the kids attempt this. Not only did Abby take the challenge but Cory did too when he talked about how Gretel tricked the witch and pushed her in the oven and because of that the witch was mad. Abbey A. used the important "because" to describe why the witch was mean. We knew we were headed in the right direction and continued to focus on giving the kids time to reflect and connect to the fairy tales we were exploring.



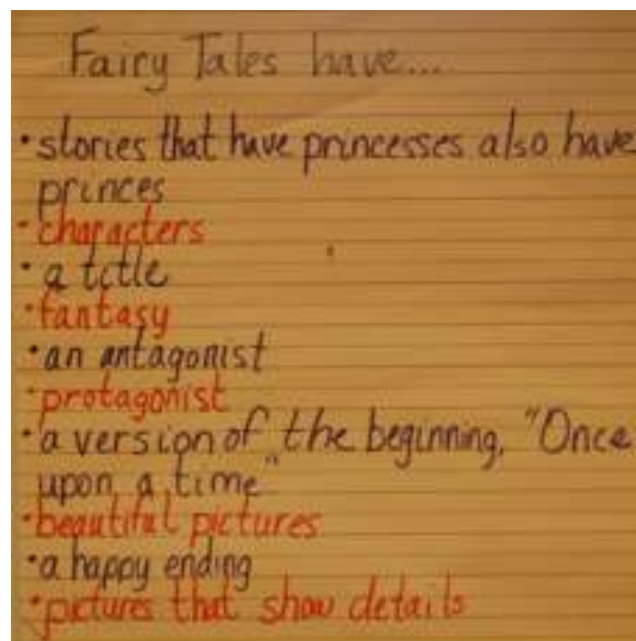
We looked at Cinderella, The Three Pigs, Rapunzel, and Jack and the Beanstalk in our first week of the study. We wanted to give kids a good background on the traditional European versions of these fairy tales and have them connect with the characters through emotions and their thinking about the stories. Cory demonstrated why Cinderella was sad when he explained that it was because her step-sisters wouldn't let her go to the ball. Abby made the same comment and added that they were mean to Cinderella because she wore dirty clothes but Cinderella thought she was fine. The kids were not only able to explain their thinking but added additional details like Abby's comment on

what Cinderella thought about her step-sisters being mean to her.

After being introduced to the five fairy tales we felt it was important for the kids to define a fairy tale so they could refer back to their definition throughout our study. We made a chart of the things they had learned about fairy tales and what they noticed as characteristics across them. They shared that fairy tales have:

- princesses and princes
- characters
- a title
- fantasy
- an antagonist and protagonist
- a version of the beginning, “once upon a time...”
- a happy ending

Through this first week of connections we wanted to provide the children with the structure of a fairy tale and so Jaquetta and I had used the terminology of antagonist, protagonist and genre in talking with the kids. As a group we put our thinking together and came up with a definition of a fairy tale -- “A fairytale is a make believe story that has a protagonist that tricks the antagonist in the end.” We referred back to this definition throughout our study to see if it still held true.



We knew after a week the kids were ready to move into invitation within the inquiry cycle. Short (2009) defines invitations as an opportunity for kids to expand their knowledge, experiences and perspectives in order to push their thinking beyond their current understandings. As teachers, Jaquetta and I knew it was our job to immerse our students in meaningful invitations to support this part of the cycle. We chose to narrow our fairy tale inquiry down to three popular fairy tales

and pull in as many international variants as we could to help us develop in-depth invitations and support our international focus. We chose to study variants of Cinderella, Rapunzel, and Little Red Riding Hood.

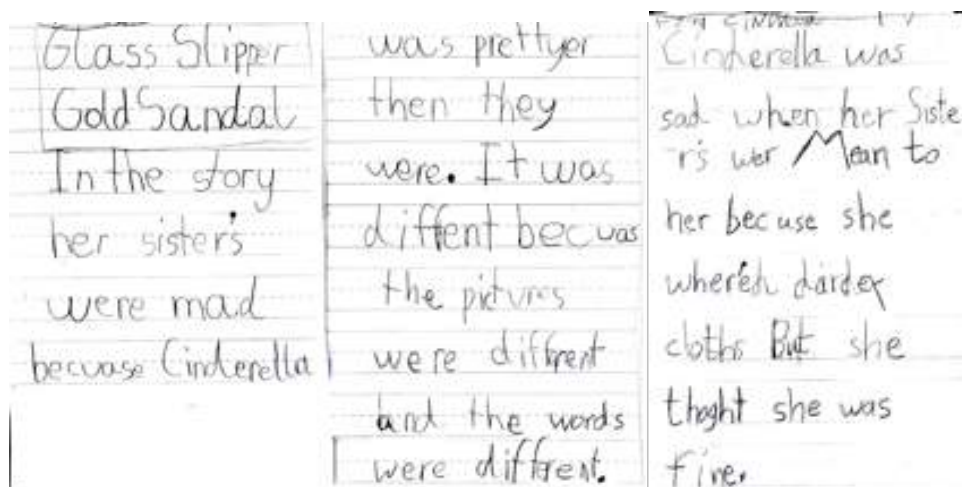
Our 60 kids were divided into the three groups. Jaquetta focused on Rapunzel, I focused on Little Red Riding Hood and our classroom aides, Jill and Anna, focused on Cinderella. The kids spent roughly a week studying variants of each fairy tale. According to Short (2009), invitations should provide engagements that expand their knowledge to build new understandings and raise tension. With that in mind we chose to read a different variant each day, have a literature discussion, chart their "I wonder's" and "I see's" and then conclude with some self-reflection time focusing on perspective and emotion. After kids were done with responding we encouraged them to browse through several titles of fairy tales that we had put together in bins for them to do wide reading to engage with other variants of the fairy tale they were working with each bin holding 15-20 titles. We utilized our literacy block which was roughly ninety minutes.

In our study group, Kathy had mentioned how a teacher in the younger grades had used a t-chart to support kids' thinking about what they saw in a story and what left them wondering. Jaquetta and I thought this sounded simple enough for our kids but we also wanted to invite them to think thoughtfully about the story. Kids naturally would come up with an "I See" and automatically share an "I wonder" that was closely related to what they saw. An example can be seen in Jaquetta's groups chart for *Sugarcane* (Storace, 2007) where a student shared that Sugarcane was brave to let Madame Fate climb up the tower. But on the flip side the kids wondered why Sugarcane didn't cut her own hair instead of letting Madame Fate climb up the tower.

I see	I wonder
• Sugarcane was brave enough to let Madame Fate up the tower.	• Why Sugarcane didn't cut her own hair when Madame Fate was climbing up so she could look for her parents because HF also mean to her?
• The pictures gave a lot of details and descriptions.	• Why didn't Sugarcane just climb down the tower?
• The words helped us understand the book.	• run away when HF was gone?

In conjunction with thinking and recording what they saw and wondered about the fairy tale the kids were also reflecting in their response logs on what they thought about the story. The use of response logs were used throughout our study. Abby began in the Rapunzel group and wrote about why Rapunzel was sad, giving details and using that important word "because." Cory was in the Cinderella group to begin with and his responses were awesome -- he was not only talking about why the stepsisters were mad at Cinderella but he compared the Cinderella we had heard during

our first week, a European variation, to the one Jill read to them, an international variant goes across cultures, [*Glass Slipper Gold Sandal*](#) (Fleishman, 2007).



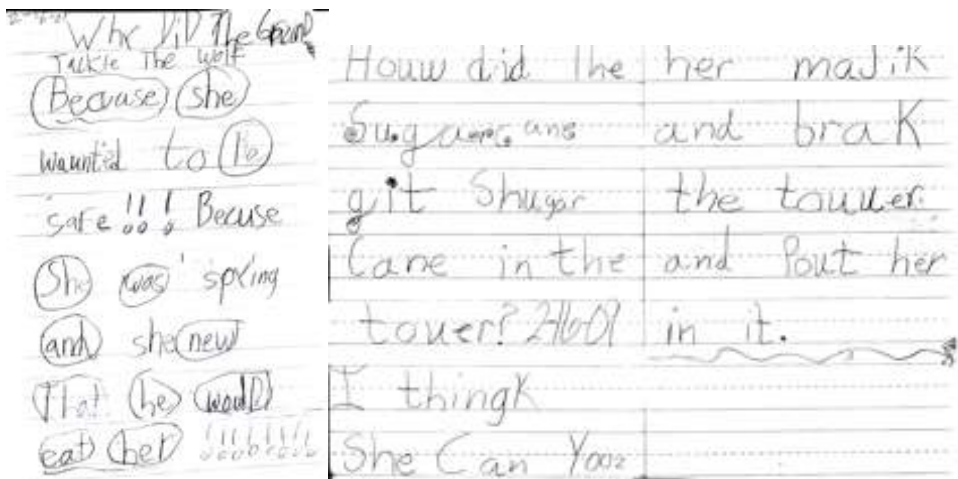
As we met and discussed our kids' thinking and wonderings about the variants we were reading in each group we felt we had hit a wall. The kids were producing these great wonderings but we weren't offering the opportunity for them to explore these ideas. We went back to Kathy's chapter on inquiry, and, sure enough, tension comes after invitation, where there is a shift from teacher-guided inquiry to student-driven inquiry. It was obvious our kids had questions that needed to be answered and it was our job to encourage them to investigate their wonderings.

We provided students with time to do investigations through opportunities to problem-solve and explore their wonderings in more depth. At the end of the week, we asked the kids to review their wonderings and choose one that resonated with them and that they wanted to explore further. We offered several possibilities to give them an idea about what we meant by choosing something to explore. In the group I worked with, we created a chart of their wonderings from which they could choose an investigation. Some international variants of Red Riding that we read don't depict her as having parents and many kids were intrigued by this. Others wondered why the setting was always the same. They were also interested in the different emotions of the wolf. We left the projects open ended, but did introduce several different mediums and processes they could use. Some possibilities for the first projects included drawing your wonderings, using drama to express your interpretations or blocks to build your thinking, and writing letters to the author asking them why they made particular choices.

When the projects were complete, Jaquetta and I came together to discuss the results of the projects and realized they were not what we were hoping for. We felt the kids didn't engage thoroughly with their wonderings the way we were hoping, so we decided to rework the investigation part of the inquiry cycle by bringing in more demonstrations. We noticed that the kids hadn't actually delved into the investigation portion of the cycle but instead focused on the

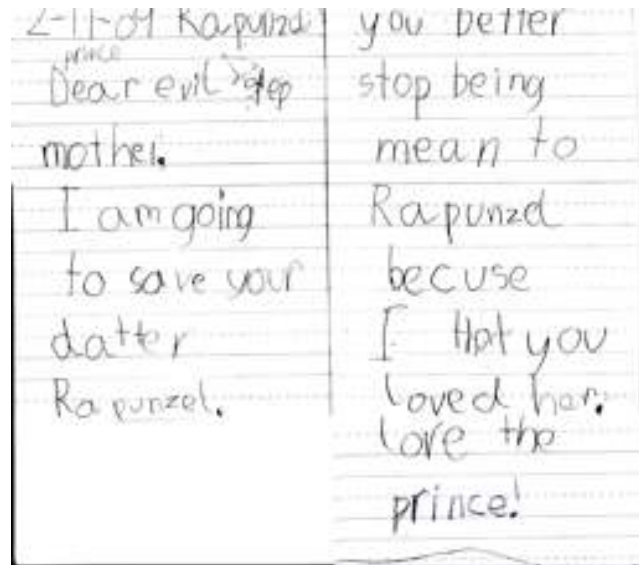
representation first. Many students heard about the mediums they could use and began their projects with a focus on what they could do, instead of engaging in a dialogue about the ideas in their investigation. Jaquetta and I knew that we may have begun this process too early and that we should have given them more guidance and time to investigate their questions before introducing the projects which were actually the representation portion of the inquiry cycle. Therefore our investigations were unsuccessful the first time around.

Demonstration is the part of the cycle where teachers offer support in the students' investigations and this was the area we knew we had to revise for the kids to get the most out of their investigations. The following week we had a new group of kids exploring a new set of fairy tales but, as teachers, we each stayed with the same fairy tale to help strengthen our skills and knowledge of the stories. Doing it this way allowed us to compare and contrast the students' engagements and wonderings in each group. After working with these stories for a week, we put the kids together and talked about what they noticed that all the stories had in common. We also asked them to think about questions they might investigate further. This seemed to make it easier for the kids to think about the stories and choose a question to explore. While thinking about the Little Red Riding Hood stories, Abby was intrigued with *Little Red Riding Hood: A Newfangled Prairie Tale* (Ernst, 1995) and explored the question, "Why did the Grandma tackle the wolf?" by using her background knowledge and inferences. Her interpretation was that grandma simply wanted to be safe and so was spying on the wolf and knew that he would eat her. Abbey A. was curious to know how Sugarcane got in the tower and explored that question using her knowledge and inferences as well. She thought that the sorceress, Madame Fate, used her magic to break the tower and put her in it. Giving them adequate time to engage in dialogue helped them think about their investigations with more depth. Jaquetta and I felt that having the opportunity to reflect on what the stories had in common and choosing a question to investigate produced more thoughtful, meaningful representations.

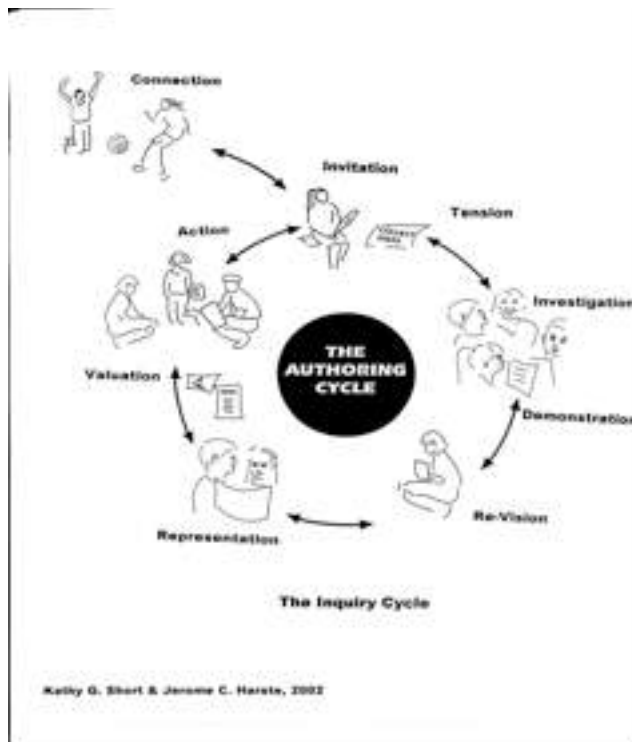


Throughout the study we continued to think about emotions the characters took on in the stories

and really delved into perspectives as a way to think about others. Our response logs gave the kids that needed opportunity to pull back and reflect on their learning. It is these opportunities that fill the re-vision part of the inquiry cycle. We introduced our kids to letter writing and challenged them to push themselves in their self-reflection time by taking on the role of a character and writing a letter to another character using emotion. It was at this point in our study that we saw the kids become engaged and transfer their thinking to other content areas. The kids showed such emotion and conviction in their letters. Cory took on the role of the prince and wrote to the Evil Stepmother in Rapunzel telling her he was going to save her daughter Rapunzel and she better stop being mean to her because he thought she loved her.

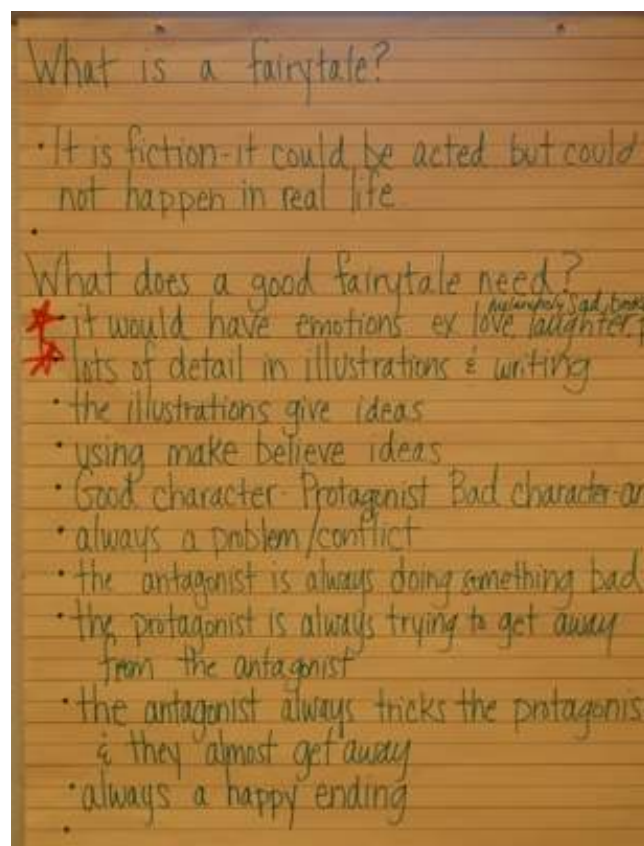


We finished the next four weeks so that every kid got to experience all three fairy tales, take on the roles of characters, and investigate their questions. When each child completed studying Rapunzel, Cinderella, and Little Red Riding Hood, we felt something was missing and knew we hadn't completed the inquiry cycle. We had encouraged kids to connect with fairy tales and use their background knowledge to further their understanding, we had invited students to expand their knowledge through responding and creating class charts on what they saw and wondered, we gave them time to ask and investigate their questions, a chance to represent their thinking and pull back and reflect in their logs. We were missing valuation and action and so again put our heads together to think about where to head next so our kids saw our inquiry all the way through.

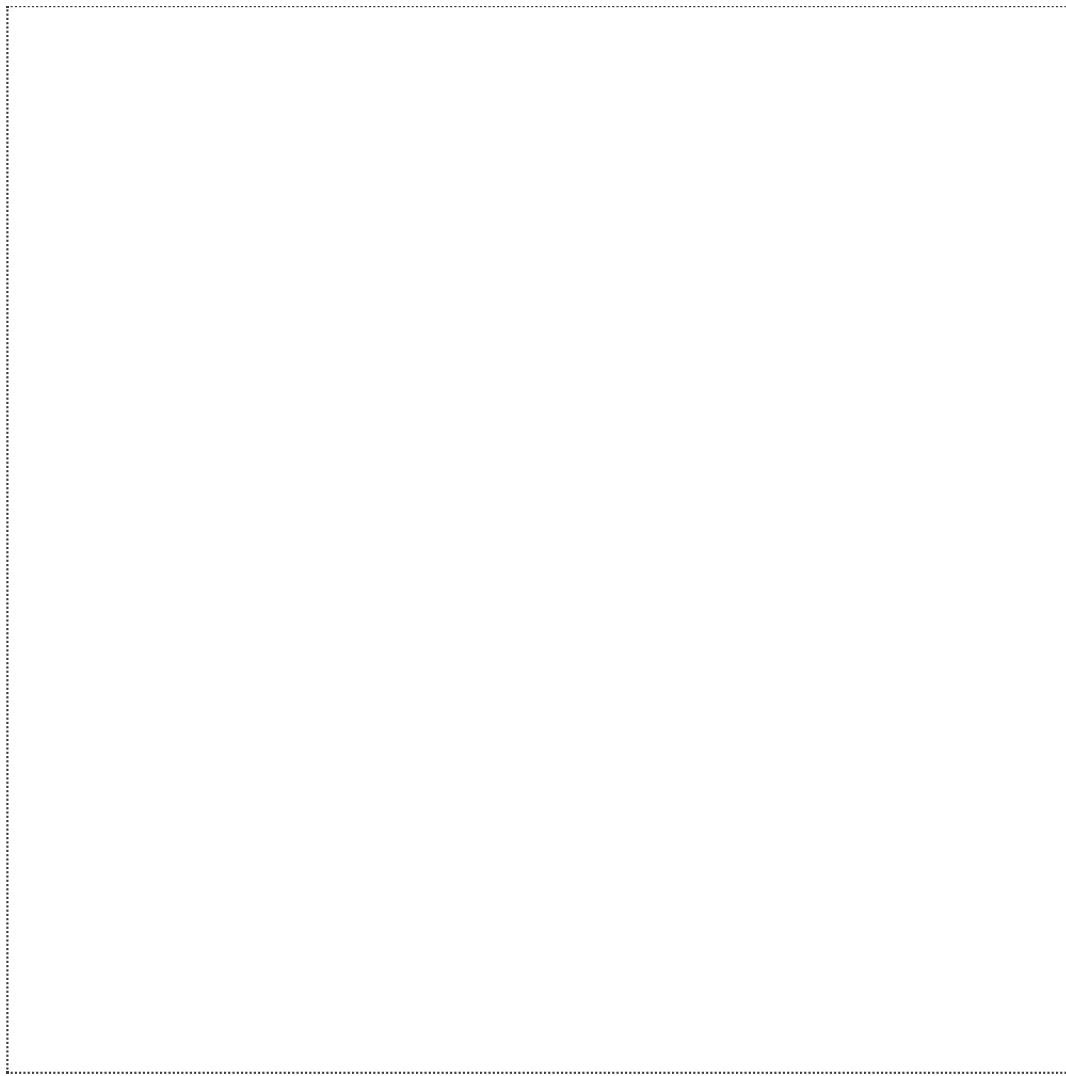


At about this time our staff presented at the IRA conference in Phoenix and we sat in on a session about Kamishibai, a Japanese storytelling method used with young kids. We went through the process as a group of creating our own Kamishibai of The Three Little Pigs. Jaquetta and I both looked at each other with the same thought -- this would be perfect for a culminating project to finish our inquiry on fairy tales. We were thrilled to get back to school and take on this new endeavor to support our inquiry.

Valuation was where we were on the cycle, a place for the kids to step back and think about what is of value from our inquiry thus far. Short (2009) argues that valuation allows learners to reposition themselves differently in the world. So Kamishibai seemed perfect, a new storytelling method to tie into our fairy tales. Demonstrating for the kids what Kamishibai was and looked like was imperative, so we purchased several and used these to model how they worked. We created a chart of what we noticed about the Kamishibais, how they are structured, and how they differ from a book. The kids were engaged in the structure of Kamishibai and we knew they would enjoy using them in our final work with fairy tales. We reviewed what makes a fairytale by creating a chart to be used during our work with Kamishibai.



Although the valuation piece of the cycle does not necessarily mean having to do a large summative assessment that consists of a time consuming project, we felt that allowing the kids to create their own variation of one of the fairy tales through Kamishibai would be valuable. Taking on this project encouraged the kids to pull from their work and experiences with the fairy tales. In creating their Kamishibai, they were using what we had learned about emotions to express their characters' feelings and perspectives and the characteristics of a fairy tale to help them understand and create their stories -- all within the structure of a Kamishibai. All of these components were used when working on this project. Some students chose to re-create a variant of a fairy tale they'd studied and others chose to take what they knew about fairy tales and created their own variant of Cinderella, Red Riding Hood or Rapunzel.



Part of valuation is presenting what students have learned to an audience. We had a Kamishibai party where the kids were put in small groups and parents were able to listen to what their children had learned about the process and fairy tales. It was impressive to watch these kids talk to their parents about their learning and understanding of both the Japanese storytelling method and fairy tales.

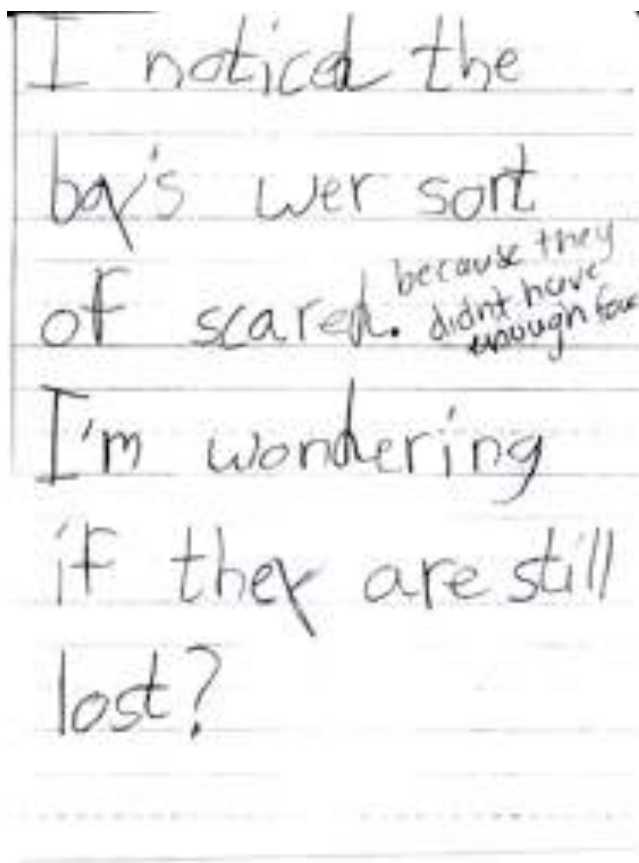




So little red riding hood took a
to the woods she was looking
for wolf I'm scared that a
wolf will eat me here a good time to
have a session

A wolf popped out at her
hmm where are you going I'm going
to my Grandmas house where
she live in the deep part of the
woods thank you

The final part of the inquiry cycle is action where we address the "so what?" of the project and think about how this will apply to our lives. It was obvious that the use of perspective and emotion were two components that kids engaged in and where we saw the transfer to other areas such as the playground and other content areas. Throughout the year the kids were able to see others' perspectives and be compassionate to emotions of characters. We particularly saw evidence of this in their literature discussions and responses as we moved into our conceptual thinking about the power of food after we completed the fairy tales inquiry. In April, when we were discussing the Lost Boys of Sudan, Abby talked about how she noticed the boys were sort of scared because they didn't have enough food and she was wondering if they still were lost today. So when I reflect on the last piece of the cycle it's easy for me to see that the action part integrated into students' thinking as they connected what they had learned about perspective, emotion and questioning from our inquiry on fairy tales into new inquiries.



I noticed the
boy's wer sort
of scared. ^{because they}
^{didn't have}
^{enough food}
I'm wondering
if they are still
lost?

Short (2009) argues that inquiry is not merely a new set of instructional practices, but a theoretical shift in how we view curriculum, students, learning, and teaching. We want to remember this as we go through the inquiry cycle, which can be daunting. Surprisingly enough, we found that as we moved through an inquiry with our students, that it was natural to progress from invitation to tension, investigation, demonstration, re-vision, representation, valuation, and action. Taking inquiry as a stance is a powerful way to move through the curriculum with students, providing the opportunity to engage in meaningful, thoughtful invitations together and to take action in their thinking and lives.

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Making Personal Connections: Conceptual Thinking in Kindergarten

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Being able to connect various pieces of information to a larger concept is a critical skill that students need to make meaning out of what they are learning. Concepts are mental constructs, organizing ideas that categorize a variety of examples or facts (Erickson, 2002). Conceptual thinking about big ideas is typically developed in intermediate grades. This does not mean that young children are not capable of making meaning of what they are learning and thinking about ideas -- it just looks different.

At our elementary school, we have a school-wide focus on using international literature to teach our students about the world through inquiry studies. Students, kindergarten through fifth grade, participate in instructional experiences that challenge them to think critically about different concepts and topics that are important in our world. Our school has a unique learning environment that engages all of our students at their level. Many of these engagements take place in our schools Learning Lab that is conducted by our school's project specialist, Lisa Thomas. We are also lucky enough to consult with Kathy Short from the University of Arizona. I have had the pleasure of teaching third grade and kindergarten at Van Horne, which has allowed me to experience our research from two distinctly different vantage points.

During my year as a third grade teacher I was amazed by the advanced thinking the students were able to engage in. I remember looking back and being in awe of the way students conceptualized major life issues, like embarking on forced journeys. We had spent time looking at refugee experiences. My students wrote essays synthesizing their thinking (see <http://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/stories/stories12/?page=11>). One essay in particular stands out in my mind, written by Andy who had been dealing with his parents divorce throughout the year. He used his personal experience to make sense of the feeling of loss that refugees experience. His thesis statement was, "When you move, you leave things behind." In his essay he argues, "Life will not fit in a suitcase. When my mom had to move she had to leave pictures of me as a kid. She was really sad because she wanted them. Refugees have to leave their homes, toys, and pets behind." At eight years old he understand the concept of loss and value of belongings. Moments like these are precious and this year I learned quickly that they are not ones that happen in kindergarten!

While kindergarteners do not typically make conceptual statements like “Life will not fit in a suitcase,” it is important not to underestimate what they can think and say. As I look back at the statements my kindergarteners made, I am pleased and excited to see that they too are able to think conceptually. Each time my class visited the Learning Lab, we read a story aloud, discussed it, and drew about it in some way. Lisa and I took dictation during the drawing engagements to record their thinking. These drawing and dictations allowed me to see a major shift in my kindergarteners thinking over the year. My students started the year by retelling events of the stories and then moved into connecting the stories to their own lives to make meaning of the story.

Retellings

At the beginning of the year, my students were still adjusting to their new school setting. A simple drawing engagement was a way for them to explore not only using markers, but drawing what they thought about the story. Drawings and dictation at the beginning of the year were basic retellings of the stories that were being read aloud. For example the very first time that we went to lab, Lisa read aloud *Fred Stays with Me!*, by Nancy Coffelt (2007). Our focus was on the power of choice and the decisions students feel they are able to make in their lives. My students discussed this concept on a very surface level. When asked to draw about the story, they created images that were retellings of the story. Reyna responded by drawing a picture of the part in the story when the dog, Fred, is stealing socks. Micaela responded by drawing a similar picture depicting the same part of the story and in her dictation she says, “I think the story is pretty good and I like it. The dog eats socks.” Both Reyna and Micaela responded to an event from the story, but it was not a significant part of the story. They did not make connections to the bigger concept of the power of choice.



Figure 1. Graffiti response to *Fred Stays with Me!*

Reyna: This is a picture of the dog taking the socks. Micaela: I think the story is pretty good and I like it. The dog eats the socks.

Making Personal Connections

During our next session in lab the drawing responses started to change from retellings to making self-to-text connections. I was amazed at how fast the shift in thinking was starting to happen. The graffiti board that was created after reading and talking about *I Will Never, Not Ever Eat a Tomato*, by Lauren Child (2000), contained many responses that made personal connections to the story along with retellings of story events. The students' personal connections were topical in nature. For example, Sarah drew a picture of a tomato and fish sticks and said, "I like tomatoes. Fish Sticks are yummy." Sarah connected personal preferences to a minor detail in the story. Although this is not a connection to the story's main theme about the influence of others on one's diet, the move from retelling to connections of topics is a significant step in thinking conceptually.



Figure 2. Graffiti Board response to *I Will Never, Not Ever Eat a Tomato*

Students continued to make topical connections in the next few sessions of Learning Lab. Seth responded using both a retelling and a personal connection to a topic. He drew a picture of the part of *Please Louise!* by Frieda Wishinsky and Marie-Louise Gay where the character, Jake, finds the dog and the dog licks his face. Seth drew Jake and the dog and said, "I am drawing a dog jumping on the face because it was funny and I have a dog." Again Seth connected the fact that there was a dog in the story to the fact that he has a dog at home. This connection is not one that shows Seth understood the main concept of sibling influence, but it does show that Seth was beginning to use his personal experience to make sense of the text. During the same session in Lab, Isaac made a connection that did move into conceptual thinking. After hearing the story, Isaac shared in our discussion that he too has an older brother who is sometimes mean to him. He said, "My brother does not let me battle with him with Pokemon cards." This comment demonstrated to me that Isaac did understand the big idea of the story because he connected his life to the concept that older siblings have influence over you.



Figure 3. Response to Please Louise.

One particular session in Learning Lab involved a majority of the students making significant gains in their ability to talk about conceptual connections. We were exploring our understandings of power using *The Book of Mean People* by Toni and Slade Morrison (2002). The students had a lot to say in the discussion that followed the read aloud, making connections from their lives where people were mean to them. For example, Ricky connected the story to a time that his sister was mean to him. He said, “My sister kept changing the channel on the TV when I was watching it.” This connection demonstrates his understanding of the concept that other people and their attitudes and action have power over your life. These connections appeared in their individual responses. This session showed Lisa and I that a majority of the class in fact understood big concepts. While they did not put these big ideas in abstract comments, they evidenced their exploration of these ideas by sharing more conceptual connections that linked to significant themes in the books. We were able to then start planning sessions and engagements that focused on more abstract concepts.





The most significant example of students' conceptual thinking came during our investigation into the difference between hunger and hungry as part of our study of the causes of hunger in our world. Students gathered with Lisa on the story floor and were asked, "What are the differences between Hunger and Hungry?" Lisa recorded their thinking on a T-chart. The class came up with clear distinctions based on their personal experiences of being hungry and knowledge they had learned about hunger from previous lab sessions. After we completed the T-chart the class was asked to choose either hunger or being hungry and draw a picture to represent that concept. The responses were thoughtful and evidenced conceptual thinking. Ricky used a personal experience to explain being hungry, explaining that his "stomach feels hurt, tired, and mixed up" when he is hungry. Matthew depicted hunger by drawing a picture of a stick figure standing behind an empty table. He dictated that "Hunger means you are starving." Seth clearly showed his understanding of malnutrition as a result of hunger when he drew a picture of a stick-thin person and said, "He's going to turn into this [pointing at the figure] because he won't get food to eat." The hunger is an abstract concept that not many kindergarteners experience, but many students showed their understanding of hunger by making conceptual comments.