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# WOW STORIES

EXPLORING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH  
LITERATURE

Volume III, Issue 3  
June, 2013

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

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### **Exploring Cultural Identity Through Literature**

This issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* shares four vignettes from classrooms where teachers and students explore identities by connecting with global and multicultural literature. While the students in question range from preschoolers to graduate students, each student is able to extend their understandings of their own cultures and the cultures of others through their experiences with quality literature.

In the first vignette, Angie Zapata shares how she helped a Korean American bilingual preschooler connect with literature related to her cultural background. Next, Maria Perpetua Liwanag, Koomi Kim and Peter Duckett describe how elementary students used multicultural literature to explore their own names and identities. In the third vignette, Laura Kanost shares how bilingual first graders interacted with Latino literature in ways that enacted their identities as Mexican Americans, Americans, and Texans. Finally, I describe my use of identity intersections as a learning engagement to help undergraduate and graduate students explore their own cultural identities and the cultural identities of book characters.

As you read this issue, think about how you connect students of all ages with literature in ways that promote intercultural understandings. Consider sharing your innovative practices by submitting a vignette to *WOW Stories*. We are interested in descriptions of interactions with literature in classrooms and libraries at preschool through graduate levels. See our [call for manuscripts](#) and author guidelines for more information.

Janine M. Schall

Editor, *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom*

## **“No, I Don’t Want To!” Nurturing Contexts for Sharing Culturally Specific Literature**

Angie Zapata

My work as a literacy tutor involved planning literature-based lessons for Seoyoung, an emergent Korean American bilingual learner. During an initial observation in her pre-kindergarten classroom, I watched Seoyoung transform from a thoughtful block architect to a playful Tyrannosaurus Rex and a doting mommy. Amazed at her ease with taking up such a variety of conditional roles from different worlds, I presumed this facility would transfer between her Korean and American lives as well. Instead, Seoyoung compellingly revealed how, in just four years, she had already marked both linguistic and cultural borders between her home and school. In this vignette, I story my learning from Seoyoung and the profound impact her justly founded resistance had on the ways I share culturally specific literature in the classroom.

Seoyoung attended a culturally and linguistically diverse elementary school. Her parents were both international graduate students at the local state university, both fully bilingual/biliterate and very interested in their daughter’s development as a bilingual/biliterate child. To my surprise, classroom observations indicated Seoyoung spoke, read, and wrote almost exclusively in English, despite having access to Korean specific picturebooks, Korean speaking peers and a teacher who took great care to represent a Korean life within her classroom. With her parents, however,

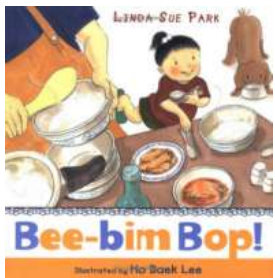
Seoyoung responded primarily in Korean and would self select Korean literature from her home library. This symbolic border between her school and home lives and languages emerged as a palpable line drawn between Seoyoung and me, a real line with real consequences for her reading behaviors.

## Reading to Seoyoung

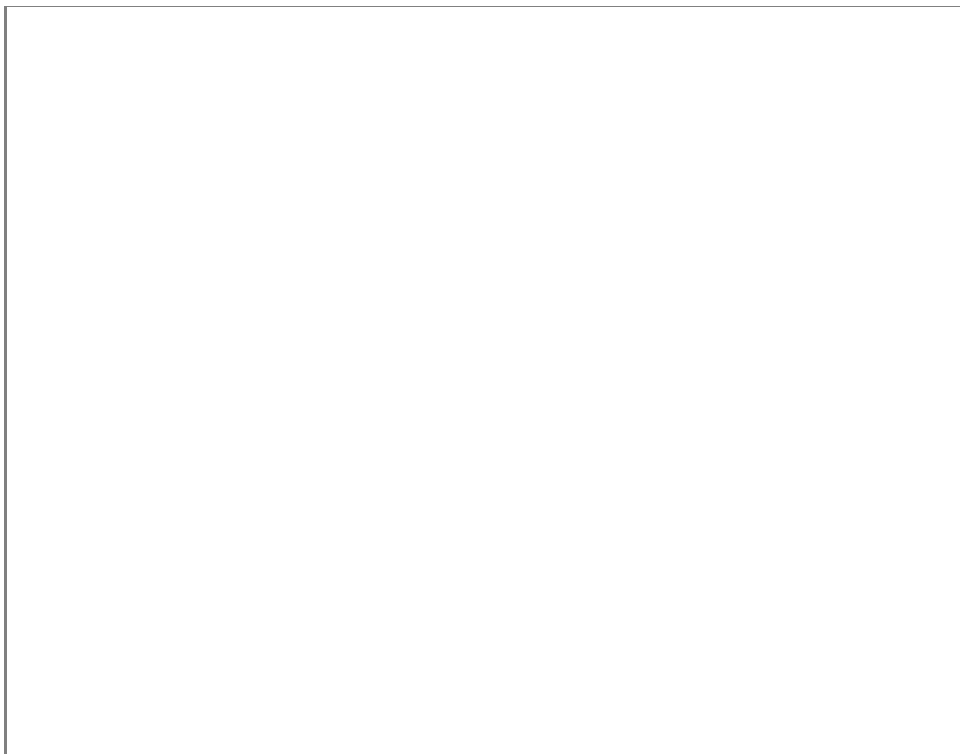
My presumption that I had a right to access Seoyoung's home life, language, and literacies proved inappropriate during our first few sessions. These sessions included shared reading (where both the teacher and the student have access to and read aloud the print) of a Korean specific song or rhyme and a teacher read aloud of a Korean specific picturebook. We concluded with a language experience activity, an approach to reading instruction based on the personal experiences of the learner written down by a teacher and read together with the learner.

The first sessions unintentionally took on a teacher-centered format. I introduced the song, I chose the book to read, I planned the inquiry, I forced the language experience and I made up the joke that concluded our time together. The unidirectional nature of the impermeable curriculum (Dyson, 1993) I had developed--setting up school knowledge as insulated and disconnected from children's emergent meaning-making, language and literacy resources-- elicited resistance from Seoyoung rather than serving as a means to call on her cultural and linguistic resources. Moreover, in choosing texts that immediately located talk around her Korean heritage, Seoyoung retreated. Clearly, my culturally specific approach and my text selection had failed to also tap into her interests and life as four-year-old girl. The negative implications of such a framework were most evident in her reading behaviors.

## “No, I Don't Want To”



During our second meeting, Seoyoung and I reflected on the previous session's reading of *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* by Molly Bang. The questions, connections, observations, and talk around rich vocabulary had proven memorable for us both. In my mind we were through with the book, but for Seoyoung, we were not. I had planned to read aloud *Bee-bim Bop!* by Linda Sue Park (2008), a picture rich, rhythmic tale of a mother and daughter preparing bee-bim bop, a tradition Korean dish. The colorful illustrations and culturally relevant depiction of a Korean family made this an obvious choice to me. The rhyme and opportunity for dramatization also contributed to this choice. What I did not account for was her rejection to my invitation.



Reading to Seoyoung: Seoyoung declines an invitation to read *Bee-bim Bop!* by Linda Sue Park.

Despite having anchored my instruction in affirming her heritage through literacy experiences, when presented with opportunities to draw from her Korean life, Seoyoung chose to assert the binary she had so cleverly created between her Korean and American worlds. In the video, Seoyoung clearly states, “No, I don’t want to!” and calls for the “other book”. A transcript of the entire read aloud sampled in this video would reveal the following reading behaviors from Seoyoung: two observations, one question, and attention to a few of the letters beginning the sentences in *Bee-bim Bop!* Her resistance and the teacher-centered nature of the instruction limited her reading behaviors rather than inviting her to take up the meaning making she engaged in daily both at school and at home. As seen in the video, when asked if she had ever eaten *bee-bim bop*, an attempt to invite a connection to the text, Seoyoung initially nods yes and then later shakes her head no, declining any claim of this cultural knowledge. Her facial expressions and gestures clearly indicated a lack of interest and motivation to engage with the story and her Korean specific experiences. In forcing us to move through *Bee-bim Bop!* I was making unwelcome claims on her Korean heritage. Seoyoung held firm to her cultural borders during this lesson, making any talk unidirectional on my part.

### **Reading with Seoyoung**

A shift in the nature of our sessions was needed. In response, our workspace was flooded with new literature, including wordless picture books, Korean specific texts, as well as a few new choices that linked to her personal interests. To begin each session, Seoyoung was invited to choose a text to “retell,” an opportunity for her to recount a familiar text. We would continue with repeated reading

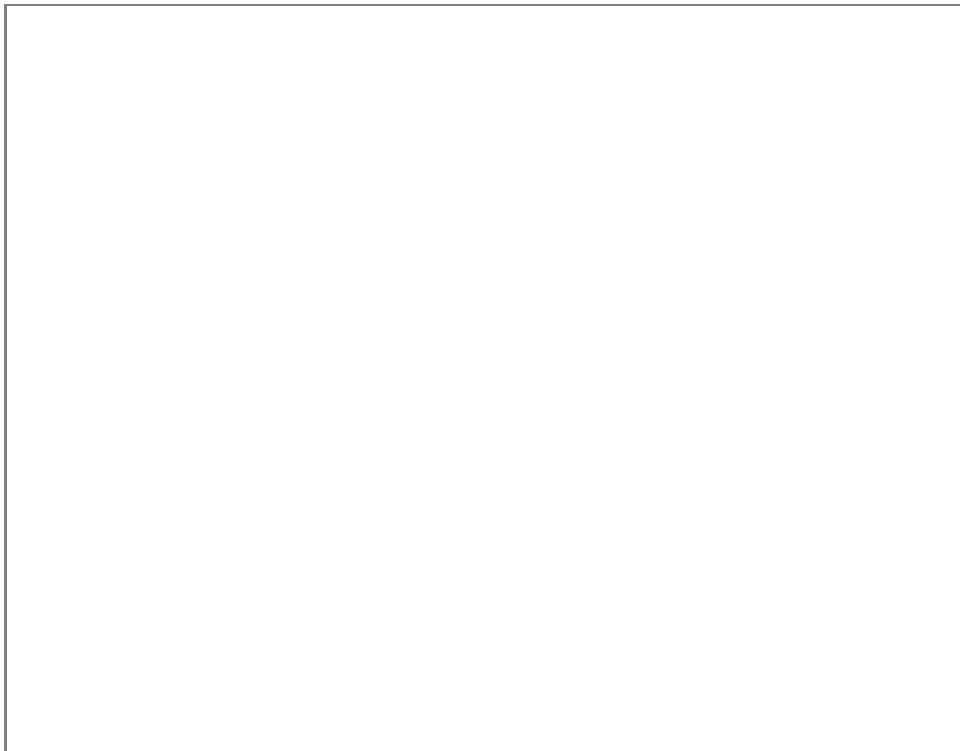
of old favorites for the first 15 minutes of our “warm up” reading. One ritual that emerged during warm up time was to retell *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* by Molly Bang (1996). Of our sessions together, Seoyoung chose to read this text the most.



Figure 1: Reading from *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* by Molly Bang.

### ***And again, and again, and again, AND again....***

The color rich illustrations of *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* are fanciful and evocative, appealing to Seoyoung’s sense of the imagined. The endless possibility of story and discovery made it easy for us to step into this fantastical world time and time again. The idea of a blue imp attempting to “snatch” the strawberries from the Grey Lady tickled us both. Even in our fifth read of the story during warm up reading, Seoyoung found plenty to notice and retell.



Reading With Seoyoung: Retelling *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* by Molly Bang.

In this clip, we see a different side of Seoyoung as a reader. Without a teacher imposing a call for culture in her retelling, Seoyoung was able to engage with the book on her own terms (See Figure 2). For instance, across this reading Seoyoung frequently posed some variation of the question, “Where is the Strawberry Snatcher?” By doing so, she not only guides herself through the book, noticing the Strawberry Snatcher, “again, and again, and again,” but also invites her listener, me, to share in the experience. Seoyoung also more readily took up new vocabulary during these readings, easily integrating “snatcher” and “tiptoe” within her retellings, integral terms to the plot introduced during previous readings. The repeated retelling also contributed to the fluency of her storytelling, as demonstrated in her melodic description of “the hat” that is pulled down and the shift in pace as she comes to the end of the book.

| Seoyoung's Reading Behaviors    | Teacher Centered | Student Centered |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Asking questions                | ✓                | ✓                |
| Making observations             | ✓                | ✓                |
| Connections                     |                  | ✓                |
| Using pictures to make meaning  |                  | ✓                |
| Concepts about print            |                  | ✓                |
| Author/Illustrator              |                  | ✓                |
| Inferring                       |                  | ✓                |
| Predicting                      |                  | ✓                |
| Emergent Phonological Awareness | ✓                | ✓                |
| Vocabulary                      |                  | ✓                |
| Dramatizing                     |                  | ✓                |
| Fluency                         |                  | ✓                |

Figure 2: An index of Seoyoung's reading behaviors

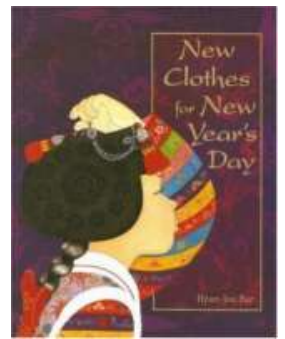
The recurring experience of sharing in the same imagined world became a bridge between Seoyoung and me. My think alouds informed her reading and her reading informed my thinking, creating a new reading each time. The exchange and interplay of our transaction with the text elicited richer reading behaviors from Seoyoung and made for a more permeable curriculum. The bidirectional exchange also supported a bridge to Seoyoung's resources as a bilingual/bicultural reader.

### Seoyoung Takes the Lead

After every warm up reading, I strategically placed a new read aloud on the table. The novelty of a new story to enjoy was very attractive and I could count on Seoyoung to select this book for me to read aloud. We would take our time during the interactive read aloud, building upon the rich meaning making she exhibited and exploring new terms that emerged from the text.



Midway through our sessions, Seoyoung selected [\*New Clothes for New Year's Day\*](#) by Hyun-Joo Bae (2007) for me to read aloud. The simple text and uniquely composed illustrations captured the excitement of dressing for the New Year. In keeping with Korean tradition, the young girl in the story receives new clothes to welcome the New Year. The oversized portraits of some of the pages depicted familiar scenes of grappling with clothing, making it easy for any young reader to step into the story world of dressing for the New Year.



After reading aloud the piece once, I read it aloud again, inviting Seoyoung to dramatize the story using the traditional Korean dress laid out on the table. The opportunity to dress as a Korean princess immediately appealed to Seoyoung. I read aloud and watched as Seoyoung tied on the oversized silk skirt and carefully slipped each arm into the rainbow-colored sleeves of the jacket, just like the protagonist in the story. Two pages of informational text at the end of the story explained each item of clothing, its significance, and the role of New Year's Day in Korean culture. We learned about the *juweoni*, the small silk pouch that would hold any money grandparents or family members might give her on New Year's Day. Photographs documented this dramatization and using language experience methods, Seoyoung storied her own version, leaning heavily on the simple pattern and phrases of Bae's original script.

To my delight, Seoyoung returned to our next session with her own Korean dress from home, very much like that of the girl in the story. She recounted wearing this costume for her grandparents and the special tradition of bowing to honor them. Building upon this experience, Seoyoung dramatized the story once again, but this time with her own dress from home. The text generated and the photographs taken from both dramatizations were compiled into a book for Seoyoung to take home and to share with her family. By the end of the year, Seoyoung could independently read her book as she had read it so many times.





New Clothes For A New Year: A Retelling By

Seoyoung.

## Learning from Seoyoung

With culturally specific literature becoming more prevalent in schools (Fox and Short, 2003), lessons learned from Seoyoung call on teachers, like myself, to more carefully consider the ways in which this body of literature enters classroom. Though well intentioned, my own assumptions and presumption of the *purposes and possibilities* of literature oriented to a specific heritage, limited Seoyoung's literacy learning. Tapping into the lives and interests of bilingual children requires more than flooding the room with culturally specific literature, more than reading them aloud, and more than invitations to students to draw from their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rendon, Gonzales, Armanti, 1993), or heritage resources. Even with the best of intentions, a read aloud of culturally specific literature can potentially feel artificial to some bilingual students and invite resistance. Such contexts can both widen and deepen the boundaries bilingual students navigate between their home and school lives. Students, even as young as Seoyoung, may even choose to reject a safe classroom space to claim heritage experiences.

Seoyoung teaches us that before sharing culturally specific texts, teachers and students must develop what Gonzalez, Moll et al describe as *confianza*, or mutual trust, "which is re-established or confirmed with each exchange and leads to the development of long-term relationships" (p. 3). The relationship of mutual respect and trust that is built over time is fertile ground for growing literacy practices that draw from students' cultural and linguistic resources. Readings of culturally specific literature rooted in student and teacher *confianza* cultivates ways of knowing and being that nurture identities as bicultural and biliterate learners. For Seoyoung and me, choice and the

ritual of talking over a good book was our bridge to *confianza*. The repeated practice of losing ourselves in story and laughing over a silly joke created a space for Seoyoung to explore an existence in the borderlands between her Korean and American life with an outsider.

Seoyoung also reminds us that teacher-directed instruction is not conducive to the sharing of culturally specific literature. She shows us that a bilingual student's motivation and interest in literacy learning must be nested in curriculum that is bidirectional and considerate of the complexity of her cultural and linguistic repertoires. My willingness to relinquish control over the nature and content of our reading and selecting literature that simultaneously recognized the hybridity she lives helped us both experience more productive and authentic literacy learning without "othering" her as Korean. What appear to be very elementary findings have greater implications for *how* teachers and families begin to think about sharing culturally specific literature.

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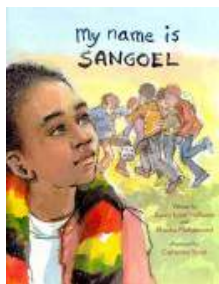
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# Children Revaluing Themselves as Readers and Writers: Critical Dialogues about Identity in Children’s Literature

Maria Perpetua Socorro Liwanag, Koomi Kim and Peter Duckett



We wanted to understand how elementary students make critical connections as they transact between texts and their own social world (Dyson, 1993) and so invited students to engage in critical dialogues in reader response journals to explore authors’ ideas as their own. Reading aloud books such as [My Name is Sangoel](#) (Williams, 2009), [Rene has Two Last Names](#) (Colato-Lainez, 2009), and *My Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) offered our students an opportunity to actively transact with the text. In Williams’ (2009) book, an elderly character tells the child: “*You carry a Dinka name. It is the name of your father and of your ancestors before him...You will be Sangoel. Even in America.*” (n.p.). By sharing children’s literature that explores names and identities, our students engaged in a journey of revaluing themselves as readers and learners.

Students from an elementary school in the northeast of the United States were participants at an after school literacy center where read aloud and independent reading sessions are a regular part of a reading practicum course for university graduate students. The practicum provides the graduate students with a culminating experience in assessing and instructing students with reading difficulties. The school has 400 K-5 students and 86% are white, 14% Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other races and ethnicities. Approximately 60 first through fifth grade students have participated since we started this project in Spring 2010. Each semester, we have 15-20 students in the Literacy Center. The majority of the students are white. At least five percent of the students who participate in the literacy program are English Language Learners (ELLs). This percentage also mirrors the demographic population of ELLs in this rural school. Also, the majority of the students who attend the after school reading program were considered “struggling readers” by the school based on their test scores. For read aloud sessions, we intentionally selected multicultural children’s literature to uncover how elementary students explore their own names and identities as well as those of others through conversations in response to the books.

We share multiple ways to use authentic multicultural children’s books to engage children as literate beings with our graduate students. We focus on various themes for book selections which include names and identities, families, friendship, and overcoming personal struggles. We regularly observe and examine students’ oral and written responses to uncover how the use of multicultural children’s literature focusing on names and identities builds a learning community and connects elementary students through critical literacy engagements. For this vignette, we share our experiences and what we’ve learned from engagements with multicultural children’s books that focus on names and identities (see Table 1). In this study, we highlight student

responses to understand how they revalued themselves as readers and learners in responding to multicultural text sets. We include oral and written responses of five students as focal points and provide the general context of the article.

## Choosing a Theme

Martinez & Roser (2011) have explored how professors of children’s literature design their courses. They mention Kathy Short, who “believes that organizing books around themes is much more significant for children” (p.16). As an opening engagement, we select stories about individuals with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and characters that have diverse names because we know this theme of diversity will engage students. Each week we read picture books, discuss them with the whole group, and then invite students to participate in a variety of response activities. These activities include writing free responses, sharing reading, conversing about books, writing responses to the books, creating posters, writing poems, and creating illustrations/drawings.

In this article we include specific examples using students’ responses to these books:

| Book Title                     | Author              | Summary   |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| <i>My Name is Yoon</i>         | Helen Recorvits     | A Korean-American girl wants to explore other English names before sharing her name with her new friends in school.   |
| <i>The Name Jar</i>            | Yangshook Choi      | Unhei is a Korean-American girl who learns to show her classmates why she has chosen to keep her name and what her name means.                                |
| <i>My Name is Sangoel</i>      | Karen Lynn Williams | A boy who comes to America and wants to be called Sangoel, even in his new home.  |
| <i>Rene has Two Last Names</i> | Rene Colato-Lainez  | Rene wants his classmates and teachers to know that he has two last names, which represent his two sets of grandparents from his father’s and mother’s sides. |

Table 1. Text set of multicultural literature focusing on names and identities.

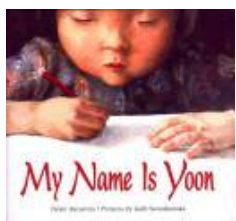
The children's books we selected deal with intricate social and cultural issues concerning identities, especially dealing with the socioculturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse names of main characters who are living in the United States. We choose these books as an invitation for students to view multiple perspectives about children's names and identities so that they can see and examine themselves and other cultures in the books they read (Freeman & Lehman, 2001; Sims, 1983).

In the following sections, we describe what we have learned about students' insights through conversation and written responses to these books. We use a lens of critical literacy (Vasquez, 2010; Wink, 2010) to understand how children position themselves socially and transact with multicultural literature.

### **Building a Learning Community**

It has been an engaging learning experience for us to understand how students respond to these selected read aloud choices. Cai (2002) reminds us that "it is not enough to know multicultural literature itself; it is imperative that we know how children will respond to it" (p.171). Our goal is to have students personally connect with a topic that invites them to share their thoughts with the group, to go in depth and think about the issues themselves, and to critically examine how the topic can influence their thinking. We have learned that students are genuinely interested and engaged whenever they are introduced to culturally and socially relevant children's literature. Our students are eager and ready to read and listen to the reading of authentic multicultural children's literature in every session because the books we selected are worth reading and talking about.

We explored the topic of names and identities in an effort to understand how children use the themes and topics to dig deeply into concepts that are as personal as names and as complex as personal identity. Issues like losing one's name in *My Name is Sangoel* (Williams, 2009) or being teased because of one's name in *Rene has Two Last Names* (Colato-Lainez, 2009) and Unhei in *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) are topics about which our students have something to say. Providing opportunities for students' voices to be heard about the issues presented in texts helps drive the learning process (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p.67).



We observed how committed students were to helping one another during a pre-reading activity for [My Name Is Yoon](#) (Recorvits, 2001). After we showed them the cover of the book and read the title of the story before reading the book, we asked children where they thought the character of the story was from. The students shared their knowledge and experiences. Most responded that Yoon could be from Japan or China. Some mentioned Mexico, but later changed their response to either Japan or

China as well when someone in the group said “it’s the name.” The students were quick and eager to share their predictions and assumptions. By listening to differing responses, students validated each other’s knowledge. This demonstrates how students “use others to help them understand” (Martinez-Roldan, 2005, p.23). In general, exploring names and identities through the selected multicultural children’s books motivated the children to share thoughts, feelings and experiences. We also learned that they freely share what they know and that they like to write about their experiences. Short (2011) reminds us that children’s discussions about books enabled them to “think with each other” (p.52). These broad ranging discussions “focus on their processes of thinking, not a final answer” (p.52).

In later sessions, students began to reflect further and make multiple connections through their personal interpretations of the literature. Here is an example of an interaction with *Rene has Two Last Names* (Colato-Lainez, 2009). Note that pseudonyms for children’s names have been used throughout the article.

**Teacher:** So why do you think Rene has two last names?

**Bree:** Probably his mom and dad are divorced.

**Johnny:** He could be like me, I was Johnny in Ghana and I’m John here now [in America] and that’s probably also true with Rene.

Here, Bree shares a personal hypothesis about family relationships while Johnny makes critical connections by drawing on his own experience in the two countries where he has lived. These responses demonstrate how children position themselves or are critically aware of their own sociocultural contexts to make critical and reflective connections. Bree is a third grader who is a monolingual English speaker and was referred to our literacy center because she needed additional support in reading and writing. Johnny is a fourth grader who came to the United States from Ghana when he was seven years old. He belongs to a large family and is multilingual. He receives ESOL instruction twice daily to support his English language development. He joined the literacy center because he also needed extra support with literacy. Connecting their experiences with the multicultural children’s books provided our students with opportunities to revalue themselves as readers and thinkers in much the same way as the characters in the story valued their own names and personal identities.

The following week, we read *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001). The students wrote how they could be a friend to a new student in their school. We asked Carlyn if we could use her writing sample to share with the class. She was very pleased that we had selected her writing piece to share. Carlyn is a monolingual English speaker. Carlyn’s written piece provided us with an opportunity to communicate as a group and become comfortable with each other. Carlyn shared the following

piece with us:

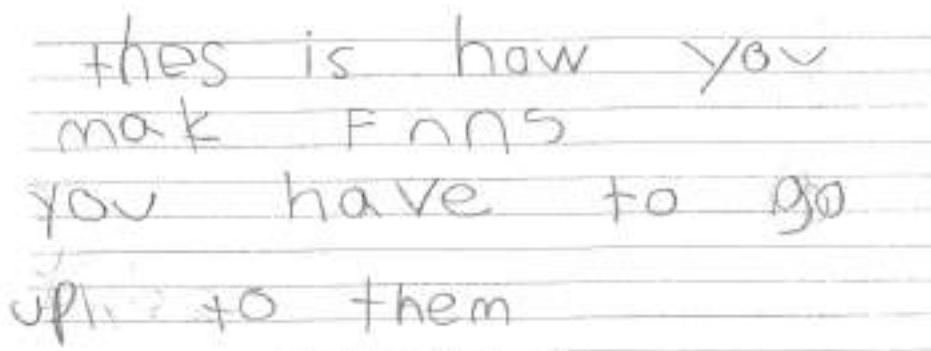


Figure 1. Carlyn writes: *This is how you make friends. You have to go up to them.*

Everyone in the group had a chance to approach another person to talk about their thoughts on *The Name Jar*. We are discovering how struggling readers in our center make reflective personal connections with the stories and share ideas with one another, and how this contributes to the students revaluing themselves as readers and learners.

### Writing about the Self to Connect with Others

As teacher educators, we use multicultural children's literature in our curriculum because it allows students to reflect on cultures that are different from their own (Harris, 1997; Henderson & May, 2005) as well as to examine their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We select stories about children's names and identities and invite them to think and talk about their own names. We also negotiate with our students on the selection of writing topics. They are encouraged to be critical learners in their understanding of social issues as well as themes which are presented in the stories we read. In the following example, Miranda chooses to write personal information about her family after reading and listening to *Rene has Two Last Names*.

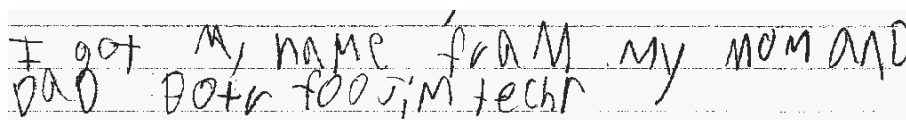


Figure 2. Miranda writes: *I got my name from my mom and dad [a] Doctor fo[r] Jim [and a] teacher.*

Miranda speaks Spanish and English. Like Johnny, she receives ESOL instruction. She decided to rewrite her own understanding of the story by situating her name based on the vocations of her parents. Rene, the character in the story, explains why he has two last names to his classmates by sharing his family tree. He acknowledged that his grandparents helped him become who he is now. He cannot just be Colato from his mother's side or Lainez from his father's side. He is Rene Colato-Lainez. In much the same way, Miranda acknowledged her family name but also added the vocations of her dad as a doctor and her mom as a teacher. By writing the origin of her name, she linked her own experience with that of Rene (Colato-Lainez, 2009) who also explained his last name in the story and linked them with his family's talent and work. We see how Miranda was re-



writing her own world in much the same way as Rene did in the story. This provides us with a platform to share more about ourselves and our families. Another example comes from a fourth grade monolingual speaker, Mark, who forged a sense of sharing when he wrote in his reader response journal and shared the following in our class:

A photograph of a student's handwritten journal entry on lined paper. The text is written in black ink and reads: "I want to change my last name because some one mad fun of my last MY last name". There are some corrections and a small mark at the end.

Figure 3. Mark writes: *I want to change my last name because some one made fun of my last name.*

Social issues such as name-calling and labeling became a focal point of our discussions when everyone agreed that it's not good to make fun of other people's names, especially concerning ethnic names. Mark's response above was also his own way of sharing information about his name after we read and listened to *My Name is Sangoel* (Williams, 2009). In the book, Sangoel goes to America to start a new life with his family but also finds that people have trouble pronouncing his name. His teachers and classmates in his new school do not know how to say his name. Sangoel doesn't like it when his name is mispronounced. In the end, he creates a rebus of his name to help his new teachers, classmates and friends to pronounce his name the way it should be said. Sangoel's situation resonated with Mark as he wrote about how others also "made fun of his last name" because it was difficult to pronounce. By sharing his writing with others, children had an opportunity to talk about issues surrounding name-calling and labeling. This book also helped them be reflective as we examined how name-calling and labeling can make a person uncomfortable and why it's important to respect others. Wilhelm (2009) talks about how "reflection is essential to critical literacy and to effective teaching" because reflection privileges our experiences as "a source of knowledge" (p. 37). In this case, Mark's writing helped us validate his experience and knowledge as a teachable resource for helping others become better individuals. Students had a starting point to share personal information and to explore family stories and names because of their experiences reading and listening to authentic multicultural literature (Short, 2011; Cai, 2002; Mathis, 2011).

Examining students' initial reading responses and journal entries helped us understand how names and identities can be topics for exploration. Even students who do not usually like to read and write are eager to read their work aloud to the group. They are motivated to read and write about names and about themselves or their identities because they are the experts in their stories about their names/ identities. Our students develop positive self-concepts while simultaneously learning about other cultures.

## Conclusion

Students in our literacy center helped us understand how they developed and grew as literate beings. Our students engaged in authentic writing events. The culturally diverse literature provided them with opportunities to extend the story and apply concepts and ideas “to and from” their own lives.

The students all showed that their life experiences transact with the stories we read and listened to in class. While they each have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds compared to the stories they read and listened to in class, they experienced a sense of connectedness through the topics and themes found in the literature. By thinking about the characters’ experiences, they generated their own insights and meanings. The children in the literacy center revalued themselves as readers and learners as they rewrote their own stories and offered their own perspectives. Like the characters in the multicultural children’s books, students had the opportunity to discuss and offer their own perspectives. Orally sharing and writing stories about names and identities helped them find meanings in their own names and identities while also creating a sense of personal ownership for learning.

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### **Made in the USA *en español*: Reading Identity in Picture Book Life Narratives**

Laura Kanost

This is a story about biographical and autobiographical picture books being published in Spanish in the United States, and about how a bilingual first-grade class taught me creative ways of reading them. By their very nature, these books invite dialogue between adult understandings of young U.S. Spanish-speakers’ tastes, needs, values, and emerging identities, on the one hand, and those

readers' playful, flexible approaches to reading and writing identity, on the other.

I wanted to develop that dialogue because I had noticed a recent sharp increase in the number of U.S. trade picture books with Spanish or bilingual Spanish-English text telling the life story of a Spanish-speaking individual. (I exclude Puerto Rico here, since unlike the fifty states, it has a well-established tradition of Spanish-language children's literature.) I counted *five* such books from the 1990s: Jonah Winter's bilingual portrait of Diego Rivera, Pat Mora's self-translated vignette based on childhood experiences of Tomás Rivera, and three memoirs by Mexican-Americans Carmen Lomas Garza and Juan Felipe Herrera published by the Children's Book Press, an early and enduring leader among the bilingual presses that emerged following the Bilingual Education Act of 1974. The following decade added *more than twenty* new books.

Writers, translators, illustrators, and editors interact in different ways to create bilingual books and monolingual translations. These collaborators are a diverse group, including Latinos born in the U.S., immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, and residents of Spanish-speaking countries. The illustrated life stories they create are heavily dominated by subjects who excelled as writers and artists, perhaps reflecting the writers' and illustrators' own love for their fields. The majority of the subjects are Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, but figures with roots in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Spain are also represented. Just about half include childhood experiences of speaking Spanish in the United States, an issue seemingly central to the identity and concerns of the target audience. Of that smaller group, nearly all center on Mexican-American figures—including multiple biographies of César Chávez— and most are produced by the same two publishers, Children's Book Press and Piñata Books. I was concerned that as a group, the life stories of Latinos being told in Spanish to U.S. children did not reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of U.S. Latinos. However, I also noticed that these books tend to place a high value on family and national or ethnic communities that nourish individual creativity, suggesting empowering parallels between the lives of the subjects—no matter where they grew up—and the readers.

To understand how child readers might interact with this body of literature, I asked for the help of a bilingual first-grade class of Mexican-American students in the Houston area. Seven female students and nine male students participated in the study. Their teacher read each book to the class and led group discussions of their reactions and observations, and the students also recorded their thoughts individually in varying formats. Readers were encouraged to connect their own experiences with those of the protagonists; they were often asked, "If you could meet the main character, what would you say to him/her?", and were encouraged to explore the modes of expression (family album, mural, pottery, salsa music, poetry, etc.) featured in each book (see Figures 1-3).



Figure 1. Students holding up part of the mural they made in response to Diego Rivera's life story.



Figure 2. The class made their own pots following a technique inspired by Juan Quezada's in *La vasija que Juan fabricó / The Pot That Juan Built*.

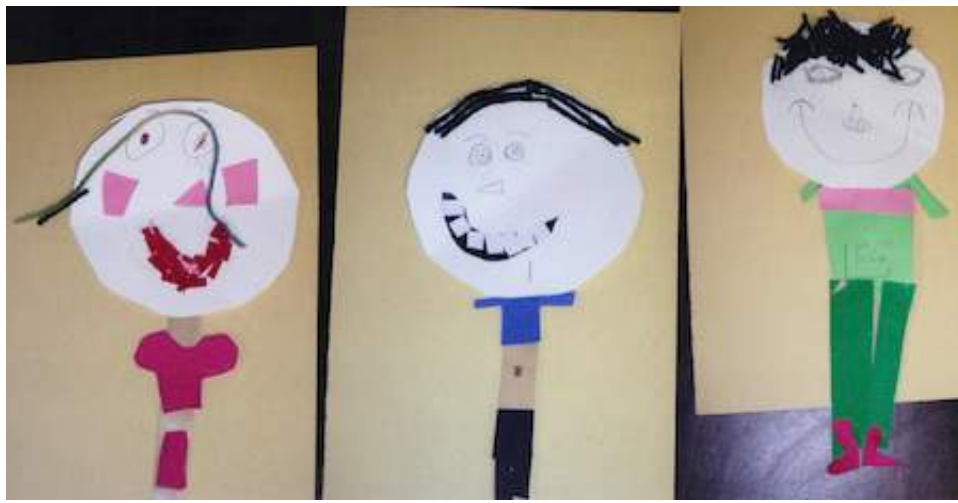


Figure 3. Masks students made to represent how they felt while listening and dancing to Celia Cruz's music.

The books we read included the detailed images and memoir vignettes of [\*Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia\*](#) (1990) that typically depict, not Carmen Lomas Garza herself, but the developing young artist's perceptions of her culturally rich and supportive South Texas community. In [\*Cosechando esperanza \[Harvesting Hope\]\*](#) (2003) by Kathryn Krull with illustrations by Yuyi Morales, César Chávez's life emerges from an idyllic childhood on the plentiful family farm that is lost to drought and poverty; the peaceful protests Chávez begins to lead after years of hardship and discrimination owe their success in part to his character traits and to the ability fostered by his mother to solve conflicts through words. Jonah Winter's [\*Diego\*](#) (1991) traces the muralist's rise to international success through natural artistic talent nurtured both by his family and his surroundings, surroundings which Rivera in turn changes politically through his art. [\*Me llamo Celia /My Name is Celia\*](#) (2004), by Monica Brown with illustrations by Rafael Lopez, emphasizes Cruz's ability to express her *cubanidad* in exile through music with universal appeal, the result of her personal qualities of exuberance, perseverance, and musicality, and her familial and national heritages. Lastly, in [\*La vasija que Juan fabricó \[The Pot That Juan Built\]\*](#) (2003), cumulative verse by Nancy Andrews-Goebel and translator Eunice Cortés pairs with luminous computer graphics by David Díaz to tell the story of Juan Quezada's development as an artist inspired by, and in turn transforming, the community of Mata Ortiz, Mexico.

The visual and verbal beauty of these selections and the subgenre as a whole powerfully affirms the language(s) of its target readership. And yet, I felt the subgenre could do more to represent diverse experiences of growing up in the U.S. speaking Spanish. As Rocío G. Davis (2006) observed in her study of Asian American autobiography for children, life narratives not set in the U.S. can "validate a non-American childhood settings" by giving "child readers access to many of their parents' or grandparents' historical or cultural stories, or, if they are immigrants themselves, it validates their experiences in the American literary context" (p. 187). Davis went on to point out that these texts thus rewrite notions of American identity, and "posit Americanization as an individual process in ways that stress transitivity rather than static or endowed identification" (p. 187).



The first-graders who participated in this study indeed formed creative and playful individual relationships to the subjects of the books-- regardless of national origin. In class discussions, they did respond especially enthusiastically to *Cuadros de familia*, and its familiar vignettes of quinceañeras, birthday piñatas, nopalitos and tamales, and the beach. In general, however, these children rarely focused on the nationalities of the protagonists, but instead used the stories as an opportunity to tell about their own values and experiences, bringing the books' subjects along for the ride. The identities projected by their responses are not easily reducible to nationality: the children were creating their own narratives as Mexicans, Americans, and Texans—and above all, as children.

In part, the first-graders' tendency to mix historical, cultural and political categories reflects their developmental stage. Thus, one child wrote to César Chávez—certain that he would reply— “Ya sé que tú vives en California. Nosotros vivimos en Estados Unidos. De seguro tú tienes familia. Bueno, en Estados Unidos también cada uno tenemos familia.” [I know you live in California. We live in the United States. Surely you have family. Well, in the United States we each have a family too.] At the same time, this crossing of boundaries reflects a lived experience in which identity constructs intermingle and overlap. Recurring images of eagles in one child's responses to the books might symbolize the United States or Mexico—or both (see example in Figure 4, below). And although *Me llamo Celia* emphasizes Cuban identity, one student depicted herself dancing with the Queen of Salsa, both dressed in skirts made from the Mexican flag (see Figure 5, below). “Yo estoy bailando,” [I am dancing], says the child in a cartoon bubble. “Tú estás bonita, muy bonita,” [You are pretty, very pretty], answers a nearly identical—but taller-- Celia.



Figure 4. Flying eagle sequence (detail from Diego Rivera-inspired class mural).





Figure 5. Student and Celia Cruz dance, both dressed in Mexican flags (detail).

In other cases, the readers privileged childhood over other issues, imagining the subjects as children with whom they could play. In one drawing, Celia Cruz was invited to play and eat pizza, to which Cruz responded by suggesting they watch television and jump on the bed. Several children wrote stories about painting the walls with Diego Rivera, but one story began at a playground, while another started by establishing, “Yo soy Superman y Diego es Spiderman” (Figure 6). Spiderman made several appearances in response to various books.



Figure 6. “I am Superman and Diego is Spiderman.”

While it was more common for the children to bring the characters into their own world, in one

instance many of the readers easily crossed into the realm of the characters. In response to young Carmen's encounter with a dead shark on the beach in *Cuadros de familia*, several children filled their family albums with gruesome narratives of their own—surely fictional—harrowing encounters with sharks. In one drawing, for example, a child and father stand in the background on the beach, observing a gory shark attack (Figure 7). The accompanying narrative begins, “Yo fui a la playa y vi un tiburón que se comió un señor. Y toda la sangre estaba toda la sangre en la agua” [I went to the beach and I saw a shark that ate a man. And all the blood was all the blood in the water]. The child goes on to describe throwing meat in the water in an effort to distract the shark.

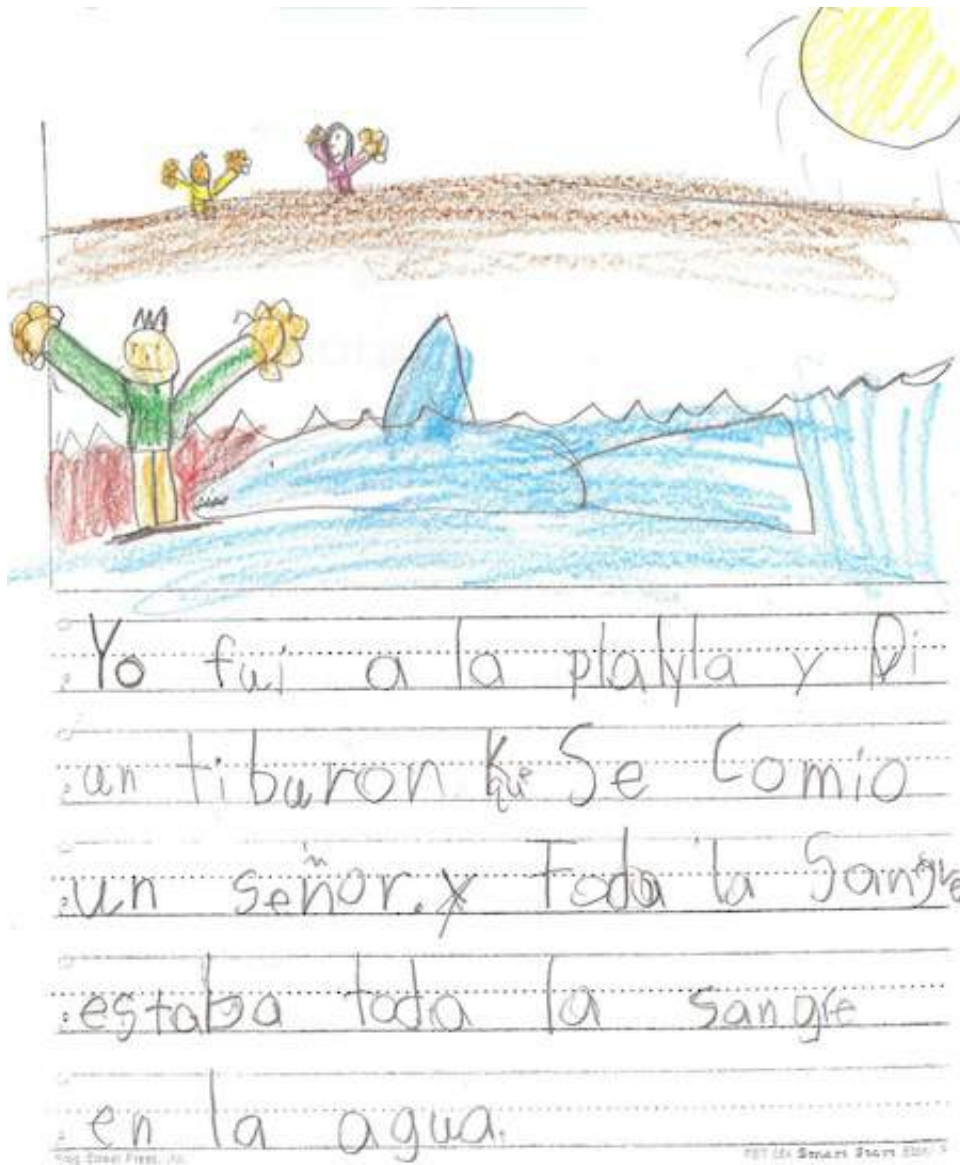


Figure 7. In family album, child describes encounter with man-eating shark.

These unpredictably creative stories and pictures reveal the students' expertise in manipulating texts both as readers and as writers—of books and of their own identities. They are at home in a United States where, as José David Saldívar (1997) observed in his study of Lomas Garza, “intercultural crossings between global and local alternatives constitute a new cultural dominant” (p. 72). This skill is implicitly but powerfully affirmed by the publication in the U.S., in growing

numbers and outstanding quality, of Spanish-language and bilingual Latino life narratives for children. The recent economic crisis has been an obstacle to the creation of books such as these; let us hope that the momentum gained in the previous decade will not be lost. There are many more stories waiting to be told.

### **Author's Note**

My most sincere thanks to the students, their teacher, and their parents for devoting their time to this project and sharing their ideas and talents. The students participated in this study during the 2007-2008 academic year with the approval of my university's Institutional Review Board and their school principal; the parents and children who agreed to participate were informed of the nature of the study and signed a consent form allowing their responses to be studied and published. The texts were selected for age-appropriateness, relationship to the curriculum, and to include both U.S. and non-U.S. childhood narratives.

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## **Exploring the Cultural Identities of Students and Book Characters with Identity Intersections**



As a professor of undergraduate and graduate children's literature courses, I have always encouraged my students to read global and multicultural literature. I believe it is important for students to experience the breadth and variety of available literature and to explore new cultures. When books are set in unfamiliar cultures, however, some readers have difficulty understanding the culturally driven behaviors and motivations of characters. It is easy for readers who do not understand how culture shapes behavior within a particular cultural setting to misinterpret the actions, beliefs and values of characters and how the characters interact with others within that setting.

Many students have simplistic understandings of culture and cultural identity, which leads to essentialized expectations of human behavior as people reduce the complexity of what it means to be human to labels and stereotypes. When readers approach multicultural or global literature with such a limited set of labels and understandings, it is easy to misconstrue the reasons characters act in the ways that they do. Instead of characters' actions making sense within their cultural setting, readers may view their actions as weird, exotic, or wrong.

Rather than being essentialized and simple, culture and the cultural identities of people living within a culture are hybrid, interrelated, and constantly changing. Every person participates in a number of different cultural groups, which wax and wane in importance depending on time, location, and context.

### **Identity Intersections**

One way I have encouraged readers to explore the cultural backgrounds and cultural identities of book characters is through a learning engagement that uses identity intersections. An identity intersection (Foss, 2002) is a graphic representation of interrelated and interconnected aspects of one person's cultural identity (see Figure 1). The intersection identifies the cultural groups that a person claims affiliation with and indicates how those cultural groups interact to influence the way that person lives their life. Depending on how it is used, this learning engagement can help students recognize the importance of their own cultural identities to how they live their lives and the influence of cultural identities on how book characters live their lives.

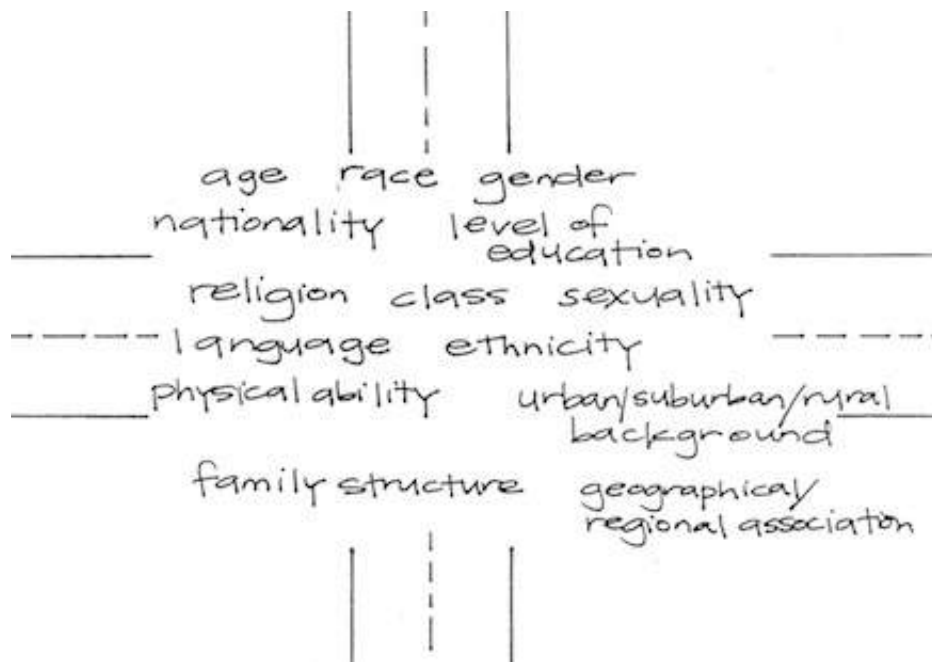


Figure 1. Identity Intersection format.

Identity intersections are created when one carefully considers how different aspects of a person's cultural identity have shaped her/his life. This includes membership in easily recognized cultural groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, language, socioeconomic status and gender, but also other types of group membership such as geographic region, education level, physical ability, and family. Although the identity intersection begins with the format developed by Foss (2002), students are encouraged to add or remove any aspects that they perceive as important or unimportant to the cultural identities under examination. Students often choose to add memberships in groups based on professions and hobbies to their identity intersections.

Once students have decided which aspects belong on their identity intersections, they think about the influence each aspect has had on their lives or the life of a book character. Each aspect of cultural identity may be more or less important at different points in life or in different contexts. For example, Beth, a recently married female student, talked about how both her perception of herself as a woman and the way other people treat her have changed since her marriage. She reported that her gender had gained a more prominent role in her life as she and her husband were figuring out their roles in the marriage and as she was beginning to think about having children.



Students also consider how various aspects of their cultural identities are connected. Aspects of cultural identity are interrelated and influence each other. For example, after reading the realistic fiction novel [La Línea](#) by Ann Jaramillo (2008), one small group created an identity intersection for the character of Elena. They discussed how her fierce independence had been fostered by her family structure, the absence of her parents who had migrated to the United States, and the guidance of her loving grandmother.



Students create a graphic representation of the cultural identities in an identity intersection. Some students choose to use the same format as Foss' original identity intersection, but I encourage them to emphasize perceived importance and interrelatedness through the way they organize aspects, and how they use size, color and font. Aspects that are perceived as most important can be emphasized by making them larger than less important aspects. They may also be placed in such a way as to show their importance, perhaps by putting highly important aspects at the top of the identity intersection or by placing them at the center and arranging other aspects around them. Connections between aspects can also be shown, for example, by writing connected aspects on the same line or in the same color.

Finally, students reflect on their work through writing or discussion. Like many learning engagements, an identity intersection can be a rote formulaic assignment if students are merely labeling aspects. The power of the identity intersection as a learning tool is in how it supports thinking about culture and cultural identities. Opportunities for reflection and thought should be woven throughout this engagement.

### **Beginning with an Exploration of Students' Own Cultural Identities**

Before we begin using identity intersections to examine book characters, we examine our own cultural identities. We do this so that students have an example of what kind of thinking is expected in this engagement, but also because I believe that students need to understand the role culture plays in their own lives in order to understand how important it is for others. Many students, particularly those from white, middle-class American settings, are not accustomed to thinking about themselves in this way. They believe strongly that the way they live their lives is an individual choice and the idea that membership in various cultural groups influences their choices is a difficult concept for them to grapple with. Because of this, as we begin working with identity intersections students are reading professional articles about identity and exploring children's literature related to the theme of identity. Modeling my own identity intersection has also been extremely important. I introduce this engagement by creating my identity intersection on the projector and talking about how each aspect shown on the intersection influences how I live my life. Next, students create their own. Sometimes this is done in class; other times it is a homework assignment. When done as a class assignment, students have time to talk about whatever parts of their identity intersection they'd like to share. When done as a homework assignment, students write a 1-2 page reflection as part of the assignment.

The two examples below are from identity intersections completed as homework. Excerpts from their written reflections are below each identity intersection.

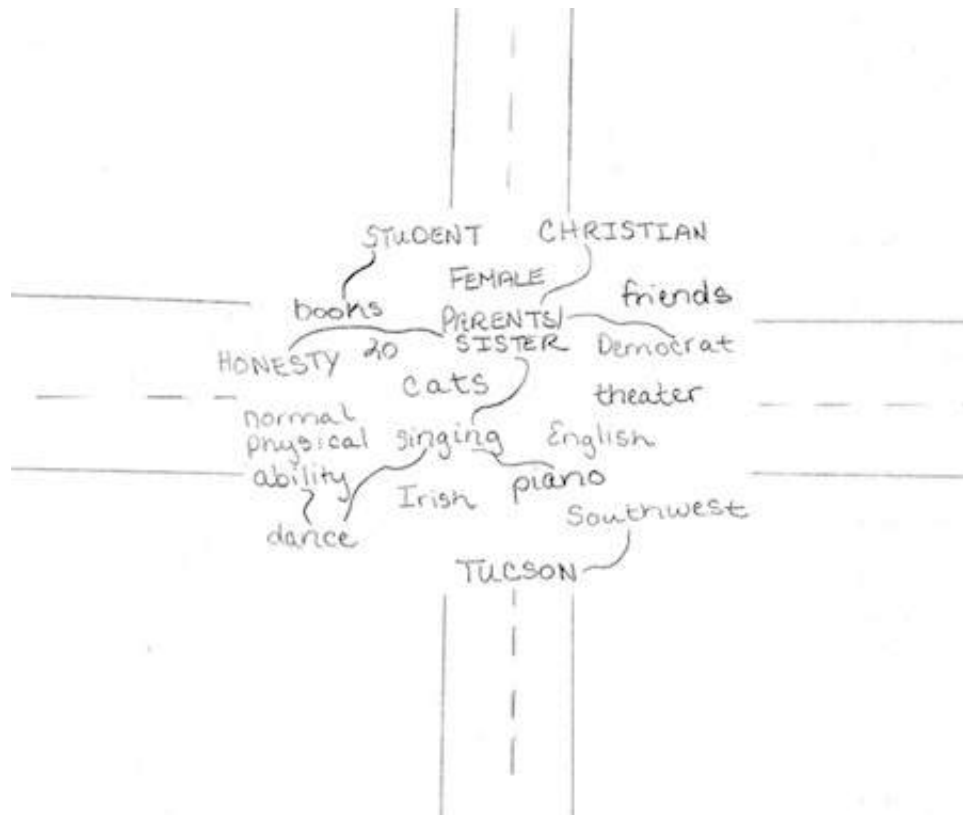


Figure 2. Elena's identity intersection.

In her reflection, Elena described her identity intersection:

For my identity intersection I capitalized the things that I find most contribute to my identity. These were things such as my family, my religion, and my school. I also connected the things which I felt had a strong link. The things that connected were mostly hobbies that I enjoy doing. Although this is my identity now, my identity is continually changing....I do not have a certain system to my identity intersection except that I tried to keep the things closely connected together.

Elena used Foss' basic format and included many of the aspects that appear on that format, including age, gender, religion, language, ethnicity, physical ability, geographic association, and family structure. She also added her political affiliation and hobbies/interests. Elena did not include anything about her race, nationality, or sexuality, most likely because she did not believe that they influenced her life in a significant way.

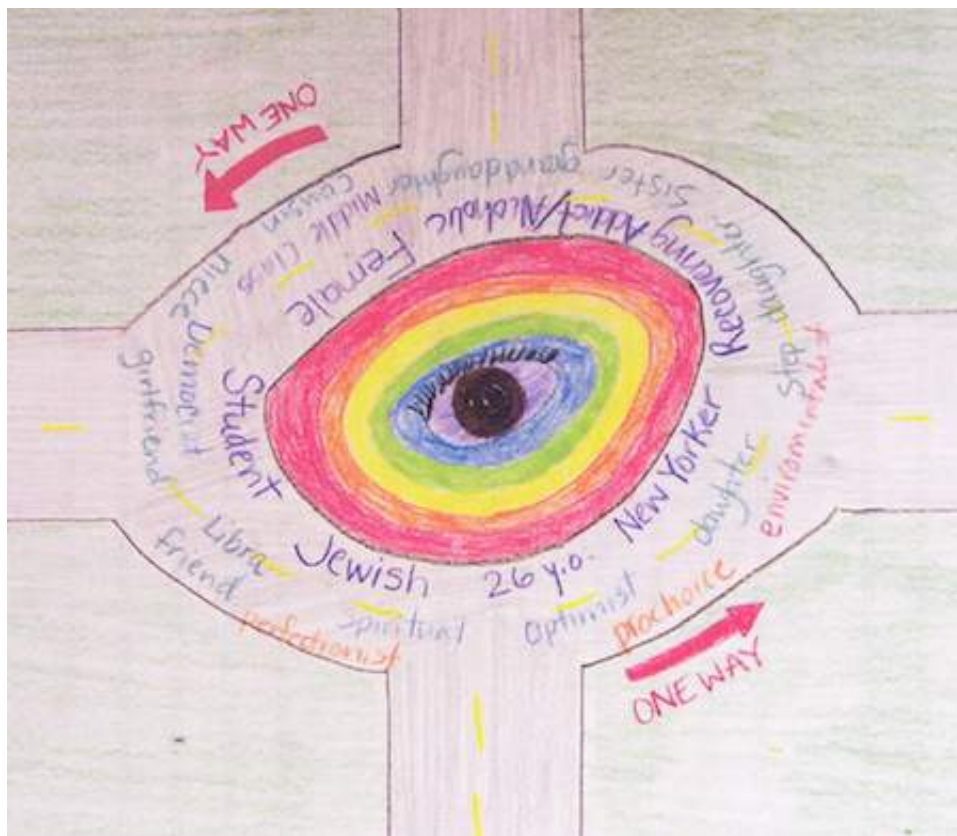


Figure 3. Mara's identity intersection.

In this excerpt from her reflection, Mara describes her identity intersection:

I made my identity intersection a one-way circle because right now in my life, things are pretty circular. Eventually, when I graduate next May, I will exit onto one of those streets. My life is one-way because I don't believe in going backwards or having regrets. I try to learn from my experiences and grow from them, always moving forward, closer to my dreams. The words I chose to identify myself are pretty self explanatory. The words closest to the rainbow are those things that are most important to my identity today, especially being a 26 year old female student who is also a recovering alcoholic/addict. The fact that I am Jewish and from New York is significant also since it affects how I relate to people.

Mara chose to modify Foss' format into an organization more meaningful to her life. She included aspects such as age, gender, religion, class, ethnicity, urban background/geographic association and family structure. Like Elena, she added political affiliations. She also added some values and personality traits. Mara chose not to include anything about her race, sexuality, language, or physical ability.

### **Using Identity Intersections to Explore the Culture and Cultural Identities of Book Characters**

After students have had the opportunity to explore their own cultural identities through identity

intersections, we use them to examine book characters, particularly for books that portray unfamiliar cultural settings. Students have done identity intersections both as individual reflections and as an engagement to support and extend talk during literature discussions.

In our children's literature course students regularly choose multicultural and global children's literature to read for literature discussions. To prepare for these discussions, students are asked to complete an individual reflection about the book. Students are sometimes assigned the reflection format and other times can choose whether they want to reflect through writing, art, music, graphic organizers, or other methods. These reflections give the students a place to record their initial thinking about the book, which leads to richer, more thoughtful discussions.

Jenny used an identity intersection in her reflection to examine the main character in *Catherine, Called Birdy* (Cushman, 1994), a historical fiction novel set in medieval England. In this book, spirited and independent Birdy struggles with her constrained role as a noble female while also trying to thwart her father's plans of marrying her off to a rich man.

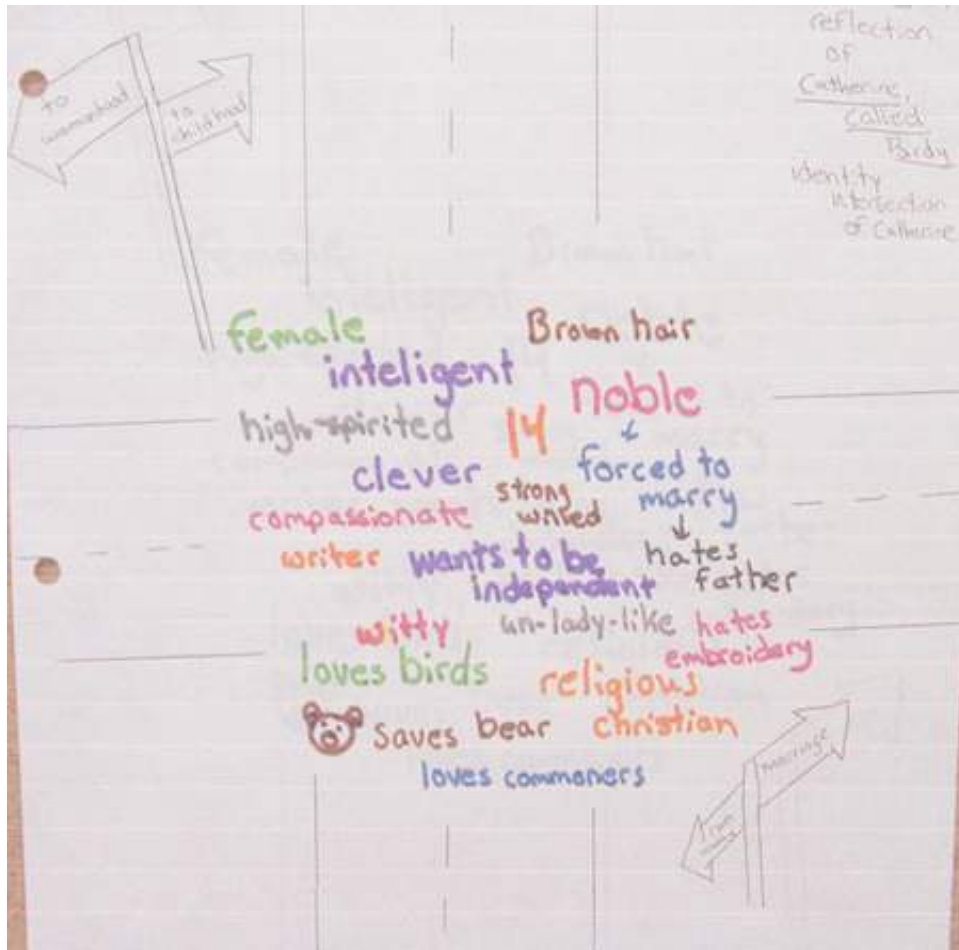
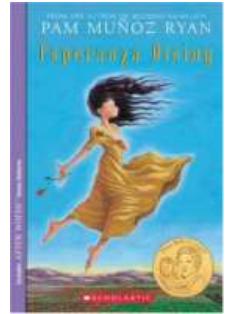


Figure 4. Individual reflection in preparation for a literature discussion over *Catherine, Called Birdy*.

In her identity intersection, Jenny included aspects such as gender, age, class and religion. She also added many personality traits. Jenny brought this identity intersection to her small group literature discussion and shared her work as the group began talking about the book. This gave the

group an initial direction. Throughout the discussion, Jenny referred back to the identity intersection, explaining why she included these particular aspects and connecting them with specific events in the book. The group spent a long time talking about what it would be like to be female in medieval England.

At other times we used identity intersections as a group engagement in order to extend and support talk during literature discussions. The small groups always had time to freely discuss the book, but after this open discussion, I often asked them to focus their discussion on an exploration of a single theme or character. When focusing on characters, the group chose which character to talk about, and created an identity intersection as they examined the character. In the example below, a group discussing [\*Esperanza Rising\*](#) by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2002), focused on the central character of Esperanza. In this historical fiction novel, Esperanza lives a privileged and pampered life in Mexico until her father dies and she and her mother are forced to flee to the United States for a life as migrant workers.



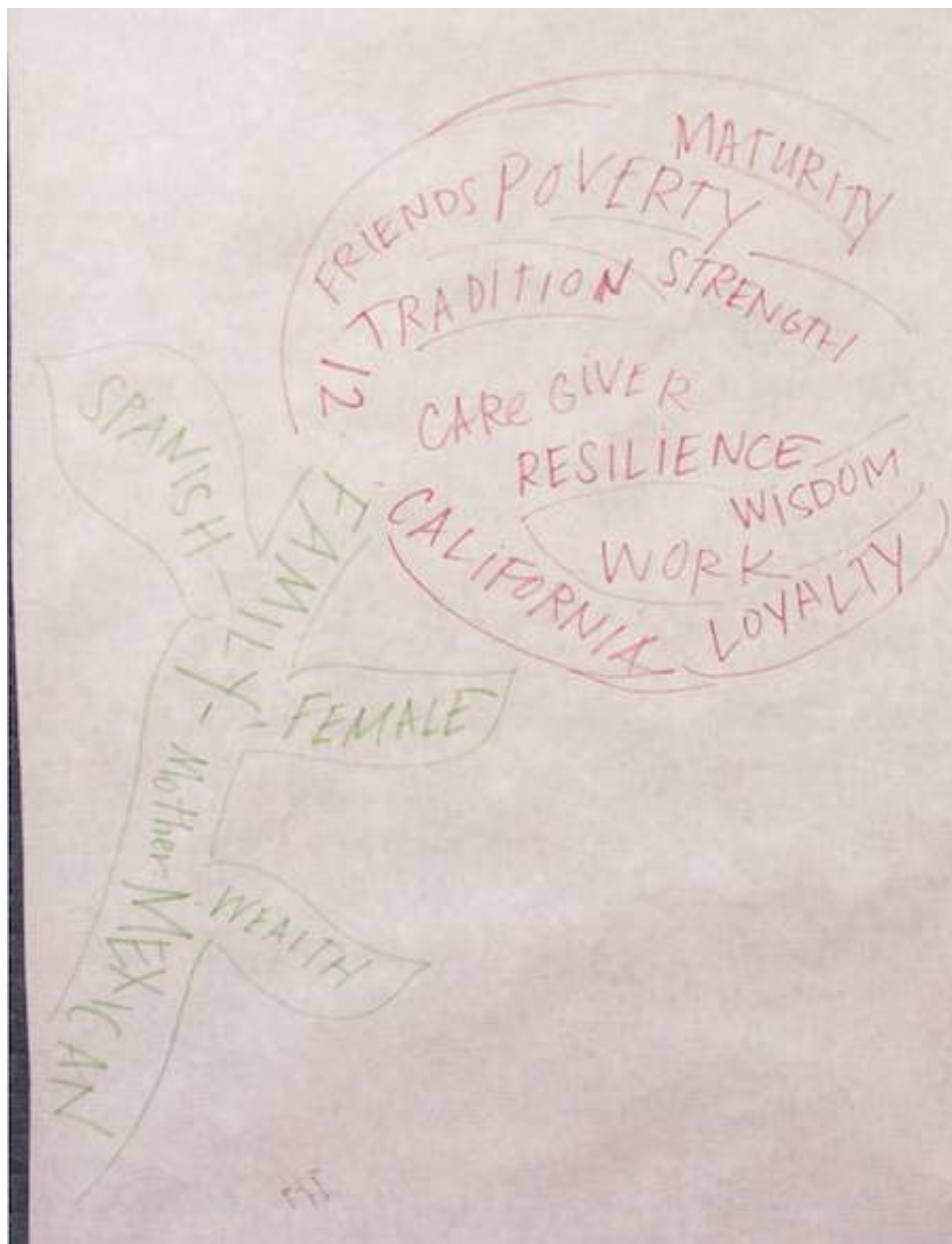


Figure 5. Group identity intersection for the character of Esperanza in *Esperanza Rising*.

At the end of the discussion, the group explained to the class that they organized the aspects of Esperanza's identity into the shape of a rose, because roses were important symbols in the novel. The aspects of her identity that they perceived as foundational to the immature Esperanza at the beginning of the novel were written in green on the stem, and included nationality, language, class, gender and family structure. The group created the bloom of the rose with aspects of Esperanza's mature identity at the end of the novel, including age, class, geographic association, family role, and several personality traits.

Creating identity intersections as a group activity during a literature discussion extends discussion as group members debate what aspects are important to the character and how each aspect affects their lives. Group members tend to return often to the book to find proof for their assertions about the character. Although the focus in this part of the literature discussion is on one specific



character, it is common for the discussion to be wide-ranging, touching on other characters, plot, intertextual connections, and connections between the text and group members' lives.

## **Final Thoughts**

There are challenges with using identity intersections. One recurring challenge is simply getting students to grapple with the idea that the way people live their lives is influenced by their membership in various cultural groups. Because dominant American cultures are highly individualistic, many students believe that values, beliefs, and actions are entirely personal choices. Related to this is the difficulty in helping students understand the difference between aspects of cultural identities and personality traits. Students are often more comfortable talking about personality traits and must be encouraged to focus on cultural identities.

It is important to provide students with multiple opportunities to think about cultural identities through class engagements such as identity intersections, discussion, children's and young adult literature, and professional readings. I find that though some students will be unable or unwilling to shift their thinking about cultural identities, using identity intersections several times across a semester will show growth in the complexity of their thinking.

Using identity intersections with undergraduate and graduate students has helped them think about culture and cultural identities in more sophisticated ways. The opportunity to reflect on their own lives has shown them how aspects of their cultural identity encourage certain behaviors or ways of thinking and how membership in particular cultural groups influences how people live their lives.

As a tool for exploring book characters, identity intersections focus and support thinking about cultures that are unfamiliar to the reader. This support, along with the talking, thinking, and learning that students do in relation to global and multicultural literature, adds to the understanding students build and the enjoyment they receive from reading books set in unfamiliar cultures.

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