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# WOW STORIES

CONNECTIONS FROM THE CLASSROOM  
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Building Bridges Across Multiple Worlds

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WOW Stories: Volume V, Issue 1  
*Building Bridges Across Multiple Worlds*  
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Volume V, Issue 1: *Building Bridges Across Multiple Worlds*

Editor's Note:

It is with a heavy heart that I write this, days after a historic and deeply troubling election that has left many of us reeling, and with questions about how rhetoric centered on hate and fear could appeal to so many. Political analysts, journalists, and pollsters are theorizing on the root causes of an election that went against predictions and the popular vote. On social media, an outpouring of teachers and parents are asking for advice on how to explain these results, and the underlying reasons for such an outcome, to their students and children. A common explanation in the discourse around the election has focused on the notion that many Americans, in response to a rapidly changing and diversifying country in terms of race, immigration, and economy, are feeling fearful and "left behind." As a parent, educator, and language researcher, I wonder how to address the polarizing ideas that have the country divided.

There is one conviction, however, that I am more committed to than ever, and that is the mission of World of Words. Its basic tenant, to "build bridges across global cultures through children's and adolescent literature," is more poignant than ever, and this issue of *WOW Stories* presents examples of how this mission plays out in practice across contexts when literature is at the center of inquiry into critical issues. A tricky balance exists between navigating mandates and preparing students for an increasingly diverse global culture that has impacted society, both locally and globally.

Donalyn Miller, a.k.a. "The Book Whisperer," in a conversation about the critical importance of international literature in the classroom, offers both an inspiring vision for why this literature matters in how it addresses the natural curiosity of children about people and cultures around the world, and considerations for how to take up such literature in the classroom.

Kathy Short provides a critical analysis of how educators can navigate the goals of intercultural understanding within the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts. Short identifies common misconceptions about how the standards are understood, implemented, and interpreted by educators and the authors of the standards, and offers insights into how to take up international texts that allow growth as readers and global citizens.

Both Donalyn Miller and Kathy Short advocate a vision of literature as central to inquiry into important global issues in the lives of children and adolescents. These two articles are accompanied by powerful examples of how literature impacts teachers and students across contexts.

Julia López-Robertson describes a collaboration between Latina mothers and their children and how culturally relevant children's literature led to powerful dialogue about their personal experiences with border-crossing.

Summer Edward, a student teacher in Debra Repak's middle school classroom in a school serving an ethnically diverse community, describes her inquiry into how Debra locates and utilizes culturally diverse literature. The article presents both important insights into sensitive issues with using diverse literature in the classroom as well as the impressive understandings generated by teachers in the earliest stages of practice when engaged in reflective practice and teacher research.

Lastly, teacher educators Natalie DeWitt and Marie LeJeune offer a framework for using children's and adolescent literature to promote nutrition education that is both culturally sensitive and academically accurate. They provide readers with criteria to consider when teaching nutrition concepts to young learners as well as a list of books that exemplify the features in their framework.

It is my hope that in this issue of *WOW Stories*, educators find themselves affirmed in the important work they do every day to grow intercultural understanding through literature. It is through this important work that, together, teachers and students can address and dispel fears of diversity and globalization prevalent in the public discourse, and engage in conversations that promote unity through knowledge, empathy, and connection.

Tracy Smiles, Editor

**Open Hearts, Curiosity, and Questions:  
A Conversation with Donalyn Miller, “The Book Whisperer,” on International  
Literature in the Classroom**

Tracy Smiles

Donalyn Miller, “The Book Whisperer,” is an upper elementary and middle school teacher in Northeast Texas and the author of several books about teaching literacy through life-long reading, including *The Book Whisperer* (2009) and *Reading in the Wild* (2013). Additionally, Donalyn co-founded the popular blog, The Nerdy Book Club, and co-hosts the monthly Twitter chat #titletalk. Her articles about teaching and reading have appeared in publications such as *Education Week Teacher*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Horn Book*, and *The Washington Post*. Her many honors include being a finalist for Texas Teacher of the Year in 2010.



Currently Donalyn is on sabbatical from her teaching position and traveling all over the country speaking to teachers and librarians about her teaching philosophy, classroom practice, and children’s and adolescent literature. Donalyn’s message is clear – students thrive when they have choices regarding what they read, and need access to a wide variety of high quality and interesting texts in the classroom. Her own journey to becoming a reading teacher, described in her first book, *The Book Whisperer*, led her to develop an independent reading program that supports students in developing life-long reading habits. Donalyn and I became friends when we served on the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts” selection committee together. I talked with Donalyn just after she had returned from a trip to McAllen, Texas, where she spoke at several school library events. She was excited about the new public library she was able to visit while there.

Donalyn: The library is in an abandoned Walmart. The architect kept some of the integrity of the original Walmart – the ceiling is all open with the scaffolding and you can see the HVAC which they painted. The library is gorgeous, everything is in English and Spanish, it has a huge children's section, huge teen room, giant reading room, and they've got fountains. It's beautiful. It won an American Library Association honor award for its architecture.

Tracy: Oh wow.

Donalyn: I know! I'm so nerdy that I actually knew that. I had two hours between two school events and I said to my friend, "Let's go over to the McAllen Public Library because it won an architectural award from the American Library Association." My friend started laughing. He goes, "Of course you knew that, Donalyn." I said, "Look, you need somebody in the world to be this nerdy, and I am happy to take on that role."

I asked Donalyn to describe what she sees as the role of international literature in the classroom.

Donalyn: I'm constantly in awe of children. I just am. Children have such open hearts. They have curiosity about themselves and about the world. I think literature in general helps children feed their curiosity, ask new questions. I also believe children have a strong sense of justice, especially if we cultivate that innate sense and build frameworks to help them understand the world. Of course, international literature feeds directly into that. We know from several studies that reading fosters our empathy, fosters our awareness for the experiences of people who have different lives than we do. Children have a natural curiosity about people who live in different communities. By sharing international literature with children, I think we can give them an opportunity to have great conversations in the classroom and to address misconceptions they may have about different parts of the world or about different communities – but also to foster their curiosity about people who have different stories to tell than theirs.

To follow up on her explanation for why international literature has an important classroom role, I asked her to describe how she engaged her students in reading books about different cultures and the ways people live in different parts of the world.

Donalyn: Often I just share, especially if it's the first of the year when we're sharing different types of books, I often like to read these books out loud with children. I'll quote Lester Laminack here. He says the first time you flip open a book, it's like opening a present. He talks about letting children "linger" with a book. This is something I've really been writing and thinking about lately. We tend to push towards the didactic purposes of using a piece of literature because we are educators. We almost can't help it. I'm mindful that I want children to experience the story as a story before I start parsing it into didactic purposes as far as saying, "this is what I want you to learn about this culture or that culture." If I overemphasize the teaching points of an international book, I almost feel like I'm perpetuating some otherness. I don't know if that makes sense in that, if the only reason for sharing a particular book is always to teach about a particular experience, then it almost marginalizes the book as a piece of literature. It's a tricky balance, I know. Also, I don't want to impose my

questions over the children's natural questions, because I don't know what they know.

Donalyn went onto to explain connections to experiences from her classroom in Northeast Texas.

Donalyn: In the last few years, I've had a very diverse classroom with a lot of biracial and immigrant children. I am always aware there's somebody in the room who may have a perspective that would be different from mine based on their own experiences and their stories. I like to just read international books first as a book and experience it as a book, then ask students, "What do you notice? What questions do you still have?" That's when I can use my background, my expertise with the book or the teaching experience to guide children to some other understandings about the text. That's generally how it looks when I'm sharing almost any kind of book with students, but I think with international texts and books that represent diverse experiences, it's even more important not to create a situation where the only value in that book is in teaching us about somebody who's different because to me it somehow minimizes the universality of the story.

Our conversation turned to issues and challenges teachers may encounter when locating and using international books in the classroom, noting that there are excellent resources available to help teachers find high quality titles.

Donalyn: Journals like *WOW Stories* and *WOW Review*, and of course all the work that the University of Arizona is doing, [International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)/United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY)], International Literacy Association's Notable Books for a Global Society, offer lists of book titles, reviews, and ideas for where to find and how to possibly use the books with children.

However, Donalyn noted challenges related to teachers and their knowledge of such resources, as well as their tensions around using books about cultures they may know little about. She also notes how the publishing industry plays into the real issues educators encounter.

Donalyn: I think a lot of these organizations and collaborations are foreign to teachers. We practice in a little world that lives, eats and breathes teaching particular literature and so we're immersed in it. When we go out into the world and talk to many of our colleagues and colleagues from other schools, I find many teachers are not even aware of the resources or the books that exist. I think certain aspects involve individuals seeking out knowledge for the questions they have, but getting more of these books in kids' hands is a challenge because of a cycle I see. Publishing companies say they don't want to

publish some of these books, or they don't want to translate them because they don't sell that well. That means locating these titles falls on teachers, librarians and parents who are not aware of the books, and not buying these books and putting them in kids' hands.

I do think teachers often shy away from using books that don't represent an experience they feel comfortable with because they're afraid of getting it wrong. They're afraid of insulting someone or saying something that comes from a place of ignorance, and by ignorance I don't mean that in a disparaging way, I mean it in a lack of knowledge way. The discomfort teachers feel comes from a concern that they may make a misstep or possibly do something disrespectful so they just don't use international texts and diverse literature in the classroom. That's why the resources that Worlds of Words is supporting are vital because they often give us the tools that we need to be able to use these texts in the classroom and make us feel more confident in doing it.

Of course, the eternal issue is the funding involved in dedicating resources to acquiring these texts so that they're available in our school libraries and our classroom collections. That's a general issue I see everywhere as far as literature for children. Those aren't exactly problems that teachers can solve on their own. How can we build that institutional support for the value of books?

For Donalyn, international literature holds great potential for the classroom, especially when opportunities for inquiry are at the center of using the texts in the classroom.

Donalyn: I think what's most important is considering and reading the book as a piece of literature. We know every culture throughout our history has had some type of storytelling. Reading a book first and emphasizing the universality of it as a story by asking children to look at the similarities and differences between their experiences and the experiences of the character from the text can be an invitation for inquiry. What questions do they have? What does the book make them think about? If the text does emphasize some aspect that has potential for social action, or for inquiry with students, how can we encourage that?

Since *WOW Stories* highlights classroom stories about how teachers use international literature, it was fitting that our conversation ended with a story Donalyn shared from her classroom regarding an inquiry that a culturally diverse book inspired in one of her students as an example of how teachers might take up these texts in their classrooms.

Donalyn: As a class, we read *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (Lo, 2012). It was about a Chinese girl living in the US. Her family found soybeans being grown at a local farm... soybeans in the United States at that time period were



grown for pig food, for animal fodder. People were not eating soybeans like we eat them now. It was based on the author's own experiences and she talks about her family eating these soybeans and the farmers thinking it was silly that people wanted to eat them. It was very interesting. My class and I had a whole conversation after reading that book about the kinds of different foods that we eat that were traditional for our families. We talked about what foods you only eat at Thanksgiving. Are there foods that you know came from your family's heritage? Kids were having a great conversation.

One of my students, Destiny, who came to Texas from Panama, came up to me the next day and she asked, "Mrs. Miller, do you know that in Panama they have different things on the McDonald's menu than we have here in the United States?" She shared with me that they sell plantains and other culturally



specific foods on the McDonald's menu. I told her, "I noticed that when I was in Japan, that they had different things on the McDonald's menu there, too."

She asked, "I wonder if a lot of countries have different things on their McDonald's menu, and why they're there. Why are they different?" Then she looked at me and she said "Genius Hour," a time for students to engage in inquiries of questions and topics that were of interest to them, inspired by Google whose engineers dedicate 20 percent of their time pursuing projects of their choosing. She went on to explain, "Mrs. Miller, this would be a great Genius Hour project." I'm like, "That sounds awesome, Destiny."

I said, "Well, let's ask some questions. Why would someone do that?" Destiny wound up doing an entire presentation for the class with PowerPoint that showed samples of the menu and then she might pick one thing off the menu that was unique to the culture and talk about why they didn't have beef hamburgers on the McDonald's menu in India and why they had plantains in Panama.

This example illustrates how literature sparked an interest in other cultures. What I found interesting about what Destiny did is that this is what a lot of children do. They take something that they know, which is McDonald's, and then they extend it just a little bit into that inquiry zone. She wasn't taking a huge leap into the deep end of the pool perhaps, but we can certainly say, "After we did this project, what other questions do you have?" It was that one book, that *Soybean Picnic* book, that launched the conversation, and for her really sparked an interest in other cultures. That was just one book, and just one experience.

My conversation with Donalyn reaffirmed the important role and tremendous potential that international children's and adolescent literature holds for developing a sense of personal identity, inspiring interest in other cultures and seeing how different cultural knowledge intersect and integrate (Short, 2016). In short, this literature plays a critical role in today's increasingly diverse classrooms.

For more information about Donalyn Miller check out the following:

Miller, Donalyn (2009). *The book whisperer: awakening the inner reader in every child*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, Donalyn (2013). *Reading in the wild: the book whisperer's keys to developing lifelong reading habits*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Donalyn Miller's Blog: <https://bookwhisperer.com/blog/>

Nerdy Book Club Blog: <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/>

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<http://www.geniushour.com/what-is-genius-hour/>

Lo, G. (2012). *Auntie Yang's great soybean picnic*. Illus. B. Lo. New York: Lee and Low.

Short, K. (2016). A curriculum that is intercultural. In Short, K, Day, D., & Schroeder, J. (Eds.). *Teaching globally: Reading the world through literature* (3-24) Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

**Tracy Smiles** is a retired professor of literacy teacher education and the current editor of WOW Stories.

## Globalizing the Common Core State Standards

Kathy G. Short

Two major movements are currently enveloping schools. On one side are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts (ELA), which have a tremendous impact on educational policy and on literacy instruction in K-12 schools. On the other side are global education and intercultural competence, which have been gathering momentum over the last ten years. Both are clearly important to the changing context of schools and society, and to the significance of critical thinking and intercultural competence for success in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

Whether global education and the CCSS are in opposition to each other, able to peacefully coexist, or can build from and strengthen each other are critical issues for teachers who stand in the middle between these two movements. Some of the blogs, articles, and books that swirl around the CCSS champion its new possibilities for literacy instruction, while others give dire warnings of its fallacies and false promises. Close examination of these debates reveals that the standards do offer new possibilities for literacy instruction that could correct some of the imbalance from previous reform initiatives. At the same time, the standards are surrounded by public myths that misrepresent their content and intent, as well as questionable assumptions that were built into the standards by their original creators. Through critically examining these possibilities, myths and assumptions as they connect to global education and intercultural understanding, educators can come to a better understanding of whether it is possible to globalize the CCSS or if teachers will again find themselves caught in a tug of war between two opposing movements.

The three major emphases within the CCSS for ELA that connect to global education are informational texts, text complexity, and close reading. Each of these foci provides both tremendous potential and huge obstacles for encouraging students to develop global perspectives. Ironically, most of the obstacles have resulted from policy makers and educators not engaging in close reading of the standards themselves, and so they can be fairly easily challenged and addressed by a close examination of the original standards document. The assumptions that are built into the standards are more subtle and much more difficult to address, which could create significant barriers for global education. Those barriers, however, are not insurmountable once educators are aware of their existence and can take positive action to globalize their approach to implementing the standards in their classrooms and schools.

### The Balance of Informational and Literary Text in Children's Lives

One aspect of the Common Core State Standards that has received a great deal of attention is the increased focus on informational texts. The CCSS document calls for 50/50 split between informational and literary texts in kindergarten, gradually increasing to a 70/30 split in high school. This shift in the balance of texts has received praise from those who believe that schools have focused too strongly on literary texts and failed to prepare students for reading the types of informational texts that daily fill their lives in college and in careers. This shift is also seen as important in engaging readers who prefer nonfiction to fiction for their own personal reading. Although there are differing statistics, researchers argue that only 10-15 percent of the texts read aloud by many teachers in primary classrooms are nonfiction (Duke, 2003).

Myths about this focus on informational text are plentiful, but the most serious is the belief that fiction or literary texts are no longer valued or important in schools. A second grade teacher in Tucson sent home a message to parents, asking them to read informational books on topics such as animals and solar system to their children, noting some fiction was okay – but only in very small quantities. Another administrator asked the school librarian to weed out as much of the fiction collection as possible and purchase only nonfiction texts as replacements. These directives are based on the belief that since informational books are receiving more emphasis, fiction is thus devalued. This belief is a misunderstanding of the standards, which are an attempt to correct an imbalance, not to establish a new imbalance where students are not reading enough fiction.

A related misconception is that 70 percent of the texts students read in their high school English classrooms should be informational. This, too, is definitely not the intention. The 70 percent relates to the kind of reading that students do across the day in math, science, social studies and other content classes and is a percentage that probably already characterizes most high schools. English teachers are encouraged to use more short informational texts, such as primary sources that can be found online and in newspapers to surround their reading of a novel, but not to switch their reading to primarily informational text. In fact, students need to primarily read literary texts in English in order to have 30 percent of their day be fiction reading.



A questionable assumption that is embedded in the standards is that fiction consists of narrative text structures – writing that tells a story – while informational texts use expository text structures – writing that explains. This distinction is overly simplistic as fiction and nonfiction both use narrative and expository writing and text structures. A science information book, such as *The Tarantula Scientist* by Sy Montgomery (2004)

includes the story of that scientist's life along with information on tarantulas. Nonfiction books often introduce readers to the community and practices of science and history; they don't just give facts. In fact, Newkirk (2014) argues informational text that engages readers always uses a narrative arc as the foundation because narrative is not a text type or a genre, but a mode of thinking.

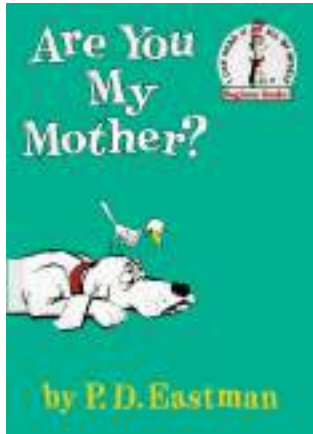
The same is true of literary fiction – the story may be fictional but readers also learn as they read, because authors have embedded their own careful research into the stories. *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys (2011) is a powerful novel about a fictional family's struggle to survive when they are sent to a work camp in Siberia, but also includes factual information about Stalin's invasion and policies in Lithuania. The difference is that informational books are about real events, people, places, and ideas that are not made up, while anything can be made up in fiction.

Connecting the emphasis on information texts to global perspectives raises several critical issues, particularly the lack of informational books on global issues and cultures. The vast majority of global literature available in the U.S. written by insiders from specific global cultures is fiction, with some memoirs and biographies that represent only one type of nonfiction. Very few informational books are translated or imported from global cultures into the U.S. Informational books by U.S. authors set in global cultures are more readily available, but are a small percentage of the large number of informational books published annually for children. Teachers who want to use global informational texts will need to make extensive use of the internet. The Library of Congress provides access to primary sources at <https://www.loc.gov/> and Primary Source, <https://www.primarysource.org/>, has online curriculum units with documents and photographs.

An imbalance of literary and informational text in global inquiries is highly problematic. Using only informational texts can perpetuate a tourist perspective of gaining facts that remain on the surface of a culture without a deep understanding of the lives and values of people within that culture. Fiction immerses readers in character's lives and thinking and allows them to experience that culture and to create caring relationships. 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.

An exclusive use of fiction is also problematic in global inquiries. Story provides a single point of view, one family or character, while nonfiction develops an understanding of the extent of an issue or problem in our world. Nonfiction provides definitions, terminology, and facts to make the issues real – not just an interesting

story, but something actually happening in the world. Through story, students understand the human emotions and struggles related to issues, and, through nonfiction, they explore the broader world context of those issues.



At Van Home Elementary School, we found that students who engaged in an inquiry about hunger needed both stories and informational texts to understand this global issue (Thomas & Short, 2009). They needed to explore the extent of the problem of hunger, 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 students associated with being hungry. We noticed that the characters in fiction usually found solutions to hunger that did not reflect the realities of on-going chronic hunger.

Informational texts helped 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 around the world. Fiction humanized the numbers. Through story, they came to feel empathy and sympathy for those who go hungry and through information about the extent and causes of problem, they came to feel the need to get involved and be socially responsible.

### Myths and Assumptions about Text Exemplars

One issue of major concern to educators is the grade-level lists of text exemplars that are included in Appendix C of the CCSS ([http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_C.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_C.pdf)). Many schools and some states interpret these lists of stories, poems, and informational texts as core reading lists for all students, and mandate these texts for classroom use. A close reading of the standards document indicates that the list and text excerpts are provided to help teachers explore the levels of complexity and quality of texts recommended for a particular grade level, so they can make their own informed selections. The lists are thus exemplars of text complexity, not a mandated reading list.

Because the goal of the group developing the standards was to show text complexity, they needed to provide excerpts from each of the selected texts. Publishers charge large permission fees for the right to use excerpts from their books and so the use of many older and out-of-print books as part of the text exemplars is not surprising. For example, the stories listed as exemplars for K-1 were published between 1957 and 1978, with only one recent book. Not only is there no global or multicultural diversity in settings or characters, only one book even has people in it – the others are about only animals. Many of the books are classics, such as *Are You My Mother?* (1960) by P.D. Eastman (1960) and *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel (1972), found in most school and classroom libraries. Children have loved these books for many years, but they are not, and should never be considered, a core list for K-1 classrooms. The same

issues are evident in the text exemplars at the high school level, which are dominated by classics such as *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1605) and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin (1813).

This misinterpretation of text exemplars as a mandated reading list, rather than as examples of text complexity, is highly problematic and creates a context in which students are restricted to books that are dated and lacking in diversity. Without balancing the classics with the richness of contemporary literature, students would soon come to the conclusion that books are of little relevance to their personal lives, discouraging their continued engagement as readers – not exactly the goal of teachers and schools.

The current text exemplar lists also offset the goals of multicultural and global education because of the absence of global and cultural diversity in the titles. Even the culturally diverse titles that are included in the lists reflect the potential for major misunderstandings. For example, two Latino texts that are included in the K-1 lists are both historical, reflecting a view of Latino culture as dated and set back in time.

### Myths and Assumptions about Text Complexity

The Common Core State Standards have focused attention on text complexity, arguing that students need to engage with texts that gradually increase in difficulty of ideas and textual structures, based on the belief that schools have not been rigorous in providing difficult texts. This focus on rigor in reading emphasizes the goal that students understand the level of texts necessary for success in college and careers by the time they graduate from high school. The problem is that decisions about text complexity in schools are often based in myths that have arisen from misconceptions about the standards.



The first myth is that text complexity is solely determined by Lexile levels ([www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com)), and that schools should level books around Lexile ratings in order to ensure that students read increasingly difficult texts. The CCSS guidelines clearly state that text complexity is determined by three dimensions, only one of which is readability, the quantitative use of formulas involving word familiarity, word length, and sentence length. The other two dimensions, given equal weight, involve the qualitative judgments of educators. The second dimension is the informed decisions of teachers and librarians about the difficulty of a text based on levels of meaning with a text, the use of straightforward organizational structures or more confusing structures like flashbacks, language that is clear and contemporary rather than archaic or unfamiliar, and the kinds of life experiences and knowledge necessary to understand the text. The third dimension is a consideration of the fit between a text and a particular reader as determined by

examining the experiences and strategies of readers related to the task. (See Appendix A of CCSS, [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf))

Readability formulas such as Lexiles assume that longer and less familiar words and long sentences automatically make a text difficult. Although sentence length and word choice are important, a student's prior knowledge or interest in a topic cannot be factored into a formula. The formulas also have difficulty measuring conceptual difficulty, the complexity of the ideas in a book and how these ideas are presented. Symbolism, abstraction, and figurative language contribute to the complexity of ideas, just as the use of nonlinear plots or shifting points of view contribute to the complexity of the plot. *Skellig* (Almond, 1999) is a British magical realism novel in which two children become involved with an otherworldly being hidden in a garage. The text has easy vocabulary and short sentences with a readability of around Grade 3.5. Yet the concepts of spirituality, faith, and prejudice cast the conceptual level of this novel much higher, making it more appropriate for students who are 11-15, depending on the background of the specific student. Another example is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which scores at a 2nd-3rd grade level on quantitative measures because it uses familiar words and short sentences as part of dialogue. Teachers, however, note that the many layers of meaning and mature themes indicate that this book is meant for grades 6 and above.

The Common Core State Standards document recommends the Lexile Framework, but notes that this framework is not accurate or useful for K-1 reading materials, poetry, and complex narrative fiction for young adults. This exclusion of a large number of texts does not take into account the complex issues of global literature where readability formulas do not evaluate the match between the cultural knowledge of readers and the cultural content and text structures of a particular book. Clearly, readers familiar with a specific global culture will find books from that culture to be less complex and more easily understandable. Those readers not only bring strong cultural knowledge but also are familiar with that culture's style of storytelling and text structures. The assigned Lexile levels will most likely be higher than the actual difficulty of these books for readers who are cultural insiders and have familiarity with the events, people, perspectives, and values at the heart of these books.

Readers from outside that culture will struggle more with that same text. This struggle, however, is important because, in global literature, we want readers to struggle – to recognize that this book cannot easily fit into their existing perceptions about how people in other cultures think and live. We want readers to stumble and have to reread and to feel discomfort, as well as to connect with characters and identify universal experiences and feelings. A book could be much more difficult for a reader than its Lexile level and still be appropriate for that reader.

In addition, quantitative measures of readability fail to identify the influence of a reader's interest in a particular book or the ways in which that book is integrated into



a unit of study in a classroom. These measures assume that the reading of a text is in isolation from other texts, which is rarely the case with global literature because teachers know these books need support. When a reading of a book is accompanied by readings of other texts and a range of experiences, research, and discussion, that book becomes much more “readable” and less complex for readers, regardless of its assigned Lexile level. The assumption that texts are read independently of each other is based in old models of literary instruction at high school and college levels that no longer reflect actual practice in classrooms, especially in elementary classrooms where teachers often embed informational and literary texts within rich units of inquiry.

The misconceptions surrounding Lexile levels are partially a result of not carefully reading the actual CCSS documents and appendices and partially a limited understanding of classrooms and readers by the creators of these documents. In arguing that teachers have not been rigorous and have not adequately considered text complexity, the CCSS creators, in turn, have failed to understand the complexity of real readers in real classrooms engaged in inquiries about compelling tensions and issues. Simplistic assumptions about readers and classrooms do not result in useful understandings about text complexity.

### **Myths and Assumptions about Close Reading**

The Common Core State Standards put a major emphasis on the close reading of texts, recommending that students find and cite evidence in the text as they discuss key ideas and details, craft and structure, and knowledge and ideas. Text analysis is viewed as bringing rigor to reading with an emphasis on higher-level critical reading skills. Any text read to or by students is used for instructional purposes – to teach something. If students respond to a text by talking about what it reminds them of from their lives, teachers are to steer students back to the task and ask them to talk about what the story is about – to get the details and to support their statements by citing evidence in the text. Text-dependent questions and evidence, not connection, are valued.

One myth that has arisen from this focus on close reading is that some schools have urged teachers to return to the use of literal level questions that are highly text dependent, rather than the higher-level thinking actually encouraged within the standards. The major issue with close reading, however, is not misconceptions of the standards but assumptions by the creators of the standards that are based in their misunderstanding of reader response.

The assumption of the writers of the standards is that reader response does not include text analysis and stays at a simple level of personal connections that do not lead to critical thinking. Although reader response does begin with personal connections and interpretations, readers are then encouraged to move into an analysis of their responses through dialogue based on evidence from their lives and the text to develop their interpretations. Rosenblatt (1938) reminds us that first we need to

respond as human beings, to share our experiences of that story, before we use the text to teach. Literature was not written to teach a strategy but to illuminate life. The first questions we should ask are, "What are you thinking? What connections did you make?" instead of "What was the text about?" and "How does the text work?" These personal connections and responses are essential, but not sufficient, as readers then need to dialogue about their interpretations, critiquing those interpretations and examining whether they are supported by evidence from their lives and the text. Our first response to a text should not violate the nature of the text itself as an experience of life. The second response can then move into close reading of that text and the evidence should come from both the text and our lives.

Teaching something from a text should come after personal response and dialogue, after readers have a chance to see that text as significant. That teaching should focus on one aspect of a text or one reading strategy. Beating a text to death with skill after skill is counterproductive – the reader walks away determined never to return to the text again and with little retention of the skills. By choosing one text structure or reading strategy, teachers provide a focus for students to explore and come to understand without destroying the text. It's much more useful for students to examine one or two significant metaphors in a particular work of Shakespeare, for example, than to identify every metaphor in that work.

These issues are particularly significant in global literature where readers need to read critically, which requires both personal response and text analysis. If readers are only engaged in text analysis, as recommended by the CCSS, they do not learn to question the text itself and the assumptions about society on which the text is based. They circle around within the text, engaging in evaluation but not critique. When readers engage in both personal connection and text analysis, they move between perspectives to critique and challenge what exists in society and to examine who benefits from these inequities as well as to imagine new possibilities (Freire, 1978). We need to go outside the world of the text to challenge that world and bring the text back to our lives to challenge our views and ways of living. Encouraging readers to only engage in close reading keeps the text distant and separate from our lives--we read as spectators instead of immersing ourselves in experiences that connect us to and take us beyond our lives.

The focus on close text-based reading in CCSS returns us to narrow definitions of what and how students read. History indicates that this type of textual criticism, known as "New Criticism," has turned off many generations of students because it lacks purpose, meaning, and relevancy to ideas and issues that students care about. Many adults have painful memories of sitting in college English classes, struggling to come up with the "right" interpretation of the assigned text and taking a text apart piece by piece, destroying interest in and enjoyment of that text. Our connections and thinking were not valued and we saw no relevance for that reading in our own lives. Rosenblatt provided a powerful indictment of this approach to literary analysis in

1938 and her critique remains valid today. We do not need to choose between personal connection and close reading; the choice is not either/or but both. The risk of ignoring that choice is another generation of readers who avoid reading because it is painful schoolwork, instead of meaningful life work.

### Final Reflections

John Dewey (1938) argued that we live in an either/or society and so often swing from one extreme to another. We need to avoid those dichotomies and look for ways to balance and integrate these various dimensions in new ways instead of setting up oppositions. Fiction versus nonfiction and literary versus informational text are examples of false oppositions that can have negative consequences for students as readers and human beings. More significantly for those of us who are engaged in global curriculum and in developing intercultural understanding, these dichotomies work against these goals and the possibilities of global literature for opening the world.

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## No más quería entrar con nosotros: Understanding Immigration through Children's Life Stories

Julia López-Robertson

My role as a Latina researcher is to represent the complexity of life in classrooms and schools, highlighting the capabilities of students and families from linguistically, socioeconomically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Writing this research allows me to “cultivate rich, multifaceted representations of human experiences that might begin to serve as a basis for teachers to understand diverse students” and their families (Carger, 2005, p. 241). Too often the literacy practices that are significant in the lives of children of color are devalued in schools and their ways of constructing literacy are seen as an obstacle to their education (Nieto, 2002; Dudley-Marling, 2007). This is consistent with Heath's (1983) argument that when there is a mismatch between the school and home in literacy experiences, children are often viewed through a deficit lens and their home literacies are not recognized or valued in the school context. The present study examined a literacy practice that was highly valued in the lives and homes of a small group of Latino children and their mothers – telling stories.

Stories, told for centuries, are “the most time-honored way in which cultures preserve the past and shape the future” (Carger, 2005, p. 237). Everyone, regardless of linguistic, cultural or socioeconomic background, tells stories; they “are a part of the fabric of the social world” (Lawler, 2002, p. 243). Stories emerged as a significant tool for making meaning during our literature discussions/*pláticas literarias*.

*Pláticas literarias* are literature circles where a group of students who have read, or who have had the book read to them, discuss the meaning they are creating from their understandings and personal connections to the text (Short, 1997). During the *pláticas* the children examine their own understandings of issues raised in the literature and share these beginning understandings with their group in a “two-way reciprocal relation” with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

### Setting and Book Selection

I worked with a small group of young Latino children and their mothers at their school about three times a month throughout the school year. During our time together we read and talked about books and participated in literacy engagements, primarily *pláticas literarias*. During our *pláticas* the children engaged in “translanguaging” to use their “linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex worlds” (García, 2011, p. 1), while their mothers communicated solely in Spanish.

The books selected for the *pláticas* represented the language and cultures of the children and their families; they were written in Spanish or contained text in both

English and Spanish. Because some of the books were about critical social issues (e.g. racism, poverty, immigration) that had directly affected the families, I was careful to have their *confianza*, a mutual trust “which is re-established or confirmed with each exchange and leads to the development of long-term relationships before delving into these deep discussions” (González, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1993, p. 3). This article focuses on the *plática* about *Pablo and Pimienta/Pablo y Pimienta* (Covault, 1998) which took place at the end of the school year.

*Pablo and Pimienta/Pablo y Pimienta* (Covault, 1998) is a story about a little boy, Pablo, who is making the journey from Mexico to Phoenix, Arizona with his father and uncle to pick watermelon. Pablo is sitting in the back of his father’s pick-up truck trying to keep dry under a tarp and bounces out when the truck hits a bump. The truck drives on as no one notices that Pablo is gone. Pablo manages to find shelter in the desert and is befriended by a coyote pup, who he names Pimienta. Both find their way across the U.S./Mexico border and eventually are reunited with Pablo’s father and uncle.

### *Pláticas Literarias: Border Knowledge*

One category of talk about this book was “Border Knowledge,” stories that indicated children’s knowledge of the border between the United States and Mexico in relation to their lives and families. Throughout the *plática*, the children told stories about life experiences as they tried to make meaning of the book events, reflecting Sipe’s (1998) notion that “readers actively construct meaning from text” (p. 76). Their stories demonstrated their knowledge about crossing the *frontera*/border into the United States (with or without documentation). The following excerpts are representative of the types of stories told during the discussion.



After reading aloud the book, I paused and asked the children and their mothers what they thought about the book. Minerva (all names are pseudonyms) began the *plática* by focusing on the page depicting the customs building. She looked at the illustration and told us how this page reminded her of a story her mother told about their family crossing the border at Ciudad Juárez. Minerva’s mother, María, explained that the lines were too long for everyone to wait in the car, and that she and her two sisters

(Minerva’s aunts) walked across and waited “*en el otro lado*” (on the other side) while her brother (Minerva’s uncle) and dad waited to bring the truck across.

*Todos tenemos papeles pero que calor, hay me acuerdo como si hubiese pasado ayer, y yo no podía más. La niña [Minerva] apenas tenía seis meses y no, es que era mucho el*

*calor para ella, así que le dije a Juan [Minerva's father] que me iba. Recogí mi bebé, su bolsita, mis papeles y me puse a caminar hacia la frontera. Llegué al edificio, presenté mis papeles y los de la niña y me senté a esperar a tu papá y tío./ We all have papers but the heat – I remember as if it was yesterday – and I couldn't anymore. Minerva was only six months old and no, it is just that it was too hot for her, so I told Juan [Minerva's father] that I was leaving. I got my baby, her bag, my papers and then started walking towards the border. I got to the building, showed my papers and Minerva's and I sat to wait for your dad and uncle.*

The conversation following María's story focused on the other mothers agreeing that the lines at the border are long and sometimes the heat makes it unbearable to have to wait. Additionally, they talked about people who were still in Mexico because they had no documentation.

Yolanda, mother of Graciela, another girl, commented:

*Pues, al menos tenemos papeles. Y los pobres que no tienen. Allí se lo pasan luchando y tratando de pasar. Me da lástima./ Well, at least we have papers. And what about those poor people who don't have papers. They just keep on with the struggle and trying to come over. I feel sad for them.*

María added:

*Pues sí, es muy triste tener que dejarlos allá. Le doy gracias todos los días al Señor que me dio el chance de venir a este país./ Well yes, it is very sad to have to leave them there. I thank God every day that He gave me the chance to come to this country.*

To which Minerva responded:

*Me too mami porque si no vienen yo no estoy aqui y yo love mi escuela y amigos./ Me too mom, because if you didn't come then I wouldn't be here and I love my school and friends.*

Flipping through the book, Jeannette suddenly stopped at the page with the illustration depicting the dogs and told us that this page frightened her because:

*Los perros parecen bravos. Ellos son los que te chequean so that you don't have drugs or bad stuff that you sneak here. /The dogs look mean. They are the ones that check you so that you don't have drugs or bad stuff that you sneak here [U.S.].*

Graciela then shared a story about the *perros de la migra*/border patrol dogs. As she told the story her mother looked on and shook her head in agreement.

*Esos perros parecen lobos. Miren le esos dientes, que grandes y filosos. Me recuerda de cuando yo era chiquita y pasamos [la frontera]. Yo era, pues una bebida, tenía unos dos años y veníamos de ver a mi nana. Mi mami tenía papeles y mi hermano y yo, pero mi papá no. El migra nos miró y dijo que enseñáramos nuestros papeles y así pasamos mi mami, hermano y yo. Pero mi papi no pudo pasar y me acuerdo que el perro de la migra lo miro y le enseñó los dientes. Yo me puse a llorar y mi mami me calmo, pero nunca se me olvidan esos dientes feos de lobo. Te huelen así, por eso lo tienen, algunos los tienen para recolectar the drogas. Mi papi no tenía drogas ni nada el no más quería entrar con nosotros and they told him 'no' that he had to stay.*

Those dogs look like wolves. Look at those teeth, how big and sharp. It reminds me of when I was little and we passed [the border]. I was, well a baby, I was about two years old and we were coming back from visiting my nana [grandmother]. My mom had papers [allowing entry into the U.S.] and my brother and me but not my dad. The border patrol [officer] looked at us and told us to show our papers and that is how my mom, brother, and I passed. But my dad couldn't and I remember that the *migra* dog looked at him and showed [my dad] his teeth. I started to cry and my mom calmed me down but I will never forget that wolf's ugly teeth. They sniff you like this, [demonstrates on my sleeve], that's why they have them some of them collect the drugs. My dad did not have drugs or anything he just wanted to come in with us.

Towards the end of the segment, Jeannette, keeping with the topic of border patrol dogs, shared:

*Si hay algo extraño, ellos lo huelen y todo lo que hacen es decir wuf, wuf, y se lo llevan/ If there is something strange, they'll smell it and all they do is woof-woof, and [Border Patrol] will take it away.*

The excerpts illustrate the children's knowledge about border crossing: waiting in long lines to enter the United States, presenting some kind of documentation, (referred to as *papeles*/papers; e.g. a passport, visa, green card), leaving family and friends in Mexico and an understanding of the job of the border dogs, "*los que te chequean*" /the ones that check you. Additionally, on a more personal level, Graciela's story demonstrates her understanding of what it means not to be allowed to enter the United States. She tells us that her father simply wanted to enter the country with his family but was not allowed to do so because he lacked documentation, not because he carried drugs:

*Mi papi no tenía drogas ni nada el no más quería entrar con nosotros and they told him "no" that he had to stay.*

In addition to sharing accounts of the families' travels between both countries, the mother's stories helped the children develop a deeper empathy for people who are not able to travel between both countries freely as they do. Minerva realized that without documentation, her family would not be able to travel to the United States and she would not be with her school and friends. Perhaps in sharing their stories with their children, the mothers are helping them develop an accurate and more humanizing view on the issue of border crossing rather than the view that is ever present (and not always accurate) in the media.

In the following excerpt, Jeannette went back to the first page of the book and told a story about travelling in the bed of her father's pick-up truck (similar to Pablo in the story).

*Esta página me recordó de cuando veníamos de allá de México porque como venimos de allá de México en el troque ponen una cosa, una tarpa. So mi Ma, mi Pa, mi hermano um, se van acá en frente y yo y mi hermana nos vinimos acá atrás. Y una vez nomás, una sola vez, traía una cosa para que no nos cayéramos o fuéramos volando ni nada, y traía una cosa tapándonos and when we stopped because his turn was red porque so lo pararon y quitaron la cosa que venía tapando a nosotros y, y luego le, se me hace que le dieron un 'ticket' porque no nos podía traer así en la caja.*

This page reminded me of when we used to come from Mexico because when we came from Mexico in the truck they would put a thing, a tarp. So my mom, my dad, and my brother were in the front and me, my sister, my brother would be in the back. And one time, only once, there was something that kept us from falling and flying out of there, and there was this thing covering us and when we stopped there, because his turn was red so he had to stop and they took off the thing that was covering us and – and, then, I think that they gave him a ticket, because he couldn't bring us like that in the bed of the truck.

Jeannette's experience demonstrates her first-hand border knowledge of travelling to the United States in a pick-up truck, just as Pablo did in the story. Jeannette shared how she travelled with her siblings in the truck and how *once, only one time*, her father was stopped at a red light. She is referring to a signal light (similar to a traffic light) at each of the entry lines at the border: when it is your turn to approach the booth, the light will flash either red or green. If you get green, you continue without being searched (but you must still show your passport). However, if you get red, this indicates that you were randomly selected for a search and you must pull aside to be searched by Border Patrol agents and their dogs. By mentioning red in her story, it is implied that she knows the others share this border knowledge. Jeannette ended her story by connecting back to the text and the illustration of Pablo in the truck bed, saying that she thinks that her father got a ticket because "he couldn't bring us like that, in the bed of the truck."



Sandra, Jeannette's mother, looked at the children and the other mothers and added the following:

*Era tan chiquita, pero mira pues, cuanto se acuerda. Yo me acuerdo de ese día y yo estaba llena de miedo cuando llegamos a la frontera. Pues fíjense que aunque no se hizo nada mal y teníamos todos los papeles y eso, cuando hay que andar con la migra y la frontera no se juega. Hay, un día espero que no se tan difícil y feo tener que cruzar para aca. Somos todos partes de las Américas y nos debemos tratar como hermanos. No sé, eso pienso yo. Cuanto no quisiera yo que pudrieran venir mis padres a este país. Pero ni modos, no se puede. Por lo menos como dijiste antes María o Yolanda no me acuerdo cual fue, nosotros podemos pasar de aquí a allá sin miedo que no nos acepten [los papeles].*

She was so young, but look how much she remembered. I remember that day; I was full of fear when we got to the border. Well, look even though we did nothing wrong and had all the papers and everything, when dealing with Border Patrol and the border, there is no playing around. Oh, I hope that one day it won't be so difficult and ugly to cross the border over here. We are all a part of the Americas and we should treat each other like brothers. I don't know, that is what I think. How I wish that my parents could come to this country. But that will not happen. At least, as you said earlier, María or Yolanda, I can't remember which one said it, we can cross from here to there without the fear that [our papers] won't be accepted.

By talking with their mothers about the books, the children learned more about their families, the events that shaped their lives and how these events were interpreted by their mothers. In turn, the mothers learned how the children interpreted particular life experiences and how those experiences have helped shape their understanding of the circumstances under which they live. The children grew in appreciation for the manner in which their families have tried to "maintain integrity and dignity in living with the ambiguity that comes with straddling multiple realities" (Villenas, 2005, p. 74).

### Discussion and Implications

*Pláticas literarias* about issues that relate to children and their families provide an opportunity to critically examine and reflect on their lives and use their knowledge and their storytelling to share their meaning-making. Because these books are written in their native language, Spanish, the families are also able to actively participate in their child's meaning-making and to pass along their cultural way of knowing-storytelling to their children.

The *pláticas literarias* support Nieto's (2002) notion that "learning is not simply a question of transmitting knowledge, but rather of working with students so that they can reflect, theorize, and create knowledge" (p. 7). The children closely examined

their lives and their families' lives in order to create an understanding of their lived experiences at the time of the discussions. Bakhtin (1981) explains that people learn language, not from dictionaries, but from other people in particular situations, and that "it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (p. 295). Children are able to do this in settings where it is expected that they talk and learn from each other, and where learning is active and participatory.

The stories that the children told were representative of the complicated lives that they live and presented some of the difficult realities of their lives. At the same time, these stories also illuminated their border knowledge and demonstrated how they were able to search their own lives for stories that connected to the book we read. Rather than pity these young Latinas and their mothers, and reinforce the deficit lens from which they are often viewed, I share their stories with the hope that others will learn to see the value in the stories they tell. It is also my hope that in sharing their stories, both the children and their mothers can "challenge the deficit perspectives through which others too often interpret their lives" (Dutro & Zenkov, 2008, p. 174). The stories made us aware of the significance the U.S./Mexico border plays in their lives and remind us that "in life, we cannot parcel out certain conditions and put others aside" (Langer, 1995, p.7).

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## **Challenging the Hidden Curriculum: A Middle School Teacher's Use of Multicultural Literature in the Classroom**

Summer Edward with Debra Repak

Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures School (FACTS) is a community-oriented public K-8 charter school located in Chinatown North, Philadelphia. It is an immigrant-focused Charter school with a predominantly Asian-American student body (Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Cambodian, Laotian and Hmong heritage). Many of the students are English Language Learners (ELLs). African-American, Latino and white students are in the minority, comprising 29 percent of the student body. The school places a high emphasis on diversity and cultural exchange, with a curriculum that emphasizes folk arts education and connections to ethnic and home culture.

Debbie Repak is the seventh and eighth grade Reading and Writing Teacher at FACTS. As a student teacher, I worked in her classroom and became interested in her use of multicultural literature with students. Previously, Debbie worked as a Humanities teacher at Welch Elementary School in the Council Rock School District. As a white, middle class teacher, she has worked hard to build bridges with Asian-American, African-American and Latino students from low-income, working class and immigrant families.

### **Multicultural Literature: A Teacher's Lens**

Kruse and Horning (1990) define multicultural literature as "books about people of color." Rudine Sims Bishop (1997), a pioneering multicultural education scholar, defines multicultural literature as books that "reflect the racial, ethnic, and social diversity that is characteristic of our pluralistic society and of the world," particularly books about the experiences and perspectives of "groups whose histories and cultures have been omitted, distorted, or undervalued in society and in school curricula" (p. 3). When interviewing Debbie, I was interested in her working definition of multicultural literature. She expounded on her understanding of the term:

Multicultural literature means books with characters, settings, plots that are unique to cultures different than my own. The different settings and plot issues truly spring from, and are dependent upon the cultures that they represent. They represent the strengths, weaknesses, preferences, prejudices, ideals, religious practices, economic situations, societal norms, and power structures between sexes in the family and society that are truly present in these cultures. They also represent the clothing, music, traditional foods, language patterns and social mores that are part of that culture.

Some of Debbie’s favorite multicultural books are those by picture book authors and illustrators like Patricia Polacco and Floyd Cooper. She admires books by Walter Dean Myers, Christopher Paul Curtis, and Jaqueline Woodson. Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) is a personal favorite. She also likes the Bluford High Series, which she describes as “lightweight on real literary merit, but full of characters and situations my African-American students can relate to and



love.” Books written by or about Asian-American children or young adults she considers groundbreaking are those by Linda Sue Park (e.g. *A Single Shard* and *When My Name Was Keoko*) and Laurence Yep, which she describes as having “wonderful, strong characters.”

Debbie shared her beliefs about the teacher’s role in creating a classroom environment where students feel safe to engage with such texts. She believes that teachers need to become cross-culturally competent by doing the challenging but necessary work required to have respectful culturally sensitive exchanges with students. Owning one’s cultural identity and issues, a willingness to step outside of one’s comfort zone, and maintaining a mindset of curiosity and inquiry, must be a part of a teacher’s stance. Debbie’s following comment illustrates some of these complex issues:

Teachers need to think of the kids they have in front of them – get to know their thoughts, experiences, feelings, cultural situations and backgrounds so that they can select works that click with them. They need to know that it’s ok to make a mistake now and again, as long as you’re open to what went wrong and it reshapes your teaching. It’s important to examine your prejudices, and examine why you choose one piece over another – make sure it’s a good choice for the student as well as you. You have to respect other cultures, but not be afraid to be open and honest, admitting what you don’t know or aren’t familiar with. Sometimes, you have to do some homework – find out a little more about things mentioned in the literature so you can explain it or treat it respectfully.

Like many K-12 literacy teachers, Debbie is aware of existing critiques of multicultural education and the pedagogical perspectives which underlie such critiques. For example, it has been argued that the effort to incorporate ethnically diverse literature in the classroom has led to “dumbing down” student textbooks and has limited children’s knowledge and overall literacy. In her response to this argument, Debbie suggests that teachers have to balance their use of inclusive literature with methodologically-sound literacy instruction:

I understand the criticism, because sometimes in the rush to be ethnically diverse, teachers have chosen trite, tired or just poorly written literature. They have presented it in a condescending way – almost “Here’s a good book, see – there’s an African-American (or Chinese or Mexican) person, just like you!” instead of, “Here’s a great story, a well written piece of literature that provides a particular perspective.” Also in the rush to be diverse, the teaching of English language arts has done itself a great disservice by often eliminating direct and specific instruction in the nuts and bolts of grammar and writing. If children’s knowledge is watered down, it is because this instruction is spotty or non-existent at best in many schools. I meet far too many student teachers who make basic grammatical and spelling mistakes that wouldn’t have been allowed by my 8th grade teacher.

Another criticism of multicultural literature is that its value is compromised because there are not enough broadly-based novels featuring characters who are people of color in “mainstream” roles. For example, books with Asian-American characters tend to be narrowly confined to issues of immigration, language barriers or racism, which can lead to what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of a single story” about Asian-Americans. Debbie commented:

I think this is true; I am seeing more books where Asian-American characters deal with the immigrant parent viewpoints and Americanized child culture clash; although “generation gap” is a theme no matter what the race. I don’t see a lot of people talking about it at FACTS, but I have observed that the stress Asian-American parents place on their children to conform and succeed within the educational structures as they presently exist does not encourage a desire to be proud of, or to promote, their own culture. Also, my students are typical teens. They want popular books that deal with the universal struggles of being a teen, before they like ones with cultural significance. I think that they do enjoy reading stories with Asian-American characters, but will not seek them out specifically. I see these students with typical first generation attitudes – the desire to fit in trumps the desire to maintain their cultural legacies. I think FACTS is so important for carrying these students through this time, surrounding them with strong Asian culture and pride, where they might not feel that yet on their own.

Thus, rather than reinforcing cultural stereotypes, multicultural education and literature must play a role in helping students from diverse backgrounds to embrace the full spectrum of who they are, and counter the dismantling of their identities. Teachers need to incorporate a diversity of narratives when they select multicultural books for instruction or inclusion in the classroom library.

### The Role of the Classroom Library

In Debbie’s classroom, students are encouraged to read a wide range of books. There are many multicultural children’s and young adult books that students can check out from the classroom library. Several of the book bins in the classroom library are devoted exclusively to books by African-American authors; for example there is a Bluford High bin for that popular teen series, and a bin with books by Jacqueline Woodson, an award-winning African-American author.

There are also several bins devoted to books written in Chinese and Korean. Some of these are books by American authors that have been translated, and some are books by Chinese and Korean authors. Browsing through the library, I found English-language picture books and middle grade novels about Asian-American, Native-American, Latino, African-American and Jewish experiences. I also found one or two examples of Inuit literature.



A clear majority of books in the classroom library are books about white, middle-class experiences. I noticed that the students check out these books the most. Fantasy, science fiction and books marketed as girl-centric fiction – genres that suffer from a lack of authors and characters of color – are popular with the seventh graders. The eighth graders tend to check out more realistic books, but again, usually steer clear of realistic books with characters of color.

### Finding and Selecting Multicultural Literature

When Debbie selects multicultural literature for instruction or as assigned reading, she draws upon her knowledge of suitable books, accumulated over years of classroom teaching. She also learns of books through conversations with other teachers. She owns a few annotated and selected multicultural literature bibliographies which she references. Occasionally, Erin, the school’s Reading Specialist, will recommend a book that Debbie will then research and possibly buy. Like many elementary and middle school teachers across America, Debbie relies mainly on Scholastic’s Classroom Wish List program to purchase books for her classroom, but also makes use of donations and thrift store and garage sales. Thus, Scholastic Books determines, to a great extent, which multicultural books are found on the shelves of the classroom library. Many teachers and parents have noted that Scholastic’s catalog and school book fairs do not provide enough diverse offerings.

Debbie clearly views herself as someone who selects, rather than censors multicultural literature, fitting Asheim's (1953) description of the positive selector who looks for reasons to keep a particular book. In talking to me about the Bluford High series, it was clear that Debbie looks for values and strengths in the books to overshadow the minor objections she has about them.

She also told me that another teacher had given her a negative review of the book *12 Brown Boys* (Tyree, 2008), a collection of unrelated short stories about 12 African-American preteen boys. The teacher had taken issue with the cover of the book and the title, and the fact that its author is well-known for writing adult books with mature themes. Debbie decided to read the book herself and eventually added it to her classroom library. This willingness to judge books by their internal values is typical of the selectors who resist the urge to put their own values and beliefs before those of others when selecting texts to use in the classroom (Asheim, 1953, p. 66).

Like any selector, Debbie also has faith in the intelligence of students and clearly respects their liberty of thought. She reported that some of the stories and poems that she has shared with students have shocked them. She knew the material would be shocking but decided to use it to promote dialogue. She thinks of students as rational, astute people who have a right to read what they want. At the same time, she acknowledges the trickiness of using books that have been the target of censorship. She believes that the onus is ultimately on parents to make decisions about what they want their children to be reading.

Debbie communicates with parents about students' reading material through the nightly reading log. In their reading logs, students list the title and author of the book they are reading and write a comment about it. From the earliest grades at FACTS, parents are encouraged (in written notices, at parent workshops called Family Reading Nights, and at the Parent/Teacher Conferences that are held twice a year ) to ask their children about their reading. Parents are provided with conversation starter questions such as: "Tell me about what's happening. Who's your favorite character? What is your favorite part so far, and why?" The seventh and eighth graders write a reading response (five sentences) each evening and parents are invited to read these responses. As Debbie's comment below reveals, the reading log is an important tool for helping students master the art of book selection:

If parents do not understand written English, students can translate what they have written for parents. Of course, they can respond to questions in the parents' preferred language. With so many parents who are English Language Learners, we as a school are proactive in enabling students to think carefully about their book choices. Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) tests for reading levels are administered at least three times a year, and students are encouraged to select books at their reading level so they will make the most progress in their reading. We teach the students to read the book



jackets/blurbs and a page or two of the book to see if it interests them. We teach them about genre characteristics and to notice which genres they prefer. We teach them about author's style and to notice which authors' styles they like. Armed with this type of knowledge about their reading abilities and habits, students are more likely to make effective book choices. Each English Language Arts (ELA) teacher works hard to be sure they have a variety of books available to students at their appropriate level. Since many parents are not confident English speakers, they depend on us to usher their children through the book selection process.

Given that FACTS has a student body that is predominantly Asian-American, I wondered if Debbie placed a high priority on selecting Asian-American fiction. To use Sims Bishops' (1997) much-quoted metaphor, such books would serve as "mirrors" for Asian-American students, providing them with opportunities to reflect on their own cultures and experiences, and would act as "windows" through which students from other ethnic backgrounds could observe their classmates' cultures and ways of perceiving the world. Debbie's comment below sheds light on how district-mandated approaches to literacy instruction may limit or complicate the teacher's desire to create a more inclusive reading curriculum:

Honestly, the [Columbia Teachers College] Readers Workshop model does not allow me to teach fiction using specific works of literature, except in short passing references. We do read novels, but they are by genres, not chosen only for cultural diversity and there are many different small book groups in each class, so no one class has a shared book (unless it's a read-aloud or short story). We try to choose literature that represents all cultures, but we could use more. I have noticed informally, that most of my Asian-American students will not self-select books with Asian or Asian-American characters, preferring other traits [over cultural significance]. Naturally, it would be important to choose characters of all ethnic backgrounds for students – the more exposure to cultures and other ways of thinking the better. It certainly helps break down negative stereotypes, and build pride in one's own culture.

### **Teaching Multicultural Literature: Strategies and Practices**

Debbie uses a variety of strategies to incorporate multicultural literature into the seventh and eighth grade reading and writing curriculum. By coming up with creative ways of using texts in the classroom, she seeks to give status to multicultural literature, build students' cross-cultural competencies, encourage critical dialogue, and help students make powerful connections to texts.

Read-alouds are a standard part of Debbie's instructional approach, and have proven to be an effective method for getting students engaged with books they would be reluctant to read otherwise. She once did an extended read-aloud of the book *Home of*

*the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), the story of a boy who is a refugee from the Sudan and his struggles to relate to a different culture. She recalls the enthusiasm of students:

Although the personal struggle might have been the main focus, the [main character's] longing for the culture of his home and references to it were important. My goal was to expose students to a great book, first and foremost. Since so many are immigrants, others are of African-American descent, and all are teens, this book was one they could relate to at many different levels. In my school, I feel it is very important to bring in characters that embody many different ways of thinking – and have a connection to the most students possible. So many are disenfranchised in many ways and choosing characters they can relate to is one small way to respect and acknowledge them. The kids really enjoyed and seemed to relate to the main character's struggles to fit in while being different; they would beg for the story to be read.

In another instance, students read a short story by Laurence Yep, a Chinese-American writer, about his childhood and analyzed how character is revealed. As Debbie recalls, the story was well-received by both of the dominant cultures in the classroom:

It was very accessible to Chinese-American students because it described an experience they actively participate in, running a store and being part of a family. The African-American students also related to the struggles of the Dad in the story where he had to settle things with his fists at times. I was very comfortable with the material. Well-written literature has a universality that transcends culture, while still transmitting it. I feel like I have a stronger lesson when students can relate to the characters in the literature I present.

Debbie has also used short stories by Sandra Cisneros and Gary Soto, and poetry by Alvin Lau and many African-American poets, like the “dream poems” by Langston Hughes. As she observes: “these authors seem to empower kids to use their own voice to share their lives.”

I noticed that Debbie does not confine her use of multicultural literature to cultural and ethnic heritage months. Observance months such as Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month and Black History Month can remind educators to highlight the achievements of specific cultures and provide an opportunity for students from those cultures to feel celebrated and valued, but if educators only feature “diverse books” for one month per year, they end up putting people and books in a box. Debbie actively avoids doing this by connecting multicultural literature to a broad range of curricular themes. Her cross-curricular approach integrates multicultural literature with the teaching of literacy skills, core subject areas and Common Core State Standards throughout the year. She eschews a reductionist conception of diversity by identifying ways that multicultural books apply to everyday, universal experiences.

Debbie's comment on the universality of good literature, and the variety of her teaching strategies, illustrates her commitment to broadening the diversity frame:

I was thinking about your last question – how I motivate multicultural literature choice – and I have to say, it's not very different from how I'd present any book. Good literature is not hard to sell. I use book talks, peer recommendations, sometimes book trailers, videos/print copies of author interviews, enthusiastic personal endorsements, previews of the author's website, and inclusion of multicultural books in book club book selections. Once students start reading a book, the excitement spreads, students clamor for the book, and I get extra copies. It's hard not to love a book frenzy!

### Conclusion

My interview with Debbie provides much insight into what is necessary when using multicultural literature in the classroom to achieve its proper ends. Her comments relate to Louie (2006), who says, "teachers need principles to guide students toward understanding multicultural stories" and that "simply exposing children to multicultural literature may lead to indifference, lack of understanding and even resistance" (p. 438). Effective teachers are continually refining their toolbox of strategies and best practices for using multicultural literature in the classroom. They are also constantly honing their criteria for selecting multicultural literature that speaks to unique sets of students. I agree with Debbie that the best way to do this is a) through critical self-reflection of one's own teaching; b) by knowing students and listening to their voices, and c) by keeping a sharp eye on discussions in the teaching field and on literary developments.

Debbie reminded me that good teachers play an active role in helping their students develop cross-cultural understanding and critical consciousness through personally meaningful engagement with multicultural literature (McNair, 2003). Such teachers realize that the right multicultural books can and should be used to "invite conversations about fairness and justice" and "encourage young people to ask why some groups are positioned as 'others'" (Leland, et al., 1999, p. 70). As teachers go beyond the role of merely being a selector of multicultural literature to being a facilitator of critical literacy in their classrooms, they use multicultural books as critical texts to "build students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead" (Leland, et al., 1999, p. 70).

Talking to Debbie also made me realize just how important it is for teachers to see the hidden curriculum in their classrooms. McNair (2003) defines the hidden curriculum as "the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that are not a part of the intended curriculum, [but which] may also have an impact on students" (p. 46). In Debbie's case, she sees how the Readers Workshop Model mentor texts and individualized approach do not readily provide a variety of multicultural literature to share with the entire class group as a whole on a regular basis. Knowing this, she commits herself to

working within and around the constraints of the Readers Workshop Model to inject multicultural literature and critical literacy into her lessons and students' self-selected reading choices wherever she can. As teachers like Debbie become aware of and find ways to challenge the "hidden curriculum of hegemony, they are able to avail themselves and their students of multicultural literature's transformative possibilities" (Jay, 2003, p. 3).

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## **A Framework for Connecting Food, Culture & Health through Children’s Literature**

Natalie K. DeWitt and Marie A. LeJeune

As health (Natalie) and literacy (Marie) educators, we both understand the critical roles that community and culture play within K-12 classrooms and beyond. In fact, we first met while involved in service learning projects that linked K-12 and college classrooms for food and spice drives to fund local food bank efforts within our small community. Food drives and other efforts to support food banks and access to food are an important part of our local and college culture. Our community is not alone in this respect. Food is something that unites communities but also that is driven by complex issues related to economics, health, culture, and geography.

Teaching nutrition concepts is commonplace in most elementary classrooms even though nutrition-specific standards or performance indicators do not exist within national K-12 health standards (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007). Classroom teachers can choose any content area that is relevant to their students to teach general health-related skill building. More often than not, educators choose nutrition-based concepts to teach those skills (IOM, 2013).

One way to approach integrating health content into an elementary classroom is to use texts, like children’s literature, to model a holistic and culturally responsive approach to the topic. This is especially true when teaching about food and nutrition. Educators need to be aware of, and teach towards, the cultures of their students within all content areas, and especially those tied to cultural belief systems, such as health (Tileston & Darling, 2008). In this article, we present a framework for choosing texts that examine the social, cultural, and nutritional reasons for our food choices that also develop children’s general and health literacy.

### **Research on Teaching Nutrition to Children**

In a study that examined the level of training elementary educators received in nutrition education, researchers found that about half of the teacher participants received some kind of formal training to teach nutrition, and that 84 percent of elementary educators reported doing their own research and reading before teaching lessons (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Because of limited continuing education or specific training related to nutrition, coupled with no national standards for teaching comprehensive nutrition education, teachers are potentially at risk of passing off their inaccurate (sometimes negative) attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding food to their students. Still, this is important information for students to explore in classroom settings. Food literacy skills provide opportunities for students to make decisions in an ever-changing food and nutritional landscape and bring context and consistent messaging around food

choices and nutrition facts (IOM, 2013, pg. 5). These are essential skills students will carry with them into adulthood and that affect their overall health and wellbeing.

Families and childcare providers are often the first significant role models children encounter who demonstrate positive or negative relationships with food and eating (Golan & Weizman, 2001). According to Eliassen (2011), teachers are also significant role models in children's lives when it comes to eating, especially when modeling personal behaviors, like selecting and enjoying a variety of foods. Incorporating a "food studies perspective" in the classroom allows for spaces that recognize the ways in which food and nutrition work together for human physical and emotional wellbeing. One key way that teachers can model the content of food and nutrition studies is through the selection of quality literature and in response-based pedagogies (Liska-Carger, Conklin, & Falk Ross, 2002).

### **Integrating Critical Literacy into a Study of Food and Eating**

The school nutrition environment has a plethora of standards set forth by The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, requiring the USDA to significantly revise what can, cannot, and should be served to students as school meals (USDA, 2010). These standards and having healthy foods accessible during school lunches, however, does not mean cultural needs related to diet and eating are met. A whole school, whole community, whole child approach (CDC, 2014) is needed to ensure that health and wellness are being addressed in all aspects of the school environment. Lee (2012) emphasizes the importance of the school environment in facilitating and supporting behavior change for students and their families. Incorporating critical literacy lessons around food and nutrition that involve quality children's literature can add an additional layer of support for healthy food-related behaviors.

Elementary teachers are often attracted to teaching nutrition because it allows for creative lesson planning. Due to the importance placed on certain content areas over others, health is one subject area that is often integrated into other lessons. Because time is often not specifically dedicated to teaching about health and wellness, relying on lessons that are embedded in other knowledge and skill acquisition is a time saver, and is often the simplest way to teach health to K-5 students. Fostering literacy while teaching about food, families, and eating in both a cultural and nutritional context offers the opportunity to do both. Preparing future teachers to incorporate culturally appropriate books that feature positive, medically accurate health information and behaviors is one way to bridge this gap.

As a part of a larger meta-review of effective intervention strategies to improve healthy eating patterns of primary school students, Dudley, Cotton and Peralta (2015) found that there are eight dominant strategies for teaching about healthy eating in classrooms. One of the dominant strategies, identified as the *literary abstraction approach* (i.e., literature read by/to children whose characters exhibit positive modeling behaviors), was found to be particularly effective. Teachers can utilize

quality literature, picture books, and informational texts to model and discuss important nutrition concepts. In fact, health standards “blend well with critical literacy principles and reader-response teaching techniques” (Liska-Carger, Conklin, & Falk Ross, 2002, p. 1).

### **A Recommended Framework or Recipe for Choosing Titles**

Based on research and our experiences as educators, we recommend the following framework when choosing books to introduce within a nutrition education curriculum:

1. *Choose books that have minimal, if any, valuing or “othering” language.*

Avoid books that classify foods or behaviors into categories such as “good” or “bad” or that privilege or shame a particular food-related family experience. Food can be presented as nutritious, culturally significant, or valuable in other ways, without being classified as the “right” way. Not all families, geographic areas, or socioeconomic groups have access to the same foods. Food experiences are integrally tied to family experiences and teachers should be careful to not denigrate the food at risk of criticizing the family.

2. *Examine books for other hints of unhealthy behavior or oversimplified health facts within text and illustrations.*

Interestingly, even in books that are designed to promote healthy and diverse approaches to nutrition, photographs or illustrations might feature other unhealthy behaviors such as cigarette smoking, bike riding without a helmet, or might oversimplify facts by claiming that foods are healthy for everyone, without attending to issues such as illnesses, conditions, or allergies that prevent individuals from consuming certain “healthy” foods.

3. *Choose books that feature photographs of real food and/or realistic drawings that draw attention to food diversity and systems.*

Quality illustrations connect students to realistic, accurate, and detailed information about the endless variety of foods and how they are situated geographically and culturally. Of particular value are photographs and illustrations that portray food’s origins across geographic regions as well as diverse ways of preparing and consuming foods.

4. *Choose books where the text, illustrations, and photographs are inclusive of race, gender, class, age, ability, etc.*

Using books to engage students in critical thinking and conversation around food, eating, and nutrition is a technique that is easily accessible to all educators. Choosing books that represent as many ways of being in the world that are also attentive to illustrating a variety of foods, cultures, genders, and other aspects of diversity help children and young adults to move beyond binaries of “good” and “bad” to



understand food and nutritious choices as part of a more complex system of privilege and access.

5. *Choose books that show kids doing.*

Books that feature young characters or real-life stories of children and young adults actively engaged in the worlds in which they live are ideal for enabling students to draw connections to their lived worlds. Texts that place a positive emphasis on active engagement in planting, growing, raising, and sharing foods allow students to examine their own participation in social justice and food sovereignty issues.

6. *Consider books that feature nutrition and food within a larger social context of family, geography, culture, and ethnicity.*

Opening up conversations around food and nutrition may come more naturally when food is first understood through the lens of our social and emotional wellbeing. Books that feature themes of family, belonging, and traditions with food and eating as a central storyline are effortless introductions to a study of the science of nutrition and can be empowering.

**A Menu of Recommended Titles...**

Although there are many titles that might fit our recommended framework, here are a few we recommend:

***Rah, Rah, Radishes! A Vegetable Chant (2011); Go, Go Grapes! A Fruit Chant (2012); and Let's Go Nuts: Seeds We Eat (2013) by April Pulley Sayre.***

This series of picture books by Sayre features high-resolution photographs of a variety of vegetables, fruits, and seeds. Each book features rhyming, rhythmic text that calls to be read aloud as well as rich vocabulary as global foods are introduced – including kohlrabi, rutabagas, tamarillos, kiwano, rambutan, mung beans and more. The books provide possibilities for rich discussions on a variety of plant-based culturally diverse foods. Additionally, some photographs feature foods labeled in languages other than English. Each book also includes an author's end note with further nutritional facts, tips for those who might have allergies, and links to additional information on Sayre's website at [aprilsayre.com](http://aprilsayre.com). Recommended for pre-K and primary grades.



***Bread, Bread, Bread by Ann Morris, Photographs by Ken Heyman (1989).***

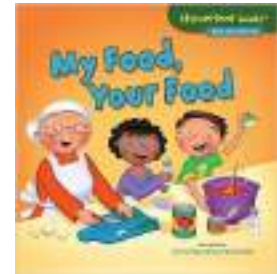
This informational text examines how bread is enjoyed throughout the world. The photographs are particularly appealing and an index in the back of the picture book links each photograph to the country in which it was taken: for example, a photo taken in India with the index comment, "This Sikh family in Bombay use chapattis, a kind of unleavened wheat bread, to soak up their egg. In Indian tradition, it is good

manners to eat with your fingers” (p. 30). Although the book has great potential for classroom sharing and discussion, it is important to note that teachers should discuss the presence of moralizing words including how “bread is good for you,” which might not be true for those with certain food allergies or medical conditions. Additionally, the book does feature one photograph where an Italian man seated beside a cart of bread is smoking a cigarette. Overall, though, the book’s global perspectives on shared appreciation of food would help students connect across cultures.



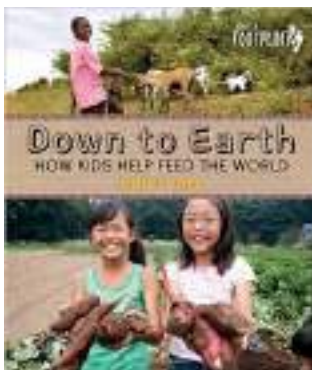
Recommended for pre-K and primary grades.

***My Food, Your Food* by Lisa Bullard, Illustrated by Christine Schneider (2015).** This concept book is part of the Alike and Different Series by Cloverleaf Books, which explore a variety of everyday events and items, examining ways in which people and cultures are both similar, and unique. In addition to sharing the story of Manuel and his classroom’s “food week” unit, the book features interactive questions throughout that facilitate classroom discussions or teacher-led thinkalouds and reflections, including, “Does your family have a favorite dinner?” and “What parts of the world does your family come from? Do they like to eat any special foods from those places?” and “Do you help your family make meals?” This book links food and meals to culture, geography, family, and belonging. It would prompt rich discussion and text-to-self connections for readers. It also features strong nonfiction text features and models expository writing. Recommended for elementary grades.



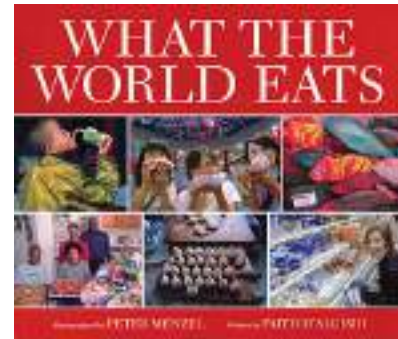
***Down to Earth: How Kids Help Feed the World* by Nikkie Tate (2013).**

This book features farming and food production across the globe, with specific focus on how children contribute to growing and harvesting a variety of foods. The text models children actively “doing.” Organic farming, genetic diversity, animal welfare, and food distribution are described as well as illustrated with photographs featuring children from diverse locations around the world. The text also connects food and food production to science. Nonfiction text features including “food fact” pull quotes, sidebars, and end-note resources add to the book’s appeal. Recommended for upper elementary and middle school.



***What the World Eats* by Faith D’Aluisio, Photographed by Peter Menzel (2008).**

Twenty-five families in twenty-one countries are featured in the young adult version of Menzel’s well known photo essay book *Hungry Planet*. The young adult version features a sample of portraits of families photographed with the food they would typically eat in one week. The book is highly visual but uses text wisely to highlight food availability, cultural influences, and economic disparities. Middle school and high school students could use this text as reference material, and it would also be a dynamic choice for teacher-led mini lessons examining the cultural and global influences on nutrition and diet. Recommended for middle school and high school.



***Dear Tomato: An International Crop of Food and Agriculture Poems*, Edited by Carol-Ann Hoyte, Photography by Norie Wasserman (2015).**

Food issues can also be highlighted in poetic form. This collection features a variety of poetic forms including haiku, acrostic, free verse, quatrains, and more. Topics include lighthearted poems about picky eaters but also important social justice-oriented writings on farmworkers, food banks, and fair wages. The poems invite response, discussion, and might serve as mentor texts for young poets as well. Recommended for all ages, dependent on poem choice.

**Conclusion**

Choosing quality literature through a critical and cultural lens can open up powerful spaces in the classroom for examining how food and nutrition impact our lives and the lives of others across the globe. Well-chosen texts, partnered with critical pedagogy practices and an informed and holistic approach to nutrition-based education allow children to understand and embrace a variety of approaches to health and wellbeing.

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