

Creating Lifelong Relationships: Children’s Connections to Characters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

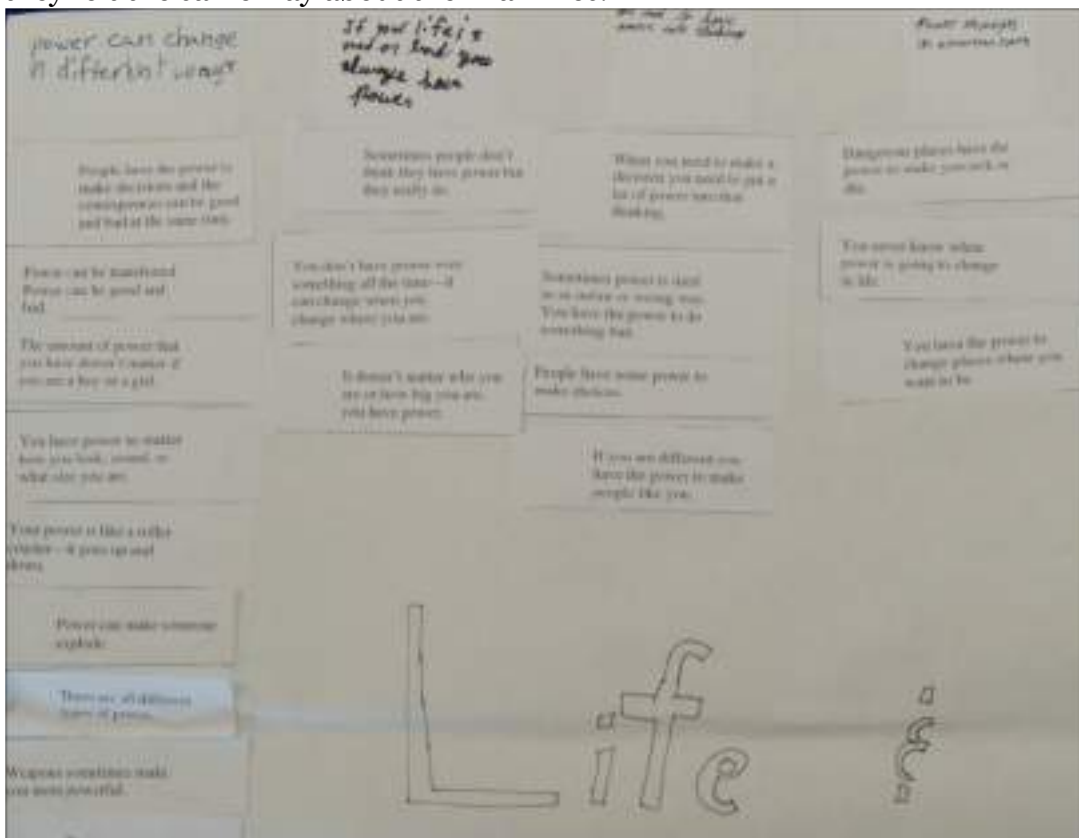
Another character whose life seemed much more removed from my students' lives but whom they grew to love was Keoko, from *When My Name was Keoko* (Park, 2002). Keoko, whose Korean name is Sun-hee, is a child living in Korea during the time of the Japanese occupation. Initially, it was hard for them to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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

References

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