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Recognizing the Familiar in the Faraway through Children's Literature

By Jane Wellman-Little, Cynthia Crosser, Jessica Dunton, and Barbara Keene

When Jane Wellman-Little contacted teachers who had taken her graduate course in picturebooks to see if we would be interested in forming a community to focus on global picturebooks, all of us were excited about the possibility. Maine, especially regions outside of the greater Portland area, tends to be insular, and many students are unfamiliar with people and cultures outside of Maine. We saw this as a wonderful opportunity to study together and support each other in helping Maine students explore other cultures through global literature.

Our group is comprised of one teacher educator (Jane), one education librarian (Cynthia), one third grade teacher (Jessica), one K-8 Title One teacher (Barbara), and one high school English teacher (Kelly). The entire group met approximately once a month to discuss issues of global children's literature and to examine and share global children's literature books.

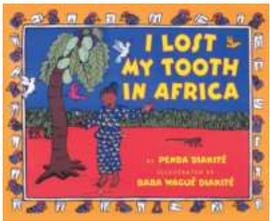
We had one dinner meeting with global children's author Margy Burns Knight, who impressed us with her emphasis on positive aspects of cultures in other countries. Subsequent meetings consisted of discussions of professional literature such as *Reading Globally, K-8* (Lehman, Freeman & Scharer, 2010) and sharing children's and young adult books with one another. Each meeting one or more members provided books for the discussion. The library purchased the full back run of *Sankofa*, which was an invaluable resource for evaluating and selecting African children's and young adult literature. This journal deals with complex contemporary issues,

includes book lists of award winners, and interviews with authors and illustrators.

We supplemented our group meetings with email conversations and smaller groups of us met as needed to work on and discuss individual projects. Within the first month it became apparent that group members were interested in using universal concepts to help Maine students explore global cultures. Using universals helps children forge a connection between their cultures and diverse cultures. By nesting a familiar activity (going to school), theme (interacting with extreme weather), universal emotion (worry) or rite of passage (losing a tooth) within the context of a global culture, children can use the familiar as an entrance into the faraway. All of our individual projects used this approach. Our projects reflect our individual professional interests of teacher education, literacy support, and classroom interactions.

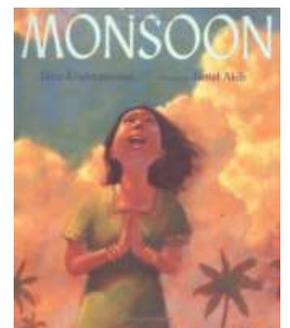
Teacher Education

Jane and Cynthia focused on supporting teacher education. Jane gave a workshop, “Recognizing the Familiar in the Faraway through Children’s Literature” at the 2012 Correll Early Literacy Conference at the University of Maine in Orono, Maine. The workshop provided early literacy professionals and early childhood students with access to over 100 global picture books.



Jane grouped the books into the themes of food, family, celebrations, school, concepts, children, home, relationships, and peace. Participants examined books and engaged in conversations about using them to teach early literacy learners about diverse cultures. Participants were particularly drawn to stories about childhood rites of passage, such as losing teeth, as encouraged by books such as [I Lost My Tooth in Africa](#) (Diakite, 2006).

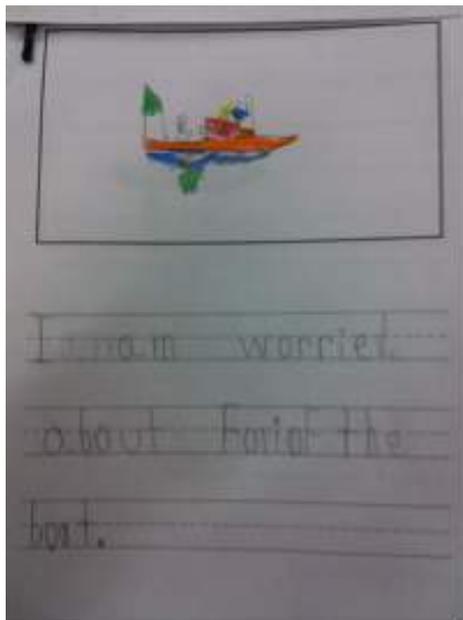
Cynthia assessed and expanded global children’s literature within the Learning Materials Collection (LMC) at the University of Maine which supports teacher education courses. Because children in Maine are familiar with extreme weather she decided to focus on families dealing with extreme weather in other countries. Picturebooks supporting the *National Curriculum for Standards for Social Studies* (Adler et al, 2010) were selected that realistically portray families and schools dealing with extreme weather in India ([Monsoon](#); [Monsoon Afternoon](#)), South Africa ([The Dove](#)), Zimbabwe ([Gugu’s House](#)), Mozambique ([Limpopo Lullaby](#)), Chad ([Rain School](#)), and an unspecified country in Latin American ([Papi’s Gift](#)). Professional books and web sites, including the *World of Words* database were used to select books. In addition to the extreme weather project, purchases were made of the Batchelder Award books (American Library Association/Association for Library Service to Children) as well as library association and government award books from Canada and Great Britain to improve the general collection of



global picture books. Over 60 global picturebooks were added to the Learning Materials Collection for teacher education.

Literacy Support

As a Title 1 teacher, Barbara Keene focused on literacy support. Barbara developed a collection of books about emotions which were donated to the guidance counselor at her school. The titles include *Silly Billy* (Browne, 2006), [*Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears*](#) (Gravett, 2008), [*How to Heal a Broken Wing*](#) (Graham, 2008), *Cherry and Olive* (Lacombe, 2007), and *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson, 1999). Barbara also implemented *Silly Billy* into a lesson plan for a class of kindergartners. The kindergartners engaged in a writing activity about the universal concept of worry, combining Common Core State Standards with global children's literature. Students began the lesson by brainstorming the reasons why people worry and then listened to a read-aloud of *Silly Billy* by British author, Anthony Browne. This book is particularly useful because it incorporates information about worry dolls from Guatemala into Billy's story about excessive worrying. After hearing the book the students wrote illustrated stories about their own worries. The stories varied from realistic stories about being lost in a store or falling off a boat to fantasy stories about zombies.



Falling Off a Boat



Lost in a Store



Zombies

Classroom Interactions

Jessica's project integrated global literature materials into the existing curriculum and was guided by Common Core State Standards and Maine State Learning Results: Parameters for Essential Instruction (Maine Department of Education, 2007). Jessica introduced her students to universal concepts through high-interest read-alouds of American and global children's literature. Jessica and her students worked at recognizing familiar activities (going to school, eating a meal, celebrating a birthday), rites of passage (losing a tooth), and familiar concepts (families) in settings that were familiar and unfamiliar. Concepts were identified as either a primary or secondary focuses in books so that students could make inter-textual connections regardless of whether the concept was the main theme of the book.

Students further developed their understanding of how universal concepts are expressed within global literature through discussions, art, and writing. Similarities and differences between cultures were explored as a natural consequence of examining universal concepts in different settings so that students explored both commonalities and differences across cultures. Students followed their own interests by selecting books from an extensive text set of global literature spanning different topics and reading levels. Books for the text set were purchased using WOW grant money and a grant of \$500 from donorschoose.org for her classroom project Go Global! (Dunton, 2012a). Students were also encouraged to bring in literature from home. Jessica recorded some of these lessons and posted them to YouTube (Dunton, 2012b) so that students could review them later and share what they had learned with their families.

Jessica concluded her project of including global literature by having students create a two-page



personal literary response related to the universal concepts that had been researched through global literature. Responses included pictures, drawings, paintings, models, poetry, jokes, and thoughts. Jessica photographed each response and put together a

classroom book called. *Universals Connect!* (Dunton, 2012c). Each student has a copy of the book which serves as a keepsake and a reminder of their explorations into other points of view. The classroom book can be purchased from Amazon.com so that relatives and friends can share in the children's project.

Conclusion

Everyone in the Orono Literacy Community explored global children's literature through universals set in other countries. Because of our diverse work backgrounds these projects involved teacher education, literacy support, and classroom interactions. Jane added to her collection of global literature books and used them in a workshop to assist early literacy teachers by engaging them in using accessible themes (celebrating a birthday) or rites of passage (losing a tooth) as a bridge to connect Maine children to global literature. Cynthia expanded the collection in the Learning Materials Collection through a focused text set on families dealing with extreme weather and increasing the global literature available to support teacher education. Barbara used the concept of childhood fears to connect her tangled readers to children in other countries who also worry. Jessica incorporated global children's literature into her existing curriculum and facilitated her students' research into universal themes (going to school) by providing them with an extensive text set that included numerous topics and different reading levels. Jessica and Barbara also worked with students to produce personal responses to a universal topic they had previously explored in another setting.

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Read Globally, Act Locally: A Global Environmental Literacy Community

Ernest Bond

Eight highly motivated teachers have been working on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to enhance transdisciplinary learning using global literature as a springboard for classroom investigations. The teachers who took part in our community exploring global environmental literature were also engaged in a Maryland State Department of Education funded STEM grant. As participants in that grant they were already exploring cross-curricular connections to STEM enriched instruction connected to Common Core State Standards. During the school year they met on a Saturday each month to discuss transdisciplinary curriculum in their classrooms with a group of twenty teachers. From the larger group eight of these teachers had the opportunity to internationalize their activities through participation in the WOW community.

So why were STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) teachers engaged with global literature? The theoretical foundation for this project builds on the understanding that, in providing windows and mirrors, literature can build bridges of international understanding (Bishop, 1994; Lepman, 2002). Narrative in particular has the potential to facilitate integrated learning across the curriculum by providing a rich personal context in which readers can construct meaning. STEM education in recent years has been conceived as transdisciplinary and Common Core State Standards are also generally interpreted as promoting learning across the curriculum. When broad themes and alternate perspectives on topics such as the earth's ecosystems are presented in ways that connect understandings across disciplines, our knowledge base becomes