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Global Literature and Content Area Literacy: Exploring the  
Pedagogical Possibilities of Content Area Classrooms

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

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Introduction: Global Literature and Content Area Literacy: Exploring the

## Pedagogical Possibilities of Content Area Classrooms

*WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* is excited to present our second issue featuring recipients of Worlds of Words Global Literacy Communities grants. These grants were funded by the Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding, an organization that has been helping young people in the United States learn about world regions and global issues since 1966.

In this issue the Willamette Valley Literacy Community shares their work using global and multicultural literature with middle and high school students in a variety of content areas. We begin with an overview and a description of the theoretical framework used by this literacy community in a vignette written by Marie LeJeune and Tracy Smiles. Next, Jennifer Hart Davis describes integrating global literature and science in a unit on water in an eighth grade Earth Science classroom. Eryn Willow helps her seventh and eighth grade students use literature circles and text sets to explore post-war Afghanistan. Mariko Walsh introduces her ninth grade language arts students to other cultures through literature circles with multicultural and global young adult literature. Finally, Mallory Marquet works with sixth grade struggling readers as they complete a global biography project.

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

Janine M. Schall

Editor, *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom*

### Examining Adolescents' Literate Lives

By Marie A. LeJeune and Tracy Lynn Smiles

As former teachers of adolescents, we are fully aware of the multi-faceted, complex, and often messy nature of adolescents' literate lives and identities. We are also aware that we are former teachers of adolescents and that in the span of the several years since we have left our middle and high school classrooms, adolescents' lives, identities, and literate practices have exploded with the advent of new digital literacies and social networking platforms such as blogging, texting, Facebooking, Tweeting, etc. Additionally, today's secondary students are more culturally and linguistically diverse than they have ever been, both in their own backgrounds as well as within the

literate, textual practices in which they engage. Considering this, we are particularly interested in and concerned with how today's teachers of adolescents approach, meld, and bridge students' out-of-school literacies and the content of schooled literacies and the ways in which cultural and linguistic diversities are embraced (or resisted) within schooled literacy practices.

We also acknowledge and empathize with the increasingly complex juggling act educators face as they attempt to honor the literate, linguistic, cultural, and technological diversity of their students, while simultaneously facing increasing mandates that limit the scope and breadth of curriculum in favor of scripted and mandated "programs" for teaching. The teachers we know and the teachers we work with understand that teaching students must mean more than following the (often scripted) and predetermined curriculum, using "one size fits all" basals, textbooks and other schooled texts they are being expected to teach in order for students to perform on assessments that teachers had little input in creating.

This issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* features voices from four such teachers—the teachers we were lucky enough to work alongside over the past school year as part of our participation in the World of Words Global Literacy Communities grant. Our group, comprised of four middle and high school content area teachers and us, their former professors, used our time together and the resources provided through the grant to grapple with many of these issues—how to best insure teachers could meet mandated state standards and core curriculum while inviting students into spaces that acknowledged and embraced the diverse backgrounds of their own lives and interests, and the larger world around them.

### The Theoretical Framework that Guided Our Group's Work

Through our work as content area teachers and teacher researchers, our literacy group explored a humanizing pedagogy with a focus on scaffolding students towards becoming "conscious of their presence in the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 407). This work with adolescents is built on the belief that students need opportunities to voice their experiences about their reading, their worlds, their concerns, and the issues and discourses that shape their ever-evolving identities and sense of self. We believe researchers, teachers, and policy makers have much to learn from the voices and experiences of adolescents (Moje, 2002; Alvermann, 1998). Additionally, our small group, or literacy community, embraced the belief that as educators we are charged with preparing students for entering a world that is as highly diverse and complex as the individual students who inhabit our classrooms. In addition to navigating the many demands of meeting mandates, students must be prepared to act and relate appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts (Short, 2010). As Short contends:

*Technology is increasing interconnectedness across world economies, politics, environmental*

*conditions, arts, education, etc. Migration and immigration are creating more culturally and linguistically diverse societies in U.S. communities and schools. Students need to be knowledgeable and interested about world regions and global issues and able to communicate across cultures and languages.*

## The Work of The Willamette Valley Literacy Community

This special issue of *WOW Stories* describes how the World of Words Global Literacy Communities grant provided four middle and high school teachers with the opportunity to engage students in authentic inquiries that supported and enhanced their content area teaching for adolescent learners through reading and discussing international children's and adolescent literature within their secondary classrooms. These vignettes describe how literature-based discussions within content area classrooms--science, social studies, and language arts--not only fulfilled teachers' goals of teaching the state and national standards they are held accountable to, but created new roles for themselves and their students as they examined critical global issues in light of their content, such as use of resources and water scarcity, racism, war, and civil rights.

This project focused specifically on using global children's and adolescent literature to explore pedagogical possibilities within secondary content area classroom contexts. Research illustrates the powerful impact that literature has on content area literacy and learning, drawing connections between the various subjects and critical issues adolescents explore in their secondary classrooms (Bean, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2008; McLaughlin, 2010). Although teachers in our classrooms were eager to engage with global literature in their classrooms, they admitted hesitancy towards how literature might be implemented within a content area classroom, particularly within the confines and time constraints of a predetermined curriculum scope, common to many secondary classrooms. What teachers found was that collaborating with other secondary teachers, within the smaller grant project and across various communities throughout the nation who also received a Global Literacy Communities grant, opened up powerful spaces for professional and pedagogical growth and development.

The project employed online components, such as an email chat loop for the teachers as well as an additional Wiki Space and Group Blog for teachers and students to share experiences and book responses across classrooms. We visited the classrooms to support and celebrate the classroom communities' inquiries into global literature and intercultural understandings. We met at the university and browsed stacks of books, and met for coffee at local restaurants to discuss our teaching successes and tensions. In short, we engaged in the type of professional development and talk that many teachers today are missing out on in an educational climate that encourages pre-determined, scripted programs in the place of teacher and student-centered, authentic curriculum.

Collaborating with these visionary teachers revealed for us the power of global literature integration in content area classrooms for secondary teachers, students, and the literate community of the classroom. These vignettes come out of diverse classroom contexts and represent a variety of subject areas, but collectively they illustrate the following:

- Cross curricular ties with literature encouraged secondary students' motivation towards and integration of content area topics and themes,
- Examination of global literature encouraged both teachers and students to examine their own cultural understandings and ways of looking at the world and the concept of "others" who live in different parts of the world,
- Examination of global literature encouraged these teachers to implement not only new texts, but also new practices around these texts within the classroom, expanding the pedagogical possibilities of content area classrooms.

Donna Alvermann (2006) proposes four principled practices for guiding and improving adolescent literacy instruction. " [Adolescents] need to generate and share their ideas about complex content area texts with others, thrive in active learning environments, need support in developing a critical awareness of what they read, write, and share, and opportunities to connect literacies that span in – and – out of schooling" (pp. 9-11). Our experiences with the teachers we collaborated with has affirmed our belief that discussion of quality children's and adolescent literature offers spaces to involve students in seeing connections between their own lives and experiences with texts, as well as opportunity to critically discuss these connections (Langer, 1993).

The work described in this special issue was derived from a desire to meld students' out of school reading interests and experiences within a schooled setting. Despite district and departmental mandates that often keep children's and adolescent literature, intensive literature based discussions, and students' perspectives on their schooled experiences on the sidelines of the required curriculum, these teachers demonstrate that international children's and adolescent literature coupled with inquiries into global issues can be powerful in supporting students in making connections between literacy and their lives while building self confidence as literacy and language users that can use language and literacy for empowerment (Goodman, 2003).

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## Multicultural Literature in the Secondary Science Classroom: Connections to Content and Culture

By Jennifer Hart Davis

Water, we cannot live without it, yet few of us really understand or stop to consider our relationship with the natural resource that ties humanity together. Water is the very essence of life. While many of us in the developed world take our unlimited access to clean water supplies for granted, there is a water crisis in much of the world. What connection and responsibility do we

have to our global neighbors with whom we share this resource? It was this globally unifying topic of water through which I sought to connect content and culture in my science classroom.

My goal in integrating multicultural literature into my eighth-grade Earth Science curriculum was to allow students to not only access science content (water cycle; global climate and weather patterns) but also to connect in a deeper way to the experiences and perspectives of young people in other cultures (cultural practices, adaptations). By making connections to their own and then other cultures, my hope was that students would be able to feel and develop respect for the “common humanity” (Short, 2009) that comes from the sharing and care of our natural resources.

I spent the first twenty years of my career conducting research in soil and water quality. It was only recently that I discovered my passion for teaching. During my first year as a teacher, pulling multicultural literacy into my science classroom was an ideal I had to implement intentionally--my background as a practicing scientist grounded the foundations of science as being unequivocally technical and objective in nature. In my observation and attempted explanation of the natural world, I sought to remove the subjective nature of the human condition from my research and writings thereby making the dissemination of scientific information as close to the “truth” as possible. However, as I guide the next generation of citizen scientists, I found that I needed ways to integrate the objective nature of science with an understanding of how we, as a society, shape and are shaped by scientific information. Decisions and policies we create regarding natural resources are intricately woven into human placement of value on these resources. The problem is that there is not always a clear pathway to integrate culture into teaching science content.

I have been on a journey in my short tenure as an educator to gain a better understanding myself of what culture is and how I can marry that understanding with my passion for social justice. Short (2003) states that culture is a “design for living that involves ways of acting, believing and valuing” (p.2). In order for my students to make socially responsible decisions, they must be able to step beyond their own experiences and not only see how their decisions impact others but to also empathize with those ‘others’. Exposure to multicultural literature is one pathway to make this possible. By exploring the value that global cultures place on water, my students will hopefully be able to consider water resource issues from a global perspective.

The availability of water clearly shapes culture. An excerpt from [Our World of Water](#) by Beatrice Hollyer (2008) included this statement: “We have a funny human habit of valuing only what seems rare to us, things like masterpieces of art or diamonds. We think that water is so very common that we needn’t value it so highly” (p. 6). This passage set the stage for my students to consider both how and on what we and other cultures place value. In our local culture in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, water scarcity is not our greatest worry; the fact that we *can* experience droughts that will likely increase with global warming goes unnoticed by most. It is this perceived abundance of water

that I predicted would lead my students to take the water flowing out of their taps for granted and inhibit them from seeing the interconnectedness of their lives with others around the world. Water never seems to be in short supply so why should they care? Yet at the same time, according to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), 1,800 million people will be living with “absolute water scarcity” by the year 2025.

In order to fully explore the interconnectedness of culture and resources, it was critical that I find and use “authentic” literature. I knew students would encounter narratives from students who had access to fewer resources than they do. I did not want my students to pity the young people they read about, rather, I wanted them to feel connected to and develop a respect for the ability of humans to adapt to their natural environments. I also wanted them to become aware of the role that water takes in shaping culture. My students first had to examine and appreciate their own culture before they could truly connect with others in a meaningful way (Short, 2009).

The first activity for my students was to explore and record how they, their family and community used water over a long weekend. For this exercise, I provided seven questions that prompted them to consider how they use water to survive and make their lives healthier, as a luxury, in ceremonial or religious ways, and also to consider how they waste water. The questions included:

*How did you use water in ways that allowed you to survive (needs)?*

*How did you use water in ways that allowed you to make life healthier?*

*How did you and your family use water in ways that you would consider a luxury and not a necessity (wants)?*

*How did you waste water?*

*Does your family ever use water in any type of ceremonial way? If so, how?*

*Do you play in water? How? What kind?*

*How valuable do you think water is as a natural resource in Corvallis? In the United States?  
In the World?*

Classroom discussions afterwards centered on the more obvious ideas of drinking water and using it to shower and brush their teeth. At this point in the lesson, students did not appear to be very engaged. I would summarize their attitude as, “Yes, I use water just like everyone else, so what?” They had a harder time initially considering how their use of water might be considered a luxury or a waste and there were few responses as to how they might use water in ceremonial or religious practices. Overall, students felt as though their use of water was relatively efficient and necessary to

sustain their everyday life. One goal of using multicultural literature is to have students' perceptions change to an understanding that their experience is not the only one and that, quite frankly, is not the "norm" in terms of global averages. The reality is that globally, one in eight people do not have access to safe water supplies (UNICEF/WHO, 2008).

The next step in the lesson was to have students dive in to the literature. The two books I selected for whole class study were [\*A Long Walk to Water\*](#) by Linda Sue Park (2010) and *Our World of Water: Children and Water around the World* by Beatrice Hollyer (2008). In *A Long Walk to Water*, students focused on the narrative of Nya, a young woman from Sudan who was solely responsible for supplying her family with water, at times walking eight hours a day through the desert. Each chapter of *Our World of Water* contained an in-depth look at the life of a child from one of several countries including Peru, Mauritania, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Tajikistan. These authentic texts explored more than the superficial "tourist perspective" (Short, 2009) and considered fully the everyday lives of the children and their relationships with water. I was somewhat surprised by my students' excitement at the text selections. These texts were so different than the science content pieces they were used to reading and their reaction demonstrated how personal narratives grab their attention and allow them to connect more easily to the text. This was an exciting discovery for me.

Students read the texts in small groups and answered the same questions they had answered for themselves about water use, this time from the perspective of the child about whom they read. I chose to have students identify similarities and differences between their and their counterparts' relationship with water. According to Marzano, et al. (2001) when students work independently to identify similarities and differences and then represent these findings in a graphic way "students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge" (p. 15) is enhanced. Using a student-led activity increases the pureness of the individual's reflection and the overall diversity of responses that can then expand and enrich individual perspectives when shared in whole group settings. The final product of this lesson was the graphic representation of these similarities and differences. I left the style and format of the product open to allow students to express their thoughts in a way that was organic for them.

The comments I heard during the reading of the texts were exciting and illustrated that students were awed by what some kids had to go through to get water. I repeatedly heard comments such as: "All I have to do is walk to the sink to get water; they have to work so hard!"; "Can you believe she has to walk all that way without shoes?", "Yeah, and then she had to take her little sister with her!"; "I can't imagine not being able to take a shower whenever I wanted!"; "They are so careful with water, they even use the leftovers to wash themselves." I felt that students were really stepping into the lives of these kids in other regions of the world.

The products students created demonstrated that their perspectives on their own relationship with their culture surrounding water had grown in depth, diverging from their initial, more obvious observations. They were able to go from focusing on merely drinking water to survive to considering use of water for religious purposes and celebrations. There was also a great shift in their categorizing of their use of water as “wants” and “needs.” The strongest shift was in their realization that many of their uses of water would, to the rest of the world, be considered a luxury. Swimming in a pool, taking showers every day, watering lawns and having access to clean water are luxuries that many around the world do not enjoy. Students also better understood the high value placed on water in these cultures and the ability of these children to use water carefully and still lead fulfilling, rich lives. Learning about the care that kids in other cultures gave to using water gave my students a new perspective on what wasting water in their own lives looked like.

Reflections on the project included the following responses from my 14 year old students:

*Doing this project has really changed my perspective on how we use water. For example, I didn't realize how valuable it is to people in Ethiopia. They have to walk long ways just to find small ponds, while we can access it by turning on our sinks. I also realized that we take water for granted. We sometimes leave the sink running while we brush our teeth or take a long shower. So this project has made me think twice when I use water and think if I need to use it or not. Matt*

*In the water unit I learned that water in some countries is so scarce that people fight over it. While in the U.S., you can take a few steps to the sink and have water pour out of the spout; as much as you want. To most people in the U.S., water doesn't seem very valuable . . . Randall*

*I found it interesting how other cultures are so much more careful about using water, even if they don't live in an area where water is a problem. Michaela*

I thought that it might be easier for students to identify the differences between themselves and their counterparts before their similarities. I was very happy to see that the literature allowed students to discover interesting commonalities. Jacob, a student with autism, recognized that he and Saran of Bangladesh use water for religious ceremonies. Jossi added that in Kadja's culture of Mauritania, they use water to wash rams for ceremonial purposes.

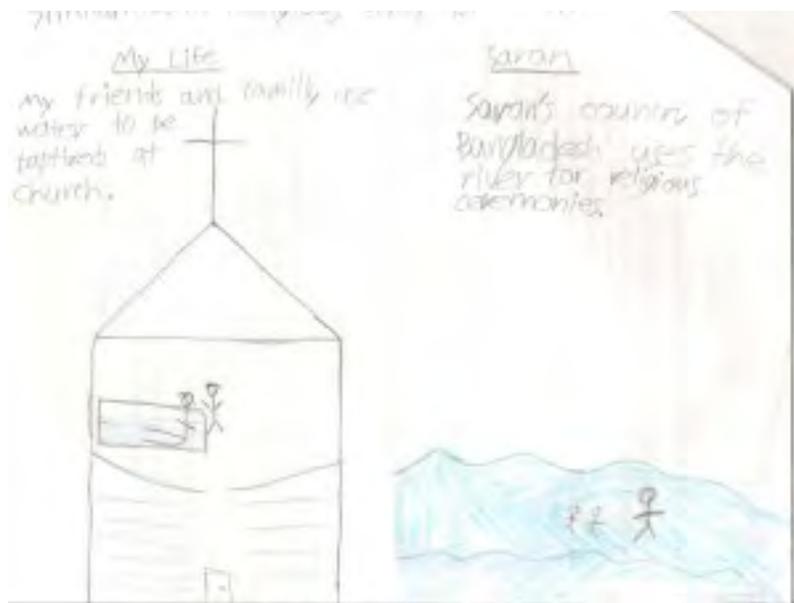


Figure 1. Jacob related that he and Saran from Bangladesh both use water for religious ceremonies.

Beverly noted that she and Kadja love to play in the ocean and both use water to prepare their food. Bev concluded that "This article opens my eyes to the fact that I take water for granted when I should really treasure it for keeping me alive."



Figure 2. Beverly, who loves to cook, noted how important it was for her and Kadja to use water to prepare food.

Jossi was able to envision Khadja's very different relationship with water. The depth of Jossi's new perspective was summed up in her comment: "Learning about Khadja and her family really opened my eyes. It's amazing how one person can learn to cope with as little as she does. She is incredible

and I would not be able to live with the little water she has.”



Figure 3. Jossi was able to really envision Khadija's very different relationship with water.

Chaeun Kim, a Korean student who is an English Language Learner, did a beautiful job expressing the similarities and differences between her Korean culture and Sudan. We used this opportunity to discuss how her relationship with water in Korea is very similar to the U.S.



Figure 4. Chaeun beautifully depicted similarities and differences between her Korean experience with water resources and that of Nya's in Sudan.

I am so pleased with the outcome of my first use of authentic multicultural literature in the science classroom. I felt that I met my goals of having students understand science content as well as develop a deeper connection to other cultures. Using this literature clearly allowed my students easier access to the content, and by gaining an understanding and appreciation for these individuals' culture, changed their perspective of their own relationship with water. It is my hope that this transformation will raise their awareness of global water resource issues. Although I have begun my adventures in using critical literacy with this single unit, my goal is to achieve the "international mindedness" as described by Short (2003, p.1) so that these multicultural perspectives "permeate" my curriculum and allow my students to "recognize their common humanity" (Short, 2009).

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“Best. Book. Ever.” Exploring Culture and Conflict through Reading *Words in the Dust*

By Eryn Willow

I teach in a rural school district at a small middle school with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, while outlying schools house grades K–8. In my district, crime and poverty are not significant unlike surrounding districts where the delineation between the economic classes is more defined. Students have little connection to the world outside their insulated community and as a result have limited understandings of the world beyond what they experience through the popular media. Their perspectives were guided not only by their undeveloped views of the world, but their reactions to it. I found myself pondering how I could use engaging literature about adolescents from other parts of the world to help my students explore alternate perspectives and experiences of teenage life and what that encompasses: friends, family, responsibilities, strengths and weaknesses, moments of courage and fear.

Using the opportunity given to me through World of Words Global Literacy Communities grant I purchased a set of classroom novels that shared the story of a young girl living and learning in a different part of the world: [Words in the Dust](#) by Trent Reedy (2011). With this novel, I hoped to help the students expand their understandings of their American lives and what it is like to have the rights, freedoms, and educational opportunities they seem to take for granted. I also wanted to invite students to discover that we share similar values and dreams, whether from Oregon or Afghanistan.

In the novel, the narrator, young Zulaikha, is living in post-war Afghanistan. The Taliban still threaten the edges of the people's memories, but the people fear the American soldiers with their brash manners and big guns more. Zulaikha, suffering with a cleft palate, lost her mother to Taliban soldiers' ruthless strictures. Zulaikha's older sister, 15-year-old Zeynab, is set to marry a rich 45-year-old man. When the American soldiers try to help get Zulaikha's cleft palate repaired so that she can eat and breath more easily, they bungle many Islamic customs, angering her father

and putting her chances for a “normal” lip at risk. To further complicate life, Zulaikha is meeting in secret with Meena, a seamstress near the market. Meena, once a literature professor in Herat, has been teaching 11-year-old Zulaikha. Meena shows Zulaikha the beauty of Afghani poems written thousand of years ago, and eventually convinces the young teen to continue her education. In the novel’s concluding chapters, Zeynab is severely burned by her husband because she cannot conceive a child and dies. This cataclysmic event helps Zulaikha to realize that even with a “normal” lip, her destiny in Afghanistan will not change without the influence of education. This novel provided students with a picture of what it means to grow up poor in relation to material possessions, but rich in family and tradition.

The makeup of my classroom is a mix of very active seventh and eighth grade students. Due to a rapidly approaching summer break, I chose a novel that I felt best suited my class. I wanted a tale that had an engaging story for both boys and girls. Many of this year’s students were reluctant and struggling readers, so it was important to choose a book with which they had some familiarity. Many of their parents and friends’ parents are currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and so they are very aware of the conflict occurring in the Middle East. They viewed their military relatives and friends as heroes. While I didn’t wish to upset this image, I wanted to challenge it in order to help them see the complexity of war and conflict for all involved. The boys were immediately won over by their curiosity – they wanted to know about our soldiers, of course, but were also intrigued by the unfamiliar culture. I tackled a range of questions about the Taliban, Afghani soldiers, and children living in cities full of constant danger. The girls immediately identified with Zulaikha. Most of my female students come from families who expect them to attend college or some sort of trade school when they finish high school. To read a story in which the female character must fight for a right to learn caught their attention.

Students asked thoughtful questions, explored big ideas, and exhibited genuine enthusiasm for the issues and content in the text. Worried about general reading comprehension, I decided to place students in groups organized around themes we identified together. In this way, students could focus on one big idea while we read together, rather than trying to consume many themes at one time. Students read along with me for a portion of their class time and then separated into small discussion groups to talk about issues from the novel that pertained to their group’s theme. As I explained the book to the students (as well as several others books that were available and connected to the novel) they immediately focused on several major themes. The girls wanted to know about gender roles and education, the boys were interested in issues related to war, poverty, and cultural differences. One of my female students, born with a cleft palate, was interested in the country’s access to health care. This student had her cleft palate repaired by the time she was two. Our protagonist was still suffering with hers at the age of eleven. I also supplemented the novel with picture books, such as [Biblioburro](#) by Jeanette Winter (2010), that connected to the themes

for each group to read, discuss, and compare with the events in the novel. After reading the novel, students surprised me by suggesting it would have been a good idea to add the theme of bullying to the six we'd discussed.

Picture Book Text Sets Explored in Global Issue Theme Groups	
<p>Issue: Health</p> <p><i>Wilma Unlimited</i></p> <p><i>Thank you, Mrs. K!</i></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan</u></a></p>	<p>Issue: Education</p> <p><a href="#"><u>Ruby's Wish</u></a></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Nasreen's Secret School</u></a></p> <p><i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i></p> <p><i>Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan</i></p> <p><i>Don't Say Ain't</i></p> <p><i>Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys</i></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Biblioburro</u></a></p>
<p>Issue: War/Civil Unrest</p> <p><i>Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan</i></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Librarian of Basra</u></a></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Smoky Night</u></a></p> <p><i>Nasreen's Secret School</i></p> <p><i>Boxes For Katje</i></p>	<p>Issue: Gender</p> <p><i>Ruby's Wish</i></p> <p><i>Nasreen's Secret School</i></p> <p><i>Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan</i></p> <p><i>Hurry, Hurry, Mary Dear</i></p> <p><i>Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys</i></p>

<i>Baseball Saved Us</i>	
Issue: Culture	Issue: Poverty
Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan	Boxes for Katje
Afghanistan: The People	Tight Times
Ruby's Wish	Afghan Dreams: Young Voices of Afghanistan
I Come From Afghanistan	Fly Away Home
At the Crossroads	At The Crossroads
Raising Yoder's Barn	Biblioburro
The Other Side	
Biblioburro	

Figure 1. Picture Book Text Sets Explored in Global Issue Theme Groups

When we first began discussing the area of the world that Zulaikha lived in, students focused primarily on the stereotypical aspects of the region and the Taliban soldiers (images viewed through American media and from stories they heard from family and community members). They were in awe of the way in which women dressed and wondered why the Taliban wanted their men to grow beards. They asked questions about the Taliban soldiers' ruthlessness among their own people, but were puzzled by the fact that Afghani people did not see our American soldiers as they see them – as heroes. They asked me questions like, "Do they have to eat their pets if they get too hungry?", "Where did the Taliban get their weapons?", and "Why do women have to wear those burkas?"

Even though students read as a class, each theme group recorded their "noticings" from their readings and discussions on large pieces of butcher paper. Students also kept personal journals of their reactions and responses to the book as well. Reviewing students' written comments from their groups and their personal journals, I saw shifts in attitudes as they connected with the novel's characters. They empathized deeply with the characters and their comments were evidence that their perspectives on life and education were expanding and changing. They learned that girls and boys in different parts of the world are still struggling just as much as the characters in the novel,

and that education, literacy, and access to medical care are vastly different in other regions of the globe. I also noticed I had fewer incomplete papers, less complaining about assignments, and no mention about whether the teacher bought treats for “good behavior.”

As students dug further into the story of Zulaikha’s life, their global and cultural perspectives shifted. They developed strong feelings for the same-aged characters in a different part of the world, and those feelings grew stronger with each chapter. Looking at life through an Afghani girl’s eyes made them realize how many freedoms – and privileges – they have in their own lives. One 13-year-old student wrote, “It makes me feel like we have so much that we don’t use, but they can! They [Zulaikha] thought getting a comb was awesome? We are so wasteful and rich compared to the poor people [in the novel].” Another female student who struggled through much of her school year and had very little by American standards wrote, “I used to think that everything I have wasn’t enough; that I needed more things. But after reading this book, I have been so grateful for everything I have.”

Both male and female students were amazed by the young character, Zeynab, who was married at the age of 15. The boys especially were stunned by this cultural practice, “What type of parent would consider having a child under 18 get married?! I think that their little girls should be given the freedom of who and when they want to marry,” wrote one 12-year-old boy. The girls however, were more than just troubled by young girls their age being married off--they were downright angry. A 13 year old girl stated in her journaling, “I would not like being married at this point in my life. Too much to handle. I’m just not ready for it. No one is.”

Students wondered why early age marriages happened in some regions of the world, but not all. We talked about what they planned to do with the next five years of life. They responded as any American student might: go to high school, get a job, and get into a good college. “How about a family?” I asked. Well, of course, all of them wanted to have kids someday. “Can you have a family in America when you’re in your twenties?” I inquired. They all thought that it was reasonable to have a family then. “What if your education didn’t last until you turned eighteen? What if you had to marry only when you had enough money to support a family and home?” That stymied them a bit. “Zulaikha’s nineteen-year-old brother has no wife, but he is almost twenty – Why?” After a bit of head scratching, students surmised that perhaps a man wasn’t suitable for marriage until he had enough money to support his own house and family like Zulaikha’s father supported her family. Once this idea came to the surface, they decided that perhaps people in Afghanistan showed responsibility in waiting. A girl marrying at a young age, they guessed, might have something to do with younger women being stronger and thus more capable of bearing healthy children.

As we read the book in class, we stopped often to discuss. The students in each theme group elected a writer each day who would run to their slice of paper to jot down notes from our discussions. Kids

from other groups would help point out different aspects of the novel that related to the themes. It was messy, it was noisy, but it was meaningful (which made the gobs of tape left on the windows at the end of the year worth every minute of cleaning.)

By the end of the novel, students began centering their discussions on education. They found it offensive that all children weren't educated through at least high school. One boy quipped, "If we get to have this much school for free, it's only right that they should get the same privilege." One girl asked during a class discussion, "Why do the Taliban not want their people to be educated?" to which a boy at the back of the room replied, "You're easier to control when you're dumb." This simple conversation floored me and brought the talk to a quiet halt. "So that's what Meena meant," a surprised student said at the front of the room. I asked what she was talking about, but another student in the class answered, "It won't matter if Zulaikha has a pretty face. Without education she'll still have to get married. She doesn't get a choice because she'll be too dumb to do anything about it." And with that, my whole class sat stunned. "Was education that important," I asked? No one spoke, but most of them nodded.

While we prepared for the end of our school year, students rushed to finish the novel. There was barely a dry eye as we read the final chapters. Even the boys admired Zulaikha's bravery, and the girls huffed over her final decision regarding her own education. They all breathed audible sighs as we read the last paragraph together. One student exhaled loudly and leaned back in her chair as we finished. She looked to me and grinned, "Best- book- ever...."

I can't sum up how this book touched the students and altered their idea of the world as globally connected. My students were provided the opportunity to experience the power of a great book to learn about themselves and their world.

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As a young Asian-American woman who grew up just outside of the major city of Portland, Oregon, teaching high school language arts in the rural community of Scio, Oregon has had its fair share of challenges. However, the most personally challenging part of teaching in this context has been the limited global and cultural awareness of my students. This limited awareness makes sense, considering exposure to these issues and experiences in their own school or community are narrow in scope and perspective. Scio is a wonderfully tight-knit community that has a population of 800, consisting of 95% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% two or more races. Scio High School has 231 students, 92% of whom are Caucasian. That means that out of the entire school population there are only around 13 students who are not Caucasian. Scio is a wonderful community to work in, but I wanted to try and inspire my students to take interest in cultures across the world and possibly even create global citizens in the process.

As a teacher I've felt strong tensions seeing my students graduate and enter the world with such a narrow frame of knowledge. I often noticed students making small minded comments about other races or cultures, I believe, because they did not understand culture as a way of thinking and being in the world, and so dismissed cultural diversity as "different from me." I wanted to expose my students to different cultures in a way that they could relate to and explore on their own; both the common values they share as well as the unique ways people had of living in the world.

Prior to my involvement with the Worlds of Words Global Literacy Communities grant, the only piece of literature we read in my 9th grade language arts class that explicitly focused on another race was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960). My students loved reading about the Tom Robinson trial, and became furious when the guilty verdict was delivered. Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided a great opportunity to start a conversation about prejudice and how we still see it today. I noticed that my students were able to easily connect to the events in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, not because they could relate to them, but because they were told in the voice of a child. Once I became involved in the Worlds of Words grant I knew that I wanted to bring in more global texts that utilized an adolescent narrator.

### Selecting the Texts

For me, the first step was to identify what format I would use to create my global literature unit. I wanted to expose students to more than one global culture, but due to time constraints I was not able to have them read more than one book. I decided to utilize literature circles so that I could incorporate several texts in my classroom at once. Next, I searched for texts that focused on cultures from around the world and that used an adolescent voice for the narrator. I chose the following texts: [Ashes](#) by Kathryn Lasky (2010), [Bamboo People](#) by Mitali Perkins (2010), [Home of](#)

[the Brave](#) by K. A. Applegate (2008), [Milkweed](#) by Jerry Spinelli (2003), and [Words in the Dust](#) by Trent Reedy (2010).

*Ashes* is narrated by a young girl named Gabriella who lives in 1932 Berlin. Through Gabriella's eyes the reader learns about Hitler's rise in power and the increasing hatred towards the Jewish community. *Bamboo People* is narrated by two teenage boys from different sides of the conflict between the Burmese government and the native Karenni people in modern day Burma. Having two narrators who were raised to hate each other brought depth to the novel, and exposed the reader to two very different cultures that exist in the same country. *Home of the Brave* is a novel that takes place in modern day Minnesota, but is narrated by a Sudanese refugee named Kek. This novel gives the reader a sense of the unique experience of a newcomer to the United States. *Milkweed* takes place in Nazi-occupied Warsaw during World War II and is narrated by a young orphan named Misha who survives the ghettos. Like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the narrator is young and naive about what is going on around him. His somewhat childish observations allow the reader to come to their own conclusions about what is really happening. A young teenage girl named Zulaikha who lives in modern day Afghanistan narrates *Words in the Dust*. I was most excited to have my students read this novel because I often hear small-minded comments about people from the Middle East. Through Zulaikha's narration, the reader is able to see what it is like to live in modern day Afghanistan. In addition to the novels using a child or adolescent narrator, I selected them because of the rich opportunities they presented for inquiry into global issues such as racism, genocide, immigration, and current events.

## Creating Research Queries

When the students chose the novel that they wanted to read and began meeting in their literature circles, I guided them in creating individual research queries. I wanted students to further research the cultures that they were reading about, but to choose aspects of that culture that really interested them. My students had never met in literature circles in my classroom before, so I still wanted to be able to nudge my students in the right direction while still giving them freedom to pursue their own interests and curiosities. I utilized two techniques to help my students identify their lines of inquiry. Every week each literature circle was given a reading schedule for that week. I carefully organized these reading schedules so that all of the literature circles would finish their book the same week. Along with their reading schedule there was space to write three "guiding questions" about their book as well as a space to record any additional notes or observations. Each individual student wrote three guiding questions at the beginning of the week, and then at the end of the week students shared the questions that they had written and the entire literature circle engaged in a discussion around these questions. Students recorded the group's responses to their guiding questions, and kept them until their literature circle had finished the entire book. See Figure 1 for an example of the worksheet.

## Ashes

Week 4

Monday	Write Guiding Questions Read Chapter 26
Tuesday	Read Chapters 27 and 28
Wednesday	Read Chapters 29 and 30
Thursday	Read Chapters 31, 32, and 33
Friday	Read Chapters 34 and 35

### Guiding Questions

Before, write three questions that you have about the book. At the end of the week, see if you can answer any of your questions.

1. What will happen to Lillo?  
-The "boys" will kill him and dump it  
in with her. Tootle out of the country  
because her electrical wires are the  
only way to the shore.

2. What happens to Ruby?  
-Ruby leaves Germany with her  
family and goes to live in a place where  
she can live in peace.

2. What happens in the end?  
The family leaves Berlin and their friends behind. Ulla stays with Karl and Gaby looks back at what happened and once at Berlin.

Other Notes/Observations:

Figure 1.

Another technique that I utilized was to have students record any differences or similarities they noticed between the cultures represented in the books and their own. These lists provided great insight into not only what made the cultures in the books unique, but also what my own students had in common with the characters of a culture. The students actually found it easier to find similarities than differences between their own cultures and the cultures in their book. I gave each student a "cultural observations" sheet on which to record these differences and the students kept them and filled them out the entire time they were reading their books in their literature circles. Here are some examples:



Book Title: Words in the Dust

**Cultural Observation Sheet**

This is where you will keep track of the cultural details from your book. Whenever you come across information that helps describe the culture of your book, write it below.

- Women wear chadors
- They eat noon
- Very traditional
- Women are submissive and expected to marry young and listen to husbands
- Women don't go to school only men do
- Taliban rules every aspect of life
- People pray in morning, noon and night and before meals
- Women are expected to stay virgins before marriage
- Arranged marriages with set bride prices
- Young women marry much older men
- Families cook meals for prospective husbands before the Taliban, women were more equal

Figure 4. A cultural observation sheet from the *Words in the Dust* literature circle.

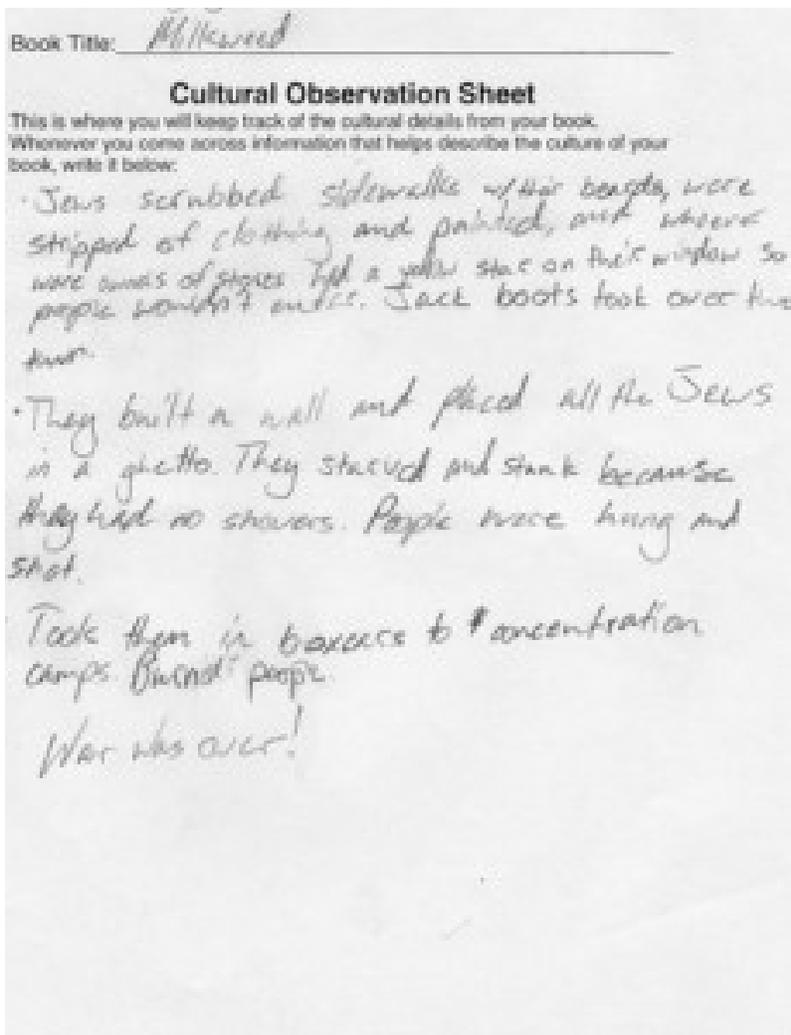


Figure 5. A cultural observation sheet from the *Milkweed* literature circle.

I found that both of these strategies encouraged my students to critically analyze their books and the unique differences they identified while exploring another culture. I was continually impressed with their insightful observations, but was even more excited by how analyzing the differences between their culture and the culture of their book made my students realize how many *similarities* they shared as well.

I wanted students to share what they learned about the cultures represented in the novels with each other so the entire class collectively gained the new knowledge and insights about cultures they had learned about through their readings and discussions. I invited each literature circle to choose topics to further research on their book's culture and then present a slideshow to the class sharing their information. The students chose their research topics by looking back over their guiding questions and cultural observations to see what topics they had the most questions about or made the most observations about as they read their book. I wanted students to pick topics that they were genuinely interested in, not topics that I assigned to them. Students really enjoyed conducting their research, and the slideshow presentations were incredibly insightful and

educational. See Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9 for examples of slides from the students' presentations.



Figure 6. A slide from the presentation by the Ashes literature circle.



Figure 7. A slide from the presentation by the *Milkweed* literature circle



Figure 8. A slide from the presentation by the *Words in the Dust* literature circle

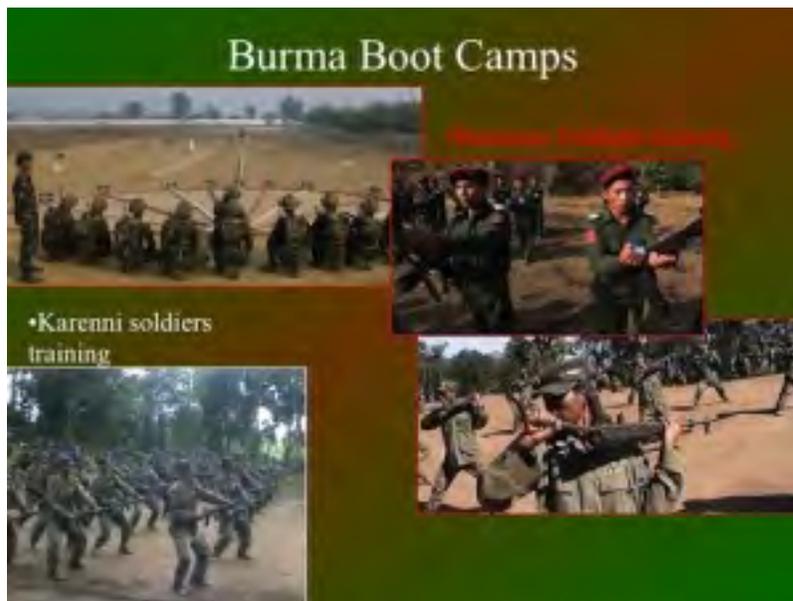


Figure 9. A slide from the presentation by the *Bamboo People* literature circle

### Reflecting on the Experience

After the literature circles had completed their research I asked students to reflect on their experiences with their novels. I asked what they learned about their new culture, and if they found the global literature unit interesting. Here are a few of the sample responses I received:

*I liked my book because it was interesting to learn about the culture. I didn't know anything about the African culture before I read my book, and I learned a lot. (Justin, Home of the Brave)*

*I enjoyed reading about the SA and the SS, and also learning more about Hitler. I had no idea that people were so angry about losing World War I, and now I understand how Hitler was able to get so much power. I learned a lot and I liked how it was from a girl about my age. (Jessica, Ashes)*

*I've always been interested in the Holocaust, and this was the first book I've read where the narrator of the story is a young kid. It was really interesting to read about what Misha saw and experienced, and it gave me a really neat look at the Holocaust and what it would have been like to be there. (Chris, Milkweed)*

*I really liked reading about how different it is to be a girl in Afghanistan, like how girls can't go to school or learn to read. I really liked how the book took place recently because I am always hearing about our troops over in Afghanistan. It was cool to read about what our soldiers are doing over there, and how they are trying to help the people. (Melissa, Words in the Dust)*

*I thought it was really interesting how scared the Burmese government was of its own people. I can't believe they had a war over it. I liked all of the details in the book about the Karenni culture, it was fun to learn about them. (Trevor, Bamboo People)*

These responses truly reflect the excitement that my students and I experienced as we engaged in critical analysis and research queries together. It was thrilling to witness my students discover the knowledge that they were not just a citizen of Scio or Oregon, but that they were a *global* citizen.

I cannot wait to teach this global literature unit again to a new group of freshmen. I plan to add to my novel collection to offer more choices and cultures to my students, which I believe will benefit the unit and increase my students' cultural awareness. I have already begun talking with the social studies teacher at my high school on ways that we can create interdisciplinary connections throughout this unit. We have decided that we will create a Current Events assignment at the end of the unit where students relate what is happening in their book to what is currently happening in the world. Along with the success of my global literature unit, my experience with literature circles has been so positive that I am now trying to incorporate literature circles in the other classes that I teach. I have found that literature circles are a great vehicle for student-led inquiry, insightful discussions, and inquisitive learning. I believe that this experience has helped me give my students the tools to continue to stay informed and curious about the world around them, and I am so thankful for that.

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## Global Biography Projects: Going Deeper with Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

By Mallory Marquet

This past school year I was assigned to teach a new class titled English Essentials, which included students who were deemed by the school district to be “struggling” students in reading and writing. On the one hand, this was very exciting to me; I had just finished graduate work on a reading endorsement and was eager to connect this knowledge to my classroom. Yet I also faced challenges as I embarked upon teaching this class. I particularly felt troubled that these students knew they were not in a ‘regular’ Language Arts class, and so I prioritized creating a safe classroom environment that focused on improving reading skills while aiming to develop meaningful connections to what we were reading.

As the year progressed we immersed ourselves in a variety of texts and worked on a range of reading strategies. One of our top five reading strategies had been “to relate” as in; “How can you “relate” your life and experiences (or not!) to what you are reading?” “How can you put yourself in someone else’s shoes?” I put an emphasis on “relating” because I believe if children can place themselves in the texts they read, they are more likely to comprehend more fully, in turn enhancing their reading experiences. This strategy became more significant when I began the Worlds of Words Global Literacy Communities grant project and started incorporating global titles into my classroom, because by “relating” students were encouraged to engage with people and cultures that may have previously been inaccessible.

While proficient readers ‘relate’ with greater automaticity, they frequently need support in building background knowledge when reading nonfiction. The students in the English Essentials (E.E.) class needed even greater support. This became more apparent when, towards the end of the school

year, the students in the E.E. classes joined fellow sixth graders in a six-week, grade-wide biography project. The project, originally designed by a fellow teacher for her master's program, was aligned to state reading, writing, and speech standards and involved students conducting research, writing a one page paper, presenting a speech, and creating a display board. Additionally, students participated in a grade-wide "Gallery Walk" where all sixth graders would stand alongside posters they created and converse with students, parents and community members in the cafeteria.

### Finding "Just Right" Books

Selecting a biography was the first stumbling block many of my students encountered when beginning the biography project. Our school library's biography section did not have a single biography published after the year 2001 and many of the texts were in disrepair. In addition, there were very few books written at a level accessible to students in my classes. A team of teachers, myself included, were awarded funds through a district foundation grant to supplement our aging collection of biographies with newer editions. However, I still felt the need for texts that supported emerging readers and English Language Learners and included more illustrations, background content and explanations of difficult concepts.

The World of Words grant provided an opportunity for me to collaborate with other middle and high school teachers and professors to read, gather and purchase global and multicultural biographies to supplement the resources in my school library. Our small grant group explored issues such as what 'cross cultural' meant, what is a curriculum that is international, and how to evaluate texts for cultural authenticity. This group also helped me deconstruct pedagogy ideas about what questions I could ask my students to elicit deeper thinking, and how students can build connections and relate to a person that might be far removed from their immediate, lived experiences. We discussed the idea that 'multi-cultural' might encompass biographical characters that were not only from diverse cultures, but also different eras, or a culture within a culture, or from a 'poles apart' country, or even part of a group such as 'the deaf community.'

This collection of new books was a boon for my students. While all sixth grade students went with their classes to peruse and choose a book in the library my students got to preview the WOW books and make selections from that collection before going to the library where the other biographies were on display.

### The "Global" Biography Project

To begin our inquiries, my students brainstormed their interests and who they might want to study for their project. I read aloud excerpts and projected images from a graphic biography on Satchel Paige, the great early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American pitcher. The graphic biography told how Paige struggled with not only getting to play in the Negro Leagues during his prime, but his attempts to

play in the mainstream all-white major baseball league system. We conducted a biography genre study and talked about issues such as the differences and advantages a primary account might have and showed students books by Anne Frank and books about her in the form of an authorized graphic biography, *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* (Jacobson & Colon, 2010).

Other first-hand and primary accounts we looked at included Zlata Filipovi's diary, [\*Zlata's Diary\*](#) (1994) and the inspirational speaker Mawi Asgedom's autobiography, *Of Beetles and Angels* (2002). Students particularly found his story of surviving refugee camps in Ethiopia and later attending Harvard University riveting. We also compared the saga of Claudette Colvin, a 15 year-old girl who stood up for civil rights months before Rosa Parks made her famous stand while reading *Claudette Colvin: Twice Towards Justice* (Hoose, 2009).

I'm not sure if students really understood these differences in primary vs. second-hand accounts or the distinction between the "less well-known but no less noble" people in the world. In fact, many students still reached for books with familiar people like Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Marley, Cesar Chavez, and Helen Keller. I was especially disappointed that the story of Jim Thorpe's years at Pennsylvania's Carlisle Indian School (*Jim Thorpe: Original All American*, Bruchac, 2006) and the lyrical biography of Cuban slave Juan Francisco Manzano ([\*The Poet Slave of Cuba\*](#), Engle & Qualls, 2006) were not snapped up as project subjects. Sadly, neither was the story of Mami "Peanut" Jackson who, inspired by Jackie Robinson, longed to be the first black, female professional baseball pitcher. This raised questions for me about how to invite students to read these important stories without diminishing their opportunities for choice over the texts they read.

### Reading and Presenting the Biography Studies

As I noted earlier, I saw the participation in this grade-wide project as facilitating a more authentic application of strategies we had been working on throughout the year, particularly "relating." I asked students to 'relate' to these individuals they were researching as we had practiced when reading together in class and independently. To facilitate this I invited students to share with a reading buddy why they had selected that particular person for the project. Then the partner would recall and explain their partner's choice. My thinking was that children might dig a bit deeper as they described and justified their choices to a trusted peer. I also thought students might be able to hear their own thinking more clearly as it was reflected back to them. Students had two days in which to change their biographical subject based on interest or the reading level of the book.

After selecting their biographical books, each student began reading daily during class. To keep their interest I often had a mini-assignment before reading, such as looking for the most interesting, confusing, scariest, or funniest excerpt from that day's portion. I frequently asked

students to tell how they 'related' to a particular section or how their subject's life was so different they had difficulty in 'getting' what was going on. I experimented with different lengths of time for independent reading. Sometimes I had students write a 'quick book report,' no more than two sentences, instead of always taking notes. We regularly had whole group discussions involving how their lives were similar to those of the person in the books, or what was difficult for them to believe and why?

I found that students would often 'put themselves in someone else's shoes,' but I struggled to draw out more complex responses. For example, while discussing Jackie Robinson, one student said if he was there he would 'just punch them' when a spectator stands up and spits on a player because of their skin color. I could see students 'getting' the concept of injustice, but struggling to fully understand how limited choices really are for people living in a particular time and place. To expand their perspectives I asked students to visualize the injustices they felt and experienced at the hands of other children and adults then extend those feelings to knowing that those injustices would be a permanent way of life with no hope of change. My goal was to spark empathy without promoting fear or engaging in lengthy role-playing scenarios.

My ongoing thinking was to segment and scaffold each step of the project so excitement could be maintained, preventing discouragement with the often overwhelming project. Students often lost their zeal as the challenging work of writing an essay, creating a display board, mapping out a speech then finally presenting in front of classmates played out. Some of that enthusiasm returned when they participated in a gallery walk that indicated the successful end of their hard work. Students basked in the recognition from the community at large and from students throughout the school.





## Conclusions

This experience has left me reflecting on my teaching, particularly on working with “struggling” readers. I intend to explore how to provide different expectations around text choice and frontload more ‘alternative’ biographical subjects. I’m also reflecting on the importance of literacy being in service to content, and the role of global inquiry in preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands. My goal for next year is to hopefully support students in forming deeper questions and understandings as to why we delve into biographies of the famous and “not-so-famous.” I will continue to draw on my social studies background to scaffold students in exploring complex issues of culture and diversity. The biography project in conjunction with WOW’s Global Literacy Communities affirmed for me that children have great capacity for empathy and compassion. I am eager for the coming school year to again address each child’s needs, nurture these qualities of caring for others, and develop our understandings of global concepts in an educational context.

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