

TEACHING GLOBALLY



Reading
the World
Through
Literature

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Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION



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Chapter 1

A Curriculum That Is Intercultural

Kathy G. Short

“Children today are growing up in a different world than we did” is a common refrain among adults. These words often reflect nostalgia for the “old days” when life was supposedly simpler and more straightforward. The world that children live in today is not all that different in complexity and societal issues—except that our knowledge of, and connection to, that world has changed. The fundamental change for children is that the world is visibly present in their daily lives through technology, mass media, economic interdependency, and global mobility. Even if children never leave the small communities in which they were born, their everyday lives are constantly influenced by global societies and peoples. Globalization touches every part of their daily activities and relationships.

An understanding of global cultures is thus a necessity, not a luxury. Although children can no longer decide whether they will lead global lives, the way in which they live those lives is open to question. That tension is what led us to this book and to our concern with curriculum that supports and challenges children to develop open-minded perspectives toward ways of living that differ from their own.

Global education has existed as a field of study for many years, but often as a strand within social studies or an emphasis in international schools. Explorations of global cultures and the development of intercultural understanding are increasingly essential as perspectives that weave across the curriculum. This possibility creates both tension and excitement. On one hand, teachers feel constrained by the standardization of cur-

riculum through prescriptive programs and high-stakes tests. On the other hand, the lack of existing curriculum around global issues and cultures provides a potential space for innovation. The challenge is how to locate and use that space within mandates and schedule overload. The good news is educators do not have to fight to replace an established global curriculum and can adapt response strategies to integrate a global focus into existing literacy and social studies curricula.

Although there are many possibilities for opening up global spaces, our particular interest is the integration of global children's and adolescent literature. Our goal is the use of literature to build intercultural understanding as a stance or perspective that permeates the curriculum and students' lives, not to add a new content area to a crowded curriculum. Of course, moving from beliefs and goals into actual action in classrooms is always the more difficult step, but it's one we are committed to as educators.

Our strength as educators is our knowledge of global children's and adolescent literature and our long-term involvement in bringing children and books together through dialogue and inquiry. This book grows out of putting theory into practice in classrooms around our interest in encouraging intercultural understandings through critical engagements with global literature. We wrote this book as a community who has been working together for many years through Worlds of Words, an initiative we created as a network of educators who share the vision of bringing global literature and children together to create intercultural understanding. We work together to create resources for educators on the Worlds of Words website (wowlit.org) and meet regularly face-to-face as well as online. In addition, we meet in a summer workshop to think together about an issue of common concern around global literature. We wrote this book as a community who think and work together across diverse contexts.

This chapter contextualizes the classroom inquiries shared in this book through a discussion of global literature and intercultural understanding and an introduction to the curriculum framework around which we organize our work in classrooms.

Building Bridges Across Cultures Through Literature

One important resource for building bridges across cultures is global children's literature. Literature provides an opportunity for children to go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface-level information about another culture. Because literature expands children's life spaces, they travel outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living to participate in alternative ways of being in the world. Readers

are invited to immerse themselves into story worlds to gain insights about how people around the world live, feel, and think—to develop emotional connections and empathy as well as knowledge. These connections go beyond the surface knowledge of celebrations, food, and facts about a country to the values and beliefs that lie at the core of each culture. Readers also go beyond the mass media emphasis on catastrophe, terrorism, and war that often results in superficial views, fear, and stereotypes.

Our goal in integrating global literature into classrooms is to challenge students to understand and accept those different from themselves, thus breaking cycles of oppression and prejudice between diverse cultures. As students read these books, they come to recognize the common feelings and needs they share with children around the world, as well as to value the unique differences each culture adds to the richness of our world. Through reading books from global cultures, students come to know their own cultures as well as the world beyond their homes. They see how people of the world view themselves, not just how we view them.

We use the term *global literature* to refer to any book that is set in a global context outside the reader's own global location, which for most of us means the United States (except for Wen-Yun Lin, for whom any book outside of Taiwan is global). For those of us from the United States, global literature includes books authored by Americans and by insiders to a global culture. We recognize that this definition needs to remain flexible based on how readers define their cultural location, not how we define them; for example, children who are recent immigrants to the United States may have a primary affiliation with their home country and so see US books as global literature or see themselves as binational with both the United States and their home country as their cultural location and any other location as global.

One type of global literature is *international literature*, books that were first written and published in another country for the children of that country before being published in the United States. International books include those from English-speaking countries, such as the Harry Potter series, and books that are translated before being published in the United States. *Multicultural literature* refers to books that highlight the lives of people from marginalized and underrepresented groups within the United States.

Issues of Availability and Authenticity

Although global literature has always been present through well-loved characters, such as Heidi and Pippi Longstocking, their numbers were so small that they had little in-

fluence. For years, many global books were so-called “travel books,” books written by Americans who traveled to a country for several weeks, and so were often superficial stereotyped representations of those cultures. This context is quickly changing as increasing numbers of authentic books from global cultures are distributed and published in North America.

Despite recent increases in the amount of global literature, these books are still a small minority of the total books being published for children in the United States. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center documents children’s books about characters of color published each year in the United States. The CCBC (2015) found that out of 3,500 children’s books published in 2014, only 11 percent were about multicultural or global characters of color. Only 1–2 percent of the children’s books available in the United States each year are translated books, because many international books come from English-speaking countries, especially the United Kingdom and Australia. So, although books are available, they remain such a small portion of the total number of books published that educators need to prioritize them or their classroom and library collections will not reflect global diversity. Appendices A and B list the award lists, websites, and resources we have found helpful in locating global literature and other global resources.

Once a book has been located, another issue is evaluating cultural accuracy, authenticity, and representation. *Accuracy* refers to the details of everyday life and language portrayed in the text and illustrations, and *authenticity* refers to the extent to which a book reflects the core values and beliefs at the heart of a cultural group. *Representation* examines the relationship of an individual book to images of a specific culture within a collection of books, such as whether particular images are over- or underrepresented. Picturebooks on Mexico, for example, overwhelmingly depict rural life and small villages rather than urban cities. Another example is that the genres of folklore and historical fiction dominate the books available in the United States for most global cultures, leading to misperceptions of those cultures as set back in time.

Educators often feel uncomfortable evaluating books from unfamiliar cultures, but there are resources available, including the review sites and questions to ask in considering authenticity noted in Appendix C. We have found it particularly helpful to research the backgrounds of authors, illustrators, and translators to determine their relationship to the content of a book. Given the many resources available online, we often find information on author websites, interviews, and videos in which they talk about their lives and the stories behind specific books. Translators are the most difficult to locate information

on. We check the book jacket and author notes or acknowledgments for information on research processes and sources. In addition, we examine the copyright information to find out where and when a book was initially published.

Our purpose in engaging in this research is to determine the questions we want to ask as readers in interacting with children around a book. We are not trying to make a yes/no decision about whether a book is authentic, because there are always multiple perspectives and issues. We want to raise questions about issues of accuracy, authenticity, or representation for discussion, not remove the book from student use. Books reflect societal perceptions and biases, and so discussing issues within these texts supports critique of societal issues. Sometimes the questions we raise are not ones that we can answer, because we lack background knowledge on a culture, but raising the question is a first step and can help in developing a critical lens for reading global literature as well as lead to further inquiry.

For us, cultural authenticity refers to the responsibilities of both readers and authors. Typically, discussions of authenticity have focused on the text and the responsibilities of authors in writing texts that are culturally accurate, authentic, and representative. We do need to ask difficult questions about the text as readers, but we are also responsible for asking those same questions about the cultural match between our responses and the text. The responsibilities of readers are discussed in greater depth by Holly Johnson in Chapter 2, and questions related to both author and reader responsibility are included in Appendix C.

The issues of availability, access, and authenticity can feel overwhelming to educators who want to integrate more global literature into classrooms and libraries. Initially, many of these obstacles seem insurmountable, but our belief in the powerful role that literature can play in creating intercultural understanding helps us persevere. Over time, we have located a range of useful resources and developed other resources through our work with Worlds of Words. We created the following online resources at wowlit.org:

- *WOW Books*: A database, searchable by geographical region, genre, age, theme, author, illustrator, and so on along with My Take/Your Take Dialogues highlighting different perspectives on a book
- *WOW Review*: An online journal of reviews of culturally diverse children's and adolescent literature that include comments on content, themes, and authenticity