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Looking Back - Looking Ahead

Clara Beier and Mira Berkley, SUNY-Fredonia

As the new co-editors for the *Language and Literacy Spectrum*, we are pleased to present the fifteenth edition. While we look back on our first year as editors and the many positive interactions we had with the contributing authors, we also find “historical significance” in this year’s celebration of the International Reading Association’s half-century mark. Our role as editors and as members of IRA, provides us with an opportunity to honor the many ways in which children, classroom teachers, teacher educators, and parents have contributed to the growing understanding of literacy. In addition, we also realize that there has probably never been a time in the history of the IRA that literacy has played, or been placed in, such a prominent role in the national agenda. Therefore, we hope you will find that the articles in this issue engage you in the process of “looking back” on your practice and “looking ahead” to the future.

As you read each of the articles, you will find that the central themes pertain to literature, culture, and identity. In *Focus on Practice*, Nora Jachym Brakas and Sally Pittman-Smith invite us to use their web site and technology to analyze children's literature and "cultural voices." Frank Serafina asks us to "re-conceptualize" literature study groups thereby enabling readers to delve more deeply into their books. Sharon de Beck reviews the three books authored by Christopher Paul Curtis and offers practical strategies for using them in classrooms. In addition, Cindy Bird raises issues related to culture and identity and reminds us of the varied meanings of literacy as we "stand in our classroom doorways" where multiple cultures meet.

The section, *Focus on Professional Development*, also includes articles on literature, culture, and identity. Rita Moore and Vicki Seeger encourage us to reflect on our practices and reconsider home and school literacies. Brett Blake and Richard Sinatra once again (as Sinatra did last year) share their experiences with the 6Rs approach, but, in addition, also share how students can become critical writers. Two articles present us with new children’s and young adult literature. *Book Banter*, written by Alice Sample, includes this year’s selections recommended by The Children’s Literature Committee. In addition, Wendy McLeish reviews a number of books for pre-kindergarten through middle school students.

We invite you to “look ahead” in another way and play an active role in the future of the New York State Reading Association by either joining the review board for the *Language and Literacy Spectrum* or by submitting a manuscript for the sixteenth edition which will be published next year. Information pertaining to both can be located at the New York State Reading Association web site located at www.nysreading.org or by contacting us (Mira Berkley and Clara Beier) at berkleym@fredonia.edu or clara.beier@fredonia.edu



The Cultural Voices of Children's Literature: Web Site Supported Instruction to Unify Theme and Content for Curricular Applications

Nora Jachym Brakas and Sally Pittman-Smith

ABSTRACT

We present a fundamentally new coding procedure and a two-dimensional Curriculum Tool that reclassifies culturally diverse storybooks for the purpose of teaching cultural understanding. The reclassification results in 9 *cultural voices* - the joining of a book theme and its complexity of cultural content - used as the basis of various teaching approaches linked to the National Standards for the Social Studies and the English Language Arts. Using a formal content analysis, 85 books were analyzed, coded and categorized. Our web site, www.academic.marist.edu/culturalvoices, complements our work and was designed for professional growth and collaboration.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nora Jachym Brakas, Assistant Professor, and Sally Pittman-Smith, Lecturer, teach Literacy Education at Marist College, New York. Nora's research interests include using children's literature as instructional materials for cross-curricular applications. Sally is interested in studying perspectives about historical figures and events from culturally diverse points of view.

Part 1

The interest we developed in culturally diverse children's literature stems from our experiences as classroom teachers and now as professors of teacher education. Teaching both at the elementary and college level enabled us to see the importance of using children's literature to teach the history, values, attitudes, beliefs and customs of different cultures. We saw culturally diverse children's literature as a means to help students make personal connections to the world, relate situations to their own lives, and take a broader view of the world, one that goes beyond their own experiences. Furthermore, we saw the literature as a way to help children develop an understanding of cultures, recognize our common humanity, celebrate our differences, and foster development of social values (Bishop, 1992).

We certainly recognized the educational value of culturally diverse children's literature, appreciated its aesthetics, and frequently used it instructionally. However, after considerable reflection, we gradually became dissatisfied with the way we were using the literature. We felt our teaching approaches tended to be amorphous, without clear structure, and therefore lacked a clear purpose.

This paper and its accompanying web site are the result of a desire to help elementary school teachers, pre-service teachers, and ourselves develop a systematic approach that maps out how one can meet the intended goals of teaching for diversity. To address this problem, we created a coding procedure that reclassifies children's literature and a new Curriculum Tool that is the basis for a variety of useful curricular approaches. In creating the Curriculum Tool and web site, we used what we found in the professional literature and built on it.

Our research revealed college-level textbooks, anthologies of children's literature and articles in research journals often classify children's culturally diverse literature by using one or more of the following mostly one-dimensional organizational patterns.



- Major character attributes. Books are often categorized by the main character's ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender, geographic, or regional culture (Ada, 2003; Au, 1993; Day, 1994; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Galda, & Cullinan, 2002; Goforth, 1998; Lindgren, 1991; Norton, 1999; Pang, Colvin, Tran & Barba, 1992; Pratt & Beaty, 1999; Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994; Russell, 1994; Smolen & Ortiz-Castro, 2000).
- Book genre. Authors frequently grouped readings by class such as modern fiction, realistic fiction, biography and folktales (Bishop, 1992; Hillman, 1999; Sutherland, 1996).
- Thematic topics. Books are sometimes clustered by categories such as friendship, celebrations, war stories, and dance (Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association, 2001; Goforth, 1998; Pratt & Beaty, 1999; Whittake, Salend & Gutierrez, 1997).

We found that literature grouped by patterns are either listed simply by title or described in annotated bibliographies. The bibliographies are not, however, always equal in content. Some give a summary while others, like Pratt and Beaty (1999), analyze the books based on a paradigm. Theirs includes geographic location, and three specific systems, economic, social, and political.

Professional resources also offer checklists and guidelines, some short, some long, to help teachers select reading materials and avoid the pit falls of choosing and using unsuitable literature (Diamond & Moore, 1995; Galda & Cullinan, 2002; Harris, 1996; Norton, 1999; Opitz, 1998-1999; Pratt & Beaty, 1999; Smolen & Ortiz-Castro, 2000). We considered some more helpful than others. We especially liked Cooper's (2000). He recommends that teachers consider four variables when selecting a book (a) its developmental appropriateness, (b) student appeal, (c) literary quality, and (d) cultural and social authenticity.

The Theory Behind the Curriculum Tool

As we sought to grow in our understanding of teaching for diversity through storybooks, we found professional classification systems and selection guidelines a good and necessary place to start when thinking about and choosing books. However, we also realized these systems were not providing us with the cultural information we hoped to find.

- We wanted to find books with identifiable themes, either explicitly or implicitly stated, that relate to teaching for diversity.
- Additionally, we wanted to know the depth, or complexity, of the book's cultural content.

Since this information was not readily available in the literature, we decided to create a process and product that would specifically address our concerns.

Looking at Theme

We recognize the problems concerning book theme.

Theme as an element of literature is a controversial issue. For instance, some writers claim that their stories do not have a theme. Others make no claim one way or another. Also, theme can be difficult to identify and may be open to substantially different interpretations. (Cramer, 2004, p. 218)

Nevertheless, we do know, as Cramer (2004) states, that children's storybooks are often written to teach youngsters about people's lives and about our common humanity, and these lessons can be conveyed through a book's theme. Galda and Cullinan (2002) state that "Often the theme is the reason authors write in the first place: A story allows them to say what they want to say" (p. 9). Furthermore, we



know that book ancillary information such as an author's note, a preface or an afterword can often clarify the writer's purpose. Nodelman (1996) wrote that a book's theme is "[t]he central idea of the text; the core of meaning that ties it together" (p. 299). We consider the book's overall theme and how it relates to teaching for diversity as the very core and essence of a culturally diverse book.

We know that humans are bound together by universal characteristics; we have the capacity to feel and think; we have the ability to read; we have moral indignation; we grow in our understanding; and we experience pleasure and sorrow. We know we must have this common humanity in order for the concept of "variations" to exist between and among groups of people, as indeed they do. It is this idea of variations that allows us to group all cultures under the umbrella of one major group, humankind. Culturally specific groupings can and have been classified in many different ways. A few examples of these groupings that interest us are those that cluster people by their common regional culture, ethnicity, family structure or religion.

We know books based on a central unifying idea may be written to teach about certain characteristics shared by all humans. Themes such as these are often called, universal. Universal themes include ideas such as personal development, overcoming fears and the need for security. Folktales, fairytales, and fables are known for having universal themes. For instance, *The Egyptian Cinderella*, by Shirley Climo (1989) teaches that good behavior and patience can be rewarded, a theme universal to humanity. Universal themes afford teachers opportunities to discuss with children the characteristics that link people together. Discussions that highlight these aspects are, we believe, a very important part of cultural understanding.

Books can also express themes that are culturally specific. This theme type emphasizes such concepts as beliefs, values, practices and situations that are unique to one, or more than one given culture. For example, the book *Baboushka and the Three Kings*, by Ruth Robbins (1960) has a culturally specific theme that evolved from a Christmas story unique to the Russian Orthodox religion.

Teachers can open discussions about the differences between and the uniqueness of specific cultures by studying books with culturally specific themes. By doing so, instruction can help students understand and perhaps appreciate why and how cultures outside their own may behave and believe differently than they themselves do. Discussions highlighting differences between and among cultures are another important aspect of cultural understanding.

Assuming that the author is successful in writing a clear complete story with an identifiable theme, either explicitly or implicitly stated, the next issue becomes, how will children recognize the author's purpose? We will deal with this through the idea of social construction of knowledge. Readers comprehend text by activating their schema (Anderson, 1994; Rumelhart, 1981) and/or by teachers helping to build schema relevant to the material being read (Bransford, 1994). Schema effects comprehension and individuals bring differing schema to the same reading situation (Anderson, 1994; Bransford, 1994). Readers construct meaning by bridging background knowledge with book content. Importantly, text variables such as concept density, genre, syntax, and abstract ideas influence this construction, as do reader variables like background knowledge and experiences, cognitive development and skills, and beliefs and customs.

Although we know that some authors do write with particular themes in mind, we recognize that interpretation of themes can and will vary among readers (Anderson, 1994; Galda & Cullinan, 2002), and these variations can be minor to major. Differing interpretations would be minor and well-grounded if teachers ensure the following: the story has an identifiable theme, the book is at a comfortable reading level, and the reader has the appropriate anticipatory set. Indeed, all aspects of best practices for reading



instruction should be implemented (see Reutzel & Cooter, 2004).

Given the same assumption about the author's success in writing and the learner's success in reading, if a child's interpretation differs radically from the author's intent then one must consider if it is a well-grounded interpretation. Can we reasonably say that any interpretation of the story by a child is equally sound? If the interpretation is significantly different, based let us say, on an accurate culturally influenced schema, then we could consider the interpretation sound. If this is the case, we see this as a splendid opportunity to help a child accommodate and assimilate new understandings into existing schema. This can be accomplished by helping the reader understand the theme from someone else's point of view. This does not mean that the student will agree or should agree with the theme, like the theme, or live according to the theme. It does mean, however, in any of the above cases that teachers can use the themes of storybooks to teach cultural understanding. However, if the construct of the interpretation is based on an inaccurate or naïve schema, then the interpretation could be considered insufficiently grounded. If this is the case, it is a wonderful opportunity to help children correct misconceptions, add missing concepts and perhaps build a more sophisticated schema.

Let us look at *A Letter to Amy*, by Ezra Jack Keats (1968) to illustrate the points we made above. The following is a summary.

Peter, a very young boy, is about to have a birthday party and wishes to invite his special friend Amy. Although he is concerned about what the boys at his party will think, he does write her an invitation. While he is trying to secretly mail the invitation, he accidentally bumps into Amy and makes her cry and run away. This worries him because he fears she will not come to his party. Amy does eventually come to his otherwise all-boy-party, and one of the boys greets her rudely. Regardless, Peter is very happy to see her and kindly invites her in.

We see the theme of Keats's book as it takes courage to have a friend not readily accepted by others.

Let us say, for example that a second grader interprets the theme as, a silly boy named Peter invites a girl to his birthday party. This could be a well-grounded or insufficiently grounded interpretation of the story depending on the reader. If a child comes from a culture that regularly practices the separation of sexes at certain social events, and has a strong understanding of this cultural practice, then the interpretation could be considered sound. On the other hand, if the child comes up with the same interpretation due not to his or her culture, but to a naïve or inaccurate schema, then the interpretation could be considered insufficiently grounded. An inaccurate and naïve schema might be one that says that boys should play with boys and girls should play with girls. You have to really look at why children interpret as they do; students need to explain their thinking before a teacher can determine the soundness of each response.

In essence, book themes can hold a natural connection to teaching for diversity when the author is successful at illustrating that which is common between and among groups and that which is special in the life and society of a culture. Teachers who use best teaching practices can guide children to making well-grounded interpretations. If interpretations do vary, instruction can focus on expanding or altering cultural schemata. The theme is the book's core and therefore, became an important variable we considered when developing our Curriculum Tool.

Looking at Level of Cultural Content

Banks (1989, 1994-1995), a well recognized researcher and proponent of multicultural reform, presented a curriculum framework including different levels of cultural understanding. These levels, he



stated, form a hierarchy of learning. They include the knowledge, empathy and decision making skills needed to develop and foster one of the basic goals of multicultural education – presenting all children with equal opportunities to learn about themselves and others (Banks, 1994-1995; Banks, Cortés, Gay, Garcia, & Ochoa, 1994; Campbell, 1996; Davidman & Davidman, 2001).

Banks's framework (1989) consists of four levels that can be mixed and blended when developing a curriculum. He explained the four approaches of curricular reform as follows:

- The Contributions Approach. Where “[h]eroes, cultural components, holidays, and other discrete elements related to ethnic groups are added to the curriculum on special days, occasions, and celebrations” (p. 201).
- The Additive Approach. Where “... the addition of content, concepts, themes, and perspectives [are added to] the curriculum without changing its structure” (p. 201).
- The Transformation Approach. Where “[t]he basic goals, structure, and nature of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, events, issues, problems, and themes from the perspectives of diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial groups” (p. 201-202).
- The Decision Making and Social Action Approach. Where “...students identify important social problems and issues, gather pertinent data, clarify their values on the issue, make decisions, and take reflective actions to help resolve the issue or problem” (p. 202).

Working from Banks's framework, Bieger (1995-1996) illustrated how books, and sometimes the same book, can be used to teach cultural content and concepts at one, or more than one of the four levels of multicultural understanding. Bieger's work catalyzed our thinking, helping us envision how Banks's framework would be instrumental in helping us identify the depth or complexity of a book's cultural content. By analyzing literature with which we were familiar, we found we too could identify levels. We decided we would employ a hierarchy very similar to that of Banks (1989) to identify the cultural content in a book.

We saw the Contributions Approach and the Additive Approach as similar in that they basically focus on cultural facts. We felt that in applying this idea to storybook content, the two categories could be combined and simply renamed as *Contributions or Additive*. This category would describe books having content with cultural facts only and would be considered the foundation level of our hierarchy. By studying the facts presented in books, teachers could help children add information to their existing knowledge base, clarifying or expanding their understanding. Also, when appropriate, we pictured instructors helping students develop metacognitive reading strategies by teaching them how to identify the nature of their learning. Students can be taught to ask themselves, “Am I learning facts?”

We saw books at the *Transformation* level as those including ideas more complex than facts. These books would depict events or beliefs from different cultural perspectives. Content reflecting this level could help students develop understanding, appreciation and empathy of others. For students who are developmentally ready, teachers could foster metacognition by encouraging learners to ask themselves the following two questions: “Am I looking through the eyes of others?” “Have I read or seen why a specific culture or many cultures behave or believe as they do?”

Social Action would describe books with the most complex cultural content. Books including this material would present readers with realistic social issues, problems and solutions that can fall anywhere on a continuum between minor or major concerns. Reading this type of book could enhance students' critical thinking, problem solving and decision making skills on the personal and societal levels. Books such as these can help learners answer the question, “Am I seeing how people think about and solve realistic problems?”



In essence, we have described the foundational principles on which our Curriculum Tool is based. It is a 3 by 3 matrix with one axis describing **Book Theme** and the other the **Level of Cultural Content**. Each of the 9 cells within the matrix categorizes the theme of a story, its main cultural content, and the cultural content's degree of complexity. We call each cell a *cultural voice*. That is, *Cultural Voice = Theme + Cultural Content*. *Cultural voices* are used to guide and plan instruction. (A detailed account of the Curriculum Tool is provided further along in our work.)

Developing an Operational Definition for Selecting Culturally Diverse Books

Before we could code culturally diverse storybooks, we needed to develop an operational definition for selecting them. We knew readings that look at North American parallel cultures are commonly called multicultural literature, and transcultural books (Pratt & Beaty, 1999) and international books are the ones that look at cultures outside the United States. We believe that culturally diverse literature includes these two types and more. Our feeling is that books written about people, their ideas, values, or practices anywhere outside the reader's own experiences can be considered culturally diverse. Additionally, we believe culturally diverse readings include cultures that have been historically excluded, underrepresented or misrepresented in children's literature once used in schools (Diamond & Moore, 1995; Diaz, 2001; Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002). We feel this broader scope affords the reader a wider range of choices to develop a deeper understanding of humanity. In essence, the literature we consider as culturally diverse includes North American parallel cultures, international cultures, and historically underrepresented or misrepresented cultures.

Our view of culturally diverse literature is not only broad in scope, it is personally flexible and, therefore, can be altered to fit the needs of any child's background. We believe that in identifying a culturally diverse paradigm the reader's perspective, based upon cultural background, is fundamental. Teachers need to choose books outside their own personal experiences and those of their students (Davidman & Davidman, 2001; Galda & Cullinan, 2002).

Based on *our* definition, the literature paradigm below represents one possible paradigm, *our* paradigm, and one that should be changed and modified based on the cultural background of the user. (Changes in the paradigm do not effect our Coding Directions or Curriculum Tool. These are two core elements of our project that will be explained in depth later.)

Considering the definitions of various authorities (Davidman & Davidman, 2001; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Grant & Gomez, 1996; Tunnell & Jacobs, 2000) and our own cultural backgrounds, we selected the following ten groups -- their beliefs, attitudes, customs and values -- to represent our literature paradigm:

- The culture of groups living in the United States other than those typically and historically represented as the "idealized American macro culture".
- The culture of groups outside the United States other than Western European (see Pratt and Beaty, 1999, for a list of Western European countries).
- The culture of religious groups other than major Protestant groups and Roman Catholic.
- The culture of regional groups, such as mountain cultures (e.g., southeast Appalachian), river cultures (e.g., the Louisiana bayou Cajuns) and the culture of the rain forest (e.g., the Amazon rain forest).
- The culture of exceptionality, the gifted and the physically and mentally challenged.
- The culture of low socioeconomic status, those people living near, at or below the poverty



level relevant to the time of the story, its setting and the particular culture depicted (e.g., migrant workers and their children, people sponsored by other families, minimum wage earners, welfare recipients, and share croppers).

- The culture of families other than the traditional ‘nuclear’ family (e.g., single parent, guardian, multi-racial, multi-generational, same sex, blended, adoptive).
- The culture of females, those demonstrating strong or independent roles, or participating in activities that reflect new career avenues (e.g., problem-solvers, leaders, carpenters, plumbers, scientists, inventors).
- The culture of elders, those people two or more generations older than the main character(s) in the book.
- The culture of groups in crisis (e.g., those confronted with war, natural disaster, fatal illness, homelessness and famine).

Using the above-described paradigm, and the previously mentioned checklists and guidelines (e.g., Cooper, 2000), we selected 85 well-written children’s books with identifiable themes. Some readings were recommended by a school librarian, some by experienced elementary school teachers, and some personally selected. The books represent a variety of genres and a wide range of developmental levels. The list includes picture books (books where the pictures tell much of the story and the text is limited), picture storybooks (books having very descriptive pictures and comprehensive text), collections of poems, and easy chapter books. Some are award winners, others are not, some are new, others are not, some are well known and others are relatively obscure. Depending on the teacher’s objective and the developmental level of the child, books may be used for a read-aloud, a directed reading lesson or independent reading.

We know there are conflicting perspectives concerning authorship and the “authenticity” of cultural content included in books (Harris, 1996). Some people believe that authenticity can only be achieved from an insider’s perspective. Others believe that good culturally diverse literature can be written by people inside or outside the culture presented in the book. The key, we believe, is proper in-depth and accurate research. The literature we selected reflects the latter belief.

The Web Site

We invite you, at this juncture, to spend some time visiting our web site at www.academic.marist.edu/culturalvoices. A visit will help you become familiar with and quickly access materials that we refer to in the rest of this article. All the information can be found in the category, “Downloads” (listed on the left hand side of each page) and can be printed easily. Before continuing to read, if you prefer to look at hard copies, we recommend that you print out all Downloads. If you would rather not, you can use the zoom feature to enlarge any or all of the documents. You may especially want to do this to read the Curriculum Tool.

Research Method: The Formal Content Analysis

We used a formal content analysis (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980) to systematically and objectively code the 85 culturally diverse books comprising our sample. The process required working back and forth among four sources, the (a) Coding Directions (see Downloads), (b) Coding Chart (see Downloads), (c) book content, and (d) Curriculum Tool (see Downloads).



As we developed the Coding Directions, we revised, deleted or added information to any or all portions of the directions as new characteristics of books were discovered. For example, when a definition in the Coding Directions was found to be troublesome, unclear or limiting, we redefined it and then carefully re-coded all the books again based on the new definition. If needed the Coding Chart and the Curriculum Tool were altered in accordance with the newly defined term.

As the coding process became more precise, it was easier for us to agree when collecting the data. We continued collecting it until 100% agreement was reached. Verification of the coding was completed a second time a year later.

The Curriculum Tool and Coding Process

In order for others to use our coding system, it is important to understand how descriptors, categories and subcategories emerged, what they mean, and how one can apply this understanding to the process of coding books that fit their own literature paradigm. The following sections explain in depth the Curriculum Tool and coding process.

The Concept Map illustrates two target descriptors, their respective categories and subcategories. It is the basic outline upon which the Curriculum Tool is structured and can be downloaded from the web site.

The Curriculum Tool with the results of our completed analysis can also be found in Downloads. It is a matrix of 9 cells that unites the two descriptors **Book's Theme** (vertical axis) and **Level of Cultural Content** (horizontal axis). As can be seen, each of the 85 books is placed in one of the 9 cells, each cell describing the book's *cultural voice*. (The parenthetical information following each book title will be explained further along in the paper.)

A Major Descriptor: Book Theme

The **Book Theme**, one major descriptor of the Curriculum Tool, consists of two main categories, one called *Universal* the other called *Culturally Specific*. These two main categories were developed as separate and equal entities; they were not considered a hierarchy. The main category, *Culturally Specific* was further divided into two subcategories, one titled *One Culture* and the other titled *Two or More Cultures Interacting*.

To determine the **Book Theme**, we considered two literary elements. The first was the author's overall message, the purpose for writing the book. To do this, we relied more heavily on the text than the artwork. We carefully studied the story itself and any and all prefaces, afterwords, or author's notes. We concentrated more on the text and ancillaries because we found that artwork could be misleading when one is trying to determine the theme. We found that culturally specific pictures do not necessarily indicate a culturally specific theme. For instance, *The Paperboy* by Dav Pilkey (1996) is a book about an African-American boy with a *Universal* theme not a *Culturally Specific* one. In general, we looked for what the author conveyed about society, individuals, living, and the meaning of one's humanity.

We wrote the theme as one declarative sentence. As often as possible we tried to lead with words that described the didactic purpose of the book. For example, words like sharing, determination, perseverance, greed and ignorance were used.

The second aspect we considered when determining **Book Theme** was whether the theme was *Universal* or *Culturally Specific*. The category *Universal* defines books with themes that transcend



diversity. Rather than dealing with differences, these books deal with similarities between and among people. Core values, virtues, vices, foibles and struggles shared by humanity are emphasized. Books with *Universal* themes could focus on honesty, loyalty, greed, ignorance and peer pressure.

We defined the category *Culturally Specific* as books with themes that reflect specific cultural beliefs, values, practices or situations. This category is further divided into the two subcategories, books about *One Culture* or those about *Two or More Cultures Interacting*. A book coded as presenting *One Culture* focuses on the beliefs, practices, language, and history of a single culture. A book coded with a theme presenting *Two or More Cultures Interacting* emphasizes one culture interacting with any other culture as an integral part of the story. Here, the key is the relationship between and among cultures.

A Major Descriptor: Level of Cultural Content

Level of Cultural Content, our second major Curriculum Tool descriptor, consists of three main categories, the first *Contributions or Additive*, the second *Transformation*, and the third *Social Action*. These categories were adapted from Banks's (1989) levels of multicultural understanding and unlike the descriptor **Book Theme** form a hierarchy.

The foundation level of the hierarchy is *Contributions or Additive*. This level defines books that present the reader with no more than facts about one culture or many cultures. This is evident when one reads about and sees the customs, languages, traditions, celebrations, foods, clothing and practices of a culture or cultures. To create this level, we combined Banks's two levels -- The Contributions Approach and The Additive Approach -- since we see both approaches as presenting information that adds to knowledge, giving one the basis to develop understanding.

Transformation, the middle level, defines books that present content from an insider's viewpoint, regardless of whether the author is of the insider's culture. The content must include (a) why a culture behaves or believes as it does, and/or (b) how a member of a culture views specific situations or issues. An example of a book at this level is one whose cultural content affords the reader the opportunity to react in a cognitive and affective way to its content. The content may help students develop understanding, appreciation and empathy for others. Books coded at this level may suggest or mention a social problem, however, taking action or suggesting ways to resolve it are not included. An example of a book coded at this level is one with content that emphasizes why some Native Americans value dreamcatchers.

The most complex level, *Social Action*, includes books with content that presents the reader with realistic social issues, problems and solutions. These can fall anywhere on a continuum from minor concerns to major ones. Furthermore, characters can resolve issues internally or externally. For example, discovering personal enjoyment of life or self-reliance may resolve a problem, or receiving family support or help from others may do the same. Like the *Transformation Level*, this level utilizes both the cognitive and affective domains. *Social Action*, however, requires higher order thinking in both domains. We see this level as enhancing critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills at the societal or personal levels.

Nine cultural voices

Uniting **Book Theme** with **Cultural Content** creates *cultural voice*. Each cell on the Curriculum Tool represents one of 9 discrete *cultural voices*. After analysis, a book is recognized as having one of the 9 *cultural voices* and is placed in a cell accordingly. This gives an immediate concrete picture of how a



book relates to teaching for cultural diversity and the complexity of the book's content. This information can then be used in planning for social studies and for the teaching of language arts.

Parenthetical information on the Curriculum Tool

The parenthetical information following each book title on the Curriculum Tool includes the culture(s) represented in the book and then the historical significance of the Book's Theme. The cultures make up our literature paradigm. They are included to help with curricular decisions so teachers can plan units, if they want to, around specific cultures. The ones included on the Curriculum Tool are not all inclusive.

Although the idea of historical significance is not an integral part of the coding system and the Curriculum Tool, we included it as an option in our coding scheme for those who find historical content valuable in making curricular choices. We felt that its inclusion should help teachers select historical materials that depict events from diverse perspectives. A historically significant **Book Theme** describes an event or events, or a person or people, who significantly changed the political, social or economic lives of a given group of people.

The Coding of Mrs. Katz and Tush

Once one has an understanding of the foundational principles of the Curriculum Tool, it is then possible to apply this knowledge to coding a book. We chose *Mrs. Katz and Tush*, a book by Patricia Polacco (1992) to illustrate the coding process. Below we provide a summary.

Mrs. Katz, a Polish- Jewish elderly woman, lives in the same neighborhood as Larnel, a young African-American boy. Mrs. Katz is lonely and widowed. Larnel brings her a cat to keep her company. Mrs. Katz will gladly take the cat, which she names Tush, but only if Larnel helps her care for it. The three happily spend time together. Mrs. Katz finds comfort sharing her life stories and her customs with Larnel. As time passes they grow to love each other and become part of each other's 'family'. Eventually, she is laid to rest with Larnel performing part of the Kaddish.

The completed Coding Chart for *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) can be found in Downloads along with the Coding Directions. The Coding Chart consists of 6 columns, each having a name in bold print. The six step coding procedure for the book is explained below.

Step 1. We entered the title, author and illustrator of the **Book** in the first column.

Step 2. We carefully read the book a number of times, including any prefaces, afterwords and/or author's notes. Then, we asked ourselves, how we might state the theme in a declarative sentence. For *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) we entered the **Overall Theme** as, "When an elder and child reach out to each other their lives can be enriched in many ways".

Step 3. We analyzed the **Overall Theme** to determine the **Coded Theme**. The inclusion of the word "elder" in our **Overall Theme** indicated the theme was *Culturally Specific*, not *Universal*, because the culture of elders is one of the cultural categories in our literature paradigm. Furthermore, the idea of an elder and a child reaching out to one another suggested *Two or More Cultures Interacting*. These terms were recorded in the appropriate column titled **Coded Theme**. Additionally, we coded the book as not historically significant because the **Theme** does not deal with historically significant content although the book contains some historical facts.

Step 4. We reread the book with a different focus. This time we looked for the **Cultural Content**.



Since a book may contain more than one level, we referred to our focusing questions and definitions (see, Downloads, The Coding Directions) to categorize the content. This process helped us group the cultural content by levels. We summarized the information starting with top-level content and finishing with foundation level information. For *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) we wrote the following, “We learn about a young African-American boy befriending a lonely elderly woman of Polish and Jewish heritage and how their relationship changes both their lives”. They eventually become “family” (*Social Action*). We also see through Mrs. Katz’ eyes why some Jewish customs are followed (*Transformation*). We hear some Yiddish words and phrases (*Contributions or Additive*).

Step 5. We next entered the highest level of **Coded Cultural Content**. We concluded that this was *Social Action*. We say this because the phrase, a young African-American boy befriending a lonely elderly woman, indicates a realistic social issue -- the isolation of some elders -- and a social action, “befriending.”

Step 6. As a final step, we listed and entered the **Culture(s) Included in the Book** based on our literature paradigm. This story includes a smorgasbord of cultures. Mrs. Katz is an elder. She is also a female of Polish-Jewish heritage, and Larnel is an African-American boy.

The Curriculum Tool, shows *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) coded with a **Book Theme** of *Culturally Specific, Two or More Cultures Interacting* and a **Level of Cultural Content** as *Social Action*. Furthermore, included parenthetically are the cultures represented in the book and the theme’s historical label. We now know the book’s *cultural voice*. It is classified in a new way and can be used in a variety of curricular approaches.

Conclusion

The *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) example illustrates our coding process along with how the Curriculum Tool works. Before we developed this process we might have looked at *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) as a touching story about an African-American boy and an elder, a Polish-Jewish woman. We might have used the book because the characters are multicultural and it contains information that might be useful teaching Jewish traditions. Now, however, after using the new coding system, we see the story in much more depth and with much more clarity. We see that it contains layers of cultural content, not just facts, and has a theme highlighting intercultural relationships. This broadens and enhances the curricular possibilities for *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992). In Part 2, we discuss some ways the book can be used to teach cultural understanding.

Before discussing these applications, we invite you to once again visit our web site at www.academic.marist.edu/culturalvoices. Try coding several of the books that we have coded and compare your results with ours. To be consistent, follow the Coding Directions very carefully. This practice should allow you to become familiar and comfortable with the coding process. Then, try using our system to analyze some of your own favorites. Record the books on your working Curriculum Tool to identify each book’s *cultural voice* and perhaps think about how your understanding of the book may have changed. If you like, submit a book to us of which you are particularly fond (see “Book Submission”). Once you are comfortable with the coding system, you might want to think about how you can establish curricular approaches. We visit this issue next.



Part 2

Curricular Approaches

Using the Curriculum Tool and Web Site to Create Concept-Centered Units

The designs inherent in our Curriculum Tool and web site lend themselves readily to many ways of planning and are reference tools. We will present several avenues you can follow in developing curriculum. There are, however, many more than the ones described here and we encourage you to create your own once you become comfortable with the process.

The following examples of concept-centered units are **Theme** based. To begin, you could simply focus on the concept *Universal* or the concept *Culturally Specific*. The Curriculum Tool clearly identifies books reflecting either idea. Three *cultural voices* are found within each concept with a wide range of content complexity. Doing a search on the web site will provide detailed analysis of each book.

However, perhaps you would want to plan a unit that studies more closely a specific concept subsumed under one **Theme** type. Let us look at how this can be done. Importantly, you need to keep in mind that the examples below were sorted by keying in words in “Overall Theme” found in Book Search on our web site.

A commonly held goal of teaching for diversity is to experience how we connect to one another, that is, learning about our common humanity (Bishop, 1992). A unit of study that appears to be quite fun would be to focus on human “foibles” found in some books that have a *Universal* theme. The web site can help you find the books you want by using Book Search.

For example, words like silly, funny, mistakes, trivial, and ignorance will call up books about foibles. A Korean folktale, *The Chinese Mirror*, by Mirra Ginsburg (1988), illustrates the foible of ignorance and its ramifications. *The Funny Little Woman*, by Arlene Mosel (1972), a Japanese folktale, tells about a character that gets in and out of trouble through thoughtless behavior. *The Chanukkah Tree*, by Eric A. Kimmel (1987), a Jewish tale, talks about the results of a trivial mistake. The *Universal* idea that connects these three stories is that different cultures can laugh at themselves over minor shortcomings. These books all happen to fall in the *Contributions or Additive Level of Cultural Content* and therefore make for a unit of study where students learn facts. The study represents one *cultural voice*.

Another goal of teaching for diversity is to highlight the beliefs and practices of a particular cultural group. For instance, a study of this type could include books with *Culturally Specific* themes like *Dreamcatcher*, by Audrey Osofsky (1992); *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* (1978) and *The Gift of the Sacred Dog* (1980), by Paul Goble; *The Mud Pony*, by Caron Lee Cohen (1988); *Where the Buffaloes Begin*, by Olaf Baker (1981); and *Sky Dogs*, Jane Yolen (1990). These six books focus in different ways on the special relationship Native Americans or specific tribes of Native Americans have with nature. Key words like spirit, nature and horses will help you find these books.

Another example of a *Culturally Specific* unit of study would be to use *Working Cotton*, by Sherley Anne Williams (1992); *In Coal Country* by Judith Hendershot (1987); and *The Black Snowman* by Phil Mendez (1989) to highlight aspects of living at a low socioeconomic level. A few key words for this thematic concept are poor and migrant. As can be seen on the Curriculum Tool, these two examples each span two **Levels of Cultural Content** -- *Transformation* and *Social Action*, -- making the study of culture more challenging than the one previously described concerning foibles. These two studies each include the same two *cultural voices*.



Teaching for diversity can also include a unit focusing on concepts that are *Culturally Specific* and that involve *Two or More Cultures Interacting*. The impetus of this study is to teach relationships that develop between and among cultures. Such a unit could incorporate ideas like solving problems together, sharing cultural practices, and learning about each other.

One concept subsumed under *Culturally Specific* themes dealing with *Cultures Interacting* is that of “reaching out to others”. Key words for this idea include respect, reaching and enriching. *Mrs. Katz and Tush* by Patricia Polacco (1992) is one reading that fits well. Other books with the same message are *Chicken Sunday*, by Patricia Polacco (1992); *The Patchwork Quilt*, by Valerie Flourney (1985); and *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox (1985). These stories encompass one level of cultural complexity, *Social Action* offering children the opportunity to see how people think critically, problem-solve and take action concerning social issues. These readings encompass one *cultural voice*.

Above we have described only a few of the many approaches one can use to teach concept-centered units. Any avenue taken can be developed further by helping children generalize their learning to a wide-range of different cultural experiences that go beyond the stories they read. Teachers can then encourage students to make personal connections to their world.

Furthermore, with generous use of teacher scaffolding, we believe that students can take more ownership of their learning by using metacognitive strategies for cultural understanding. The discussion below is an illustration of how teachers can use scaffolding to reach this goal.

Using Metacognitive Strategies for Cultural Understanding

For our purposes, metacognitive strategies focus on helping children identify the theme and its type, and the level of cultural complexity of any individual book. Students can be guided through this process when teachers model and think-aloud the critical thinking skills and metacognitive strategies needed. For **Book Theme**, the end goal of this process would be for children to independently ask and answer questions such as, “What is the author trying to tell me?” “What is the author trying to say about people and living?” Also, we want them to ask, “Does the theme refer to all humankind, or is it specific to one, or more than one culture?” For **Level of Cultural Content**, we want students to independently ask and answer, “Am I learning facts?” “Am I looking through the eyes of others?” “Am I seeing how people think about and solve problems concerning realistic social issues?” Furthermore, the process includes asking, “how does this learning effect and perhaps change me?”

Using the Curriculum Tool teachers can immediately identify titles with a specific *cultural voice* to teach metacognitive strategies. The web site’s Coding Chart will help with book details. As children become confident with analyzing stories with one particular *cultural voice*, teachers can then move onto another.

Mrs. Katz and Tush, by Patricia Polacco (1992) is a good book to examine in studying metacognitive strategies. However, it is one that might be used after children have had substantial practice analyzing books and their learning. The **Book Theme** of *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) is *Culturally Specific, Two or More Cultures Interacting*. To teach children how to recognize the theme, we would encourage them to ask themselves the question, “What is the author trying to say to me?” To answer this we would want learners to say something like this, “A boy and a person who is like a grandmother help each other”. Next, we would want them to identify the theme type by asking and answering the following: “Is this about everybody or is this about special groups of people?” We would want the children to realize that it is about two special groups, a child and an elder.

In regards to **Level of Cultural Content**, *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) is coded as *Social*



Action and importantly in this case, it also includes *Transformation* and *Contributions or Additive* information. To begin, in teaching children how to recognize **Levels of Cultural Content**, we would want students to look for all levels present in a book. We would encourage them to ask themselves, “Am I learning facts?” In the case of *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) they could answer in a variety of ways. They could report “yes”, a Bubbie is a grandmother, Jewish people place a stone on a grave as a sign of respect, and a Seder is a special dinner at Passover time. We would want children to realize that this information is at the *Contributions or Additive* level. Next, we could have students ask themselves, “Am I looking through the eyes of others?” “Am I finding out why people outside my culture believe or behave as they do?” To answer these questions, we would want a child to recognize that *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (Polacco, 1992) includes why Passover is celebrated. This information is at the *Transformation* level. Finally, we want children to ask themselves, “Am I seeing how people think about and act to solve social problems?” In this case, we would want students to see that Larnel understands that Mrs. Katz is lonely so he brings her a cat to keep her company and agrees to help her care for it. These acts reflect *Social Action*.

As students identify the content, teachers can help them relate it to their own thinking about cultures and to situations that may have occurred or will occur in their own lives. Importantly, students can then question their beliefs, confirm them and/or change them.

Curricular Approaches and the National Standards for Social Studies

We see the curriculum approaches described above as naturally connecting literature, teaching for diversity and the teaching of Social Studies. Our Curriculum Tool and its *cultural voices* can clearly help teachers plan for and meet the demands of some of the *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* prepared by the National Council for the Social Studies (1997). The Curriculum Tool also builds upon resources such as *Children’s Literature in Social Studies: Teaching to the Standards* (Krey, 1998), a book that classifies children’s literature based on the National Council’s thematic strands.

There are ten Social Studies thematic strands developed by the National Council. Our Curriculum Tool seems to fit closely with a number of them. Each thematic strand contains several performance expectations. We will use the first strand, entitled Culture to illustrate the applicability of the Curriculum Tool as a means of identifying books that meet specific national expectations. Our discussion will be for the thematic strand Culture and the performance expectations for the Early Grades.

One performance expectation states that students will “explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1997, p. 7). In this statement, the word “explore” suggests gaining knowledge through discovery. The word “describe” implies a basic level of understanding. Any book that can be coded as *Contributions or Additive* could provide the content for this expectation. Books that have *Culturally Specific* themes talk about differences or unique practices of a given group. Those that have *Universal* themes emphasize how we address our needs and concerns in similar ways. Any of the above may prove to be useful in meeting this expectation.

Another performance expectation states students will “give examples of how experiences may be interpreted differently by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1997, p. 7). Books coded as *Transformation* are most likely to be a resource for this expectation. Also, stories coded *Social Action* with a *Transformation* component, like the books *Baseball Saved Us*, by Ken Mochizuki (1993) and *Encounter*, by Jane Yolen (1992) could help teachers prepare students to meet this expectation. Readings that have *Culturally Specific* themes are more likely to address this expectation.



A third performance expectation states students will “compare ways in which people from different cultures think about and deal with their physical environment and social conditions;”(National Council for the Social Studies, 1997, p.7). Stories with content coded as *Social Action* often focus precisely on this. *The Wagon*, by Tony Johnston (1996) and *Amelia’s Road*, by Linda Jacobs Altman (1993) are two good examples of books that focus on how people adapt to their living conditions and physical environment. Again, literature with *Culturally Specific* themes would more likely fit this expectation.

These examples of performance expectations in the thematic strand Culture serve to illustrate how our Curriculum Tool can be applied to the Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Other thematic strands also connect well to our Curriculum Tool.

Curricular Approaches and the Standards for the English Language Arts

Curricula, such as the ones we developed, in which literature is the main vehicle to teach for diversity, not only meet some Standards for Social Studies, but also reflect a number of Standards for the English Language Arts.

We are going to address the Language Arts Standards that most strongly link to our project, using those developed by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996). A “title” will be used to identify each Standard. The titles can be found on the web site created by Education World (1996). Each Standard’s description can be found on that web site and also in the book, *Standards for the English Language Arts* (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996).

Our two curricular approaches, Concept-Centered Units and Using Metacognitive Strategies, satisfy a number of Standards simultaneously. It stands to reason that both approaches help teachers meet Standard 9, entitled, “Multicultural Understanding”. To satisfy this Standard, instruction is planned to help “[s]tudents develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles” (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 41). Our whole project helps teachers select books that depict relationships across a spectrum of cultures and complexity of content. Students, for instance, hear different dialects, see different life-styles, and read about how people interact with one another.

Both curricular approaches reflect two other Standards as well, Standard 1 “Reading for Perspective” and Standard 2 “Understanding the Human Experience”. Standard 1 recognizes that students should read a range of materials. These reading experiences should help students “... build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment” (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 27). Standard 2 deals with students “... build[ing] an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience” (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 29). Studying *Universal* or *Culturally Specific Themes*, an integral part of both curricular approaches, naturally reflects the content of these Standards. The basic focus is to learn about and respond to that which is common between and among groups or that which is special in the life and society of a culture. Since *Level of Cultural Content* is infused in these studies, students learn facts about themselves and others, view situations from the perspective of others, and identify and react to realistic social issues.



One of the two curricular approaches-- Teaching Metacognitive Strategies for Cultural Understanding -- meets Standard number 3. This Standard focuses on strategy instruction and comprehension and is titled "Evaluation Strategies." Specifically, it requests that "[s]tudents apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts..." (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 31). The metacognitive approach teaches students to identify, through critical thinking, the type of information found in books. Students, with the help of their teacher, learn how to identify facts, recognize the viewpoint of others, and enhance critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills at the societal and personal levels. To one degree or another, students react to their learning in a cognitive and affective manner.

The two curricular approaches we described above deal with analyzing and responding to literature. The modes in which one can respond are numerous and varied and have not been dealt with in our paper, since that was not our purpose. However, when teachers choose different ways for their students to respond to the literature, such as writing or using technology, more of the Language Arts Standards can be realized.

The Web Site

In Part 1 of this article, we demonstrated how books are classified by unifying theme and content to determine their *cultural voice* and referred you to the web site to practice coding some of your own favorites. Look again at our interactive web site, found at www.academic.marist.edu/culturalvoices , to find books that fit particular curricular approaches that interest you

In-depth analysis of all books within one *cultural voice* can be located by entering the two target descriptors of that *voice*. One *voice* could be *Universal with Contributions or Additive*; another, *Universal with Social Action*; and a third, *Culturally Specific - One Culture with Transformation*.

On the other hand, entering a single descriptor from the Curriculum Tool can access analysis of a group of books crossing several *voices*. For example, if one entered only *Universal*, information located would span three *cultural voices*.

Furthermore, other searches could focus on values, virtues, vices or cultures. In this case you might want to click on the ? for key words to use in your search. This search type will often, but not always, group books spanning many *voices*. The manipulation of the information on the Coding Chart will allow you to quickly access readings so you can begin organizing for specific curricular approaches.

Conclusion

By identifying the *cultural voices* of children's literature, we are able to rethink curricular approaches. Since books are now kept intact rather than viewed by a single, one-dimensional characteristic, instruction can provide more in-depth opportunities for students to personally connect with the many cultural aspects of stories. Our project provides a systematic means for elementary teachers, pre-service teachers, and ourselves to rethink what we want to present when teaching for diversity.

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Overcoming Theoretical and Pedagogical Impediments to Quality Literature Discussions

Frank Serafini

ABSTRACT

Literature study discussions have been included in many instructional frameworks for the past twenty years. As classroom teachers struggled to get quality discussions going, researchers and educators offered a variety of pedagogical approaches, theoretical considerations, and instructional resources to support their efforts. While the use of literature study groups may remain an important component of instruction, particular theoretical and pedagogical considerations may, in fact, impede the quality of the discussions. This article focuses on overcoming some of the theoretical and pedagogical impediments necessary to enact and support quality literature discussions.

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With the best of intentions, many ideas concerning literacy instruction seem to work against their desired outcomes (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). One distinct example of this phenomenon is the effect of particular classroom procedures, instructional approaches, and theoretical orientations to what has been referred to as literature study groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1990) or literature circles (Daniels, 2001). For the purpose of this article, I will refer to discussions between a teacher and a small group of students, focusing on a single picture or chapter book, as a literature study group.

In this article, I will describe two theoretical assertions and two pedagogical approaches that may impede teachers and students from enacting quality literature discussions in their classroom. While these impediments may be unintentionally imposed by classroom teachers, it is important to bring them to light in order to examine their effects on literature study discussions.

In various educational publications, researchers and experienced classroom teachers have offered instructional approaches for supporting students' engagement in quality literature discussions (Dias, 1992; Eeds & Peterson, 1997; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Huck, 1996; Serafini, 2000; Sipe, 1997). For quality literature discussions to take place, it has been suggested that teachers need to explicitly demonstrate how to discuss literature; increase students' awareness and understandings of the elements and structures of literature; help readers learn to generate, articulate, and negotiate interpretations in a supportive learning environment, and learn how to talk to classmates in a positive and effective manner (Maloch, 2004; Wiencek & O'Flahavan, 1994). However, a shift in instructional practices and resources, for example from the use of a basal series to authentic children's literature, must be accompanied by a parallel shift in theoretical perspectives for real change in the quality of students' literature discussions to take place (Serafini, 2003).

While the literature may be replete with suggestions for enhancing the quality of the



discussions that take place around children's literature, there has been less attention paid to the ways in which these pedagogical approaches and theoretical assertions may disable readers from effectively discussing literature. Certain instructional approaches, prescribed for use with literature discussion groups, may shift readers' attention away from the actual literature being read and focus instead on the roles and procedures that are to be enacted during the literature study discussions, the assessments being used or the dominant position of the interpretations offered by the teacher (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

Classroom teachers should not assume that after choosing a piece of literature for students to read and organizing them into small groups they will be able to conduct a quality literature discussion: making personal and literary connections, investigating the author's style and intentions, and analyzing the elements and structures of the story being read. It takes a great deal of patience, and instructional support before students' literature discussions rise to the level classroom teachers have read about in the professional literature (Urzua, 1992). Maloch (2004) states, "implementing new approaches takes time and does not always translate easily into real-life classrooms with real-life students and teachers" (p.320). In other words, the journey into "grand conversations" is a challenging one that takes a great deal of support and encouragement (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Before discussing the impediments to quality literature discussions, it is important to consider the characteristics of quality literature discussions in order to develop a preferred vision for the types of interactions we hope to enact in elementary and middle school classrooms.

Quality Literature Discussions Defined

Although there are many ways to evaluate the quality of a literature study discussion, there are some fundamental aspects that separate an informal chat from a quality, in-depth literature study discussion, or "grand conversation". Literature study groups are formed to explore texts, where talk is the keystone participants use for understanding the piece of literature and creating deeper, more sophisticated interpretations (Gilles, Dickinson, McBride, & Vandover, 1994). In a quality literature study discussion, readers are deeply engaged with the books they read and are eager to generate, share and negotiate meanings with the other members of their group (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). This sense of "investment" in the reading and group discussions is an important factor in determining the quality of these literary experiences. Literature discussions can take place in whole class interactions or in smaller literature study groups, usually with five to seven students.

Quality literature study discussions are filled with a variety of readers' perspectives and opinions about the books being read, where readers are interested in the meanings they construct and those meanings that are offered by other readers. It is the diversity of the ideas presented in literature discussions, rather than the group's ability to reach consensus and agreement that is essential for quality discussions. The subjugation of group members' interpretations to a single, correct main idea should not be part of these proceedings.

Literature study discussions should become literary exchanges where emotionally engaged readers passionately share and negotiate their understandings and interpretations concerning a piece of literature (Serafini, 2001). Throughout these small group discussions, interpretations are put forth and are made open for negotiation and revision (Karolides, 1992). The intended outcome of a quality literature discussion is for each member of the group to come away with a greater understanding of themselves and the literature being read. It is a synergistic event that demands readers' passionate attention to the piece of literature and to the various members of the discussion group.



Literature study discussions should become focused engagements where readers feel comfortable sharing their interpretations without fear of retribution from other group members or the teacher. Readers need to feel that they can discuss what really matters to them about a particular book, rather than search for a predetermined meaning that resides in the teacher's head or is contained in a commercial instructional manual.

In addition to the pedagogical approaches mentioned to support quality literature study discussions, educators have argued for attention to the social interactions and implications of community and democratic principles in literature study groups. Pradl (1996) suggests that literature study discussions provide students, "the opportunity to reflect on the values they hold and what their consequences might be as they live within the tensions of freedom and discipline, of personal desire and community control" (p.10). Drawing on the work of Rosenblatt, Pradl (1996) continues, "citizens in a democracy have the convictions and enthusiasms of their own responses, yet they are willing to keep an open mind about alternate points of view, and finally are able to negotiate meanings and actions that respect both individual diversity and community needs" (p.11).

Not only should literature be used as a window into the lives of others and as a mirror into their own lives and identities (Cullinan, 1989), but literature should create a theoretical space for readers to generate, articulate, and negotiate meaning in transaction with a particular text. Literature study discussions are social events, where readers bring their interpretations and responses to the group, to generate, articulate, and negotiate meaning in the company of other readers.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Impediments to Quality Literature Discussions

The theoretical assumptions and instructional considerations that I suggest impede the evolution of quality literature discussions or grand conversations are as follows:

Theoretical Considerations

1. the dominance of modernist literary theoretical orientations
2. overemphasis on personally constructed meanings and responses

Pedagogical Considerations

1. prescribing roles for group participation
2. limited student and teacher experiences with literature

For each of the above mentioned theoretical and pedagogical considerations, I will offer an explanation concerning why I believe it to be a possible impediment to quality literature discussions, and some suggestions for overcoming them.

The Dominance of Modernist Theoretical Orientations

Modernist literary theory has had an enormous impact on reading instruction in elementary and secondary classrooms (Bogdan & Straw, 1990). Closely associated with the New Criticism, a modernist theoretical orientation is based on the belief that meaning resides in the text and readers are expected to uncover this meaning during the reading event (Eagleton, 1996). It is asserted that there is one, stable meaning for each text, and individual's readings can be evaluated in comparison to this objective meaning. Only the most competent of readers, usually university professors and literary scholars, can ever truly understand the pure essence of a text, and all subsequent readings by individual readers can be measured against this purported true meaning (Probst, 1992).



One of the foundations of modernist literary theory that has translated into elementary and secondary reading and literature instruction is the concept of finding the main idea in a text through close, objective analysis. If this theoretical orientation is not made problematic, teachers may reduce literature study discussions to a procedure for identifying the single correct meaning that resides hidden in the bowels of the text, rather than a process of constructing meaning based on the experiences and understandings of the reader. This is what (Scholes, 1998) refers to as a “centripetal” force, driving interpretations to the center, searching for consensus and agreement.

Although there is an understandable temptation to adhere to the notion of looking for the main idea, largely due to issues of teacher control, standardized testing, and an emphasis on objectivity in assessing comprehension, the ensuing literature study discussions become focused on building a correspondence to an external authority’s interpretations rather than exploring alternative interpretations and possibilities. Students come to believe that the interpretations offered in resources like *Cliff Notes* are more important to read than the literature itself. It is this delegation of authority to an externally created and endorsed interpretation that undermines the potential and power of literature study groups.

As teachers begin making a theoretical shift towards a transactional (Rosenblatt, 1978) or socio-cultural theory of meaning (McKormick, 1994), the reader is given more voice and privilege in the process of constructing meaning in transaction with literature. Reader response (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980) and socio-cultural literary theories (Gee, 1996) may provide a better foundation for quality literature discussions. According to reader response theories, readers bring a wealth of experiences and knowledge with them to the reading event in order to construct meaning in transaction with a piece of literature (Hunsberger & Labercane, 2002; Marshall, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers are no longer conceptualized as passive recipients of a text’s meaning, rather, the variety of experience, culture and knowledge of each individual reader adds to the multidimensional texture of the literature discussions. It is this active role of the reader that adds to the dimensions and quality of their literature discussions.

From a transactional or reader response perspective, members of literature study groups are given permission to consider multiple interpretations and negotiate meanings with other group members, rather than reduce discussions to guessing what the teacher thinks or what has been designated as the correct interpretation in the teacher’s manual.

Working from a transactional theory of literary meaning, teachers assume the role of facilitator, or literary docent, guiding students through the lived through experience of reading a text, rather than the arbiter of meaning whose job is to decide who found the correct meaning and who didn’t. It is more important to understand and explore why readers constructed particular responses than to decide if they align to a predetermined interpretation offered in a commercially published novel unit. Teachers need to disrupt the commonplace notions of modernist theories of meaning and begin to explore the freedom and possibilities offered by transactional and reader oriented theories of meaning. The shift from a modernist orientation to a transactional or reader response perspective is an essential element in a more democratic discussion of literature, allowing more voices to be heard and interpretations to be expressed.

Overemphasis on Personally Constructed Meanings and Connections

In addition, focusing on the reader’s responses to the exclusion of the text itself, and conceptualizing the reader as an autonomous individual unaffected by cultural, historical and social



factors and experiences, may diminish the nature and quality of literature study discussions. Rosenblatt (1985) warned us about focusing on the role of the reader to the exclusion of the text when she stated, “like the Rorschach inkblot, a verbal [or written] text may be used to stimulate personal ‘free’ associations and memories of childhood traumas. But this makes the text simply a passive tool in the psychological study of personality” (p. 36). For Rosenblatt, reading is an experience shaped by the reader under guidance of a text. She insists that her transactional theory is a “reader-plus-text” orientation, not simply a reader response theory.

Sloan (2002) warns us about reducing literature discussions to “superficial chat about readers’ aesthetic responses to a work” (p.25). Although personal response to a text is an essential component of the reading experience, it is only the beginning of the process of interpretation and literary analysis. Sloan (2002) continues, “narrow interpretation of Rosenblatt’s ideas left some teachers thinking their role was only to listen mutely as initial responses poured from the children” (p.28). In response to these assertions, the role of the teacher has shifted from controlling discussions to facilitating them, helping readers explore the structures and elements of literature in order to understand a story without destroying the enjoyment of reading it.

With the publication of *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), many classroom teachers began to focus on text to text, text to self and text to world connections. While *Mosaic of Thought* has been central in supporting teachers’ burgeoning awareness of comprehension strategies, expanding discussions beyond asking main idea questions, there is a problem with teachers requiring students to simply make personal connections to a text while disregarding the text itself in the process. Too often, classroom discussions seem to leave the book behind as readers make superficial connections to individual words or names in the text. Each personal and intertextual connection offered by readers should be evaluated based on how it helps readers more extensively understand a book and their experiences, developing more sophisticated interpretations and perspectives. This is not a shift back to the objective focus on the text of the New Critics, rather it is a call to remember that the text is not vacated during the literary experience.

Lewis (2000) has argued for teachers to consider not only the reader as an individual, but also as a culturally, historically and politically situated reader that brings not only individual experiences, but socially determined experiences that affect their responses to literature. It is important to conceptualize the reader, not simply as an individual responding to a text, but as a historical, socio-cultural being that brings past experiences, culture, gender and political history to every reading event. Lewis (2000) contends that the interpretation of reader response that is most frequently used to support literature study focuses on personal interpretations at the expense of the social and political manifestations of the reader and text. She encourages teachers to view the discussion of literature as a social, as well as a cognitive, act, helping readers understand where their responses are derived, and what factors influence those responses. Readers don’t read in a vacuum, nor do their responses arise in one. Readers read particular texts in particular contexts, bringing their historically, culturally and politically embedded experiences with them to the act of reading. Exploring these contextual factors expands the possibilities for literature discussion and helps readers understand the ways that texts affect them as human beings.

In order to conceptualize readers as historically, politically and culturally embedded readers, it is necessary to interrogate how particular interpretations are naturalized and seen as commonplace. Texts are written to set forth particular versions of reality, and it is through the interrogation of these realities that readers come to understand the genesis of their interpretations, and how they are positioned as readers of fiction in contemporary society.



Prescribing Roles for Literature Study Discussions

In my opinion, one of the most challenging pedagogical approaches offered for supporting readers in literature study groups is the assignment of predetermined roles for members of literature study groups to adopt in order to attend to particular aspects of literature and literature discussions (Daniels, 2001). While it is commonsensical that readers need support in learning how to talk about literature, that support may better come in the form of helping them understand the elements and structures of literature, or what is referred to as “literary literacy” (Cai & Traw, 1997) prior to engaging in literature study discussions, rather than learning what role to assume after groups are organized.

According to Daniels (2001), roles are designated prior to the literature discussions and readers are required to adopt, rather than construct, these roles in discussing a piece of literature. When roles are imposed on literature study groups, readers may focus on adequately filling their role (as vocabulary monitor, question asker, summarizer and others) rather than responding and constructing interpretations in transaction with a piece of literature. An overemphasis on these predetermined roles may shift readers’ attention from making connections and constructing interpretations in response to texts, to simply searching for vocabulary words to look up, asking literal questions, worrying about whether the group is on task, or adequately summarizing the story. To his credit, Daniels (2001) has discussed the “jeopardy and joy of role sheets”, however, these role sheets continue to be included in his books on conducting literature study groups.

While each reader at different times during a literature discussion may, in fact, discuss vocabulary, summarize events in a story, ask questions or help facilitate the discussion, to assign these as individual roles limits each member’s participation in the group rather than supporting their interactions. Student led literature study groups require readers to assume a great deal of responsibility for the discussions, however, this responsibility cannot be bypassed by creating and assigning roles for group members. The predetermination of roles associated with literature study groups forces an “inflexibility” upon readers, narrowing their purpose and possibilities in the “transaction zone” (Smagorinsky, 2001). Roles that readers construct need to remain open for readers to reposition and reconstruct themselves in their interactions with other readers. Placing readers in predetermined roles cannot serve as an instructional shortcut to the time and support needed to help readers learn about the structures and elements of literature and develop the passionate attention needed to become effective members of a literature study group (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

In order to support readers’ abilities to participate in literature discussions, a foundation needs to be constructed including; a deepening of their knowledge of the elements and structures of literature, the ability to interrogate and reflect on one’s initial responses to literature, the ability to discuss ideas effectively with other students, and the willingness to consider multiple perspectives and opinions. These abilities can be developed through whole group discussions, where teachers demonstrate the types of responses and interactions they want students to develop long before small group discussions are employed.

Limited Student and Teacher Experiences with Literature

Another challenge in developing quality literature discussions is teachers’ and students’ lack of experience with reading and discussing literature. Nothing can substitute for time spent reading and



discussing literature. Readers need to be able to respond to literature aesthetically before they are required to evaluate the piece based on a particular literary criteria (Cox & Many, 1992). This requires extensive exposure to literature as a foundation for analysis and discussion. We can't simply expect teachers and students to talk about things they have not had experience reading. Literature needs to be experienced before it can be analyzed.

There has been a shift from developing teachers' understanding of the reading process, literary theories, theories of comprehension, and experiences with children's literature, to a focus on training teachers to implement a particular reading program in the past decade or more (Shannon & Goodman, 1994). As a consequence of the high stakes testing associated with the No Child Left Behind legislation and the National Reading Panel report, teachers are increasingly being required to follow an instructional script rather than make decisions themselves about what is important to teach readers (Allington, 2002). Because of these pressures, literature study has become a scripted routine in many classrooms, where some teachers, unfortunately, are leading discussions about books they have not even read themselves. Teachers are simply required to ask the requisite questions and assess the answers given by students according to criteria prescribed in a commercial reading program or novel unit. It is assumed that actual experiences with literature can be bypassed by scripting the procedures and predetermining the questions to be asked in literature study groups. In fact, many publishers of trade books often used in literature study groups are now including discussion questions in the book itself for teachers and students to use in their discussions, rather than allowing students and teachers to generate questions based on their readings of the text and their life experiences.

Teachers and students need access to literature and time to read and discuss literature regularly in schools. Because of the pressures associated with high stakes testing, teachers are focusing on the reading skills that will help their students do well on standardized tests. The effect of this concentration on test-based reading skills is the relocation of literature to the periphery of the reading instructional program. This focus on reading test skills limits the amount of time readers get to actually read and discuss literature. This, in turn, limits the experiences necessary for students and teachers to become more competent readers, interpreters, and evaluators of literature.

Concluding Remarks

The focus of literature study groups should be on the aesthetic experience of reading a piece of literature and generating, articulating, and negotiating meaning within a community of readers. However, the initial response is only the beginning of the interpretation and analysis of literature. The exploration of literature should not be at the expense of enjoyment, rather it should enhance the experience, providing readers with the "textual power" (Scholes, 1985) necessary to interpret and understand literature for themselves.

In addition, we need to re-conceptualize the reader as a historical, political, and culturally embedded reader. A primary goal of reading literature is to change the reader's perception of self and other within the context of examining the structural inequalities within which cultural identities are constituted (Lewis, 2000).

As readers are drawn to a piece of literature in the company of other readers they learn to develop the language of critique necessary to delve deeper into literature and explore the multiple interpretations generated and offered by other readers. It is the energy created by the interactions of readers and quality literature that makes literature study discussions so exciting.



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Kenny, Bud, and Now Luther! Using Curtis' Books in the Classroom

Sharon M. de Beck

ABSTRACT

Christopher Paul Curtis is an internationally known author of books loved by young adult readers. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and *Bud, Not Buddy* have now been joined by *Bucking the Sarge*, Curtis' newest book. This article will share information about each of the texts, as well as how they can be used in the classroom, with activities and strategies for before, during, and after reading.

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On September 14, 2004, a collective “Thank you!” might have been heard from middle grade readers throughout the country in response to the publication of Christopher Paul Curtis' latest young adult novel! It has been a long, five-year wait for *Bucking the Sarge*, but Curtis' new protagonist, Luther T. Farrell, was well worth it!

Many readers have been fans of Curtis' work since his first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, was published in 1995. This book was recognized as both a Newbery and Coretta Scott King Honor Book. His second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy* followed in 1999, and received the 2000 Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award. Though each of the three books is set in a different time, with different characters facing different problems, the books form a trilogy of sorts that will be welcomed by young adult readers. In this article, I will share ideas as to how Curtis' books can be used in the classroom, focusing on before, during, and after reading strategies and activities. For those of you who do not know Curtis' works, I will begin with a brief summary of each of the books and then share some information about the author.

Curtis' Three Books

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

The Watsons is an historical fiction novel about a family of five living in Flint, Michigan in the 1960's. Ten-year-old Kenny, the main character, his older brother Byron and little sister have led relatively peaceful lives, without experiencing the overt racial prejudice evidenced in the South during that time. As a young teen, Byron has been getting into trouble, so his parents decide to take him away from the city for the summer. Thus, the Watsons all travel in the family car, the “Brown Bomber”, to Alabama to Grandma Sands' home. While in Birmingham, Kenny and his family come face to face with the reality of being black in the South in 1963, as they witness one of the most hateful events in



American civil rights history. Though parts of the book deal with serious issues, Kenny tells the story of his family with a humor and wit that appeals to young readers.

Bud, Not Buddy

Bud, Not Buddy is an historical fiction novel, once again set in Michigan. Times are hard for ten-year-old Bud Caldwell, growing up in the Depression of the 1930's. Since his mother died, Bud has lived in an orphanage. Soon after moving into a foster home, and running away, Bud is on his own. Bud never knew anything about his father, except for some clues his mother left for him: flyers from a jazz band, Herman E. Calloway and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. Bud keeps these flyers, along with his other important, secret things in his suitcase. Without any other information, Bud decides to look for Herman Calloway, who he suspects is his father. Bud is able to navigate his way, both figuratively and literally, directed by his "Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and for Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself". As in *The Watsons*, *Bud, Not Buddy* is written with laugh-out-loud humor, interspersed with the serious issues of prejudice, the depression, and life as an orphan.

Bucking the Sarge

Bucking the Sarge is a contemporary novel for older readers, again set in Flint, Michigan. Fifteen-year-old Luther T. Farrell lives with his mother, AKA, the Sarge. She lives her life ruled by her "Sargisms", as Luther calls them, such as, "Take my advice and stay off the sucker path". The Sarge is a tough and angry woman, who wants her son to follow in her footsteps. However, her footsteps walk close to the edge of the law, seeing that she is the owner of slum housing, a questionably-run halfway house for mentally ill men, and a loan shark business (The Friendly Loan Company). Luther spends his time out of school working for his mother by taking care of his "crew" (the men from the home) and cleaning up apartments after the tenants leave. The Sarge pays Luther by setting aside his earnings into his growing (\$90,000 plus) college fund. Despite his family circumstances, Luther is bright and focused on getting into a good college, fancying himself as a philosopher-in-training. He sets aside time every day to work on his science project, dreaming of a "three-peat" first place win. Luther's project has to do with the dangers of lead paint. He is acutely aware of the problem, because this is the kind of paint his mother uses in the apartments she leases. When Luther wins the science fair as the Sarge watches from her front row seat, he sees that his mother is furious, for his project is surely at odds with her business interests! Luther decides that it would be best for him if he leaves Flint, but not before taking revenge on the Sarge and her number one thug assistant, Darnell Dixon. In the end, Luther becomes a latter-day urban Robin Hood, as he takes from his rich mother and gives to his less-fortunate friend, Sparky, and his crew.

The Author: Christopher Paul Curtis

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, the setting for his three novels. After he finished high school, Curtis worked at the Fisher Body Plant hanging doors on Buicks for thirteen years. It was during this time that he began writing the draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. He and his co-worker devised a plan by which they would take turns working for



thirty minutes hanging all the doors, rather than every other one, while the other took a break. Curtis used his break for writing!

After leaving the plant, Curtis worked at a variety of jobs while attending school at the University of Michigan. In 1993, his wife, Kaysandra, offered to work so that Christopher could write full time. He accepted her offer, and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* was completed. And Christopher Paul Curtis, award-winning author was born!

Clearly, Curtis’ family and his own experiences provide a rich source for his stories. In an interview with Horn Book magazine (Lamb, 2000), Curtis said that Kenny is a combination of his brother and himself. Curtis’ grandfather was Herman E. Curtis, the 1930’s bandleader of Herman Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression! Obviously, family and heritage are important to Curtis, as illustrated by his novels. All three are about families, though in different ways. Kenny is from a strong family; Bud is searching for a family; and Luther is trying to get away from his family!

When Curtis writes, he does not write to a specific audience. Rather, he writes because he has a story he wants to tell. In an interview about his writing (Welch, 2000) the author said that he hopes that the books he writes will touch the people who read them. When he was growing up, he rarely read a story that was about someone like him. Through Kenny, Bud, and Luther, Christopher Paul Curtis hopes to change that for this generation of readers.

Strategies for Middle School Students

Before Reading

For middle grade students to appreciate each of Christopher Paul Curtis’ books, it is crucial that background information be provided before students begin their reading, as each text deals with a time in American history or facets of urban life today which may be unknown to the readers. By providing this information or activating the prior knowledge some may have, students can approach the books with a clearer sense of what the characters are experiencing. By exploring the Internet, students should be able to learn enough about the topics in Curtis’ books to enable them to relate to circumstances of Kenny, Bud, and Luther. Table 1 provides a listing of possible topics to explore before reading the texts.

Table 1

<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	<i>Bucking the Sarge</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s • the church bombings in Birmingham 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Great Depression • soup kitchens, bread lines • Hoovervilles • racism • jazz in the 30’s 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slum lords and slum dwellings • lead paint

Another important pre-reading strategy to consider is the use of book talks. Think of yourself as a reader. Do you not appreciate hearing about books your friends have enjoyed? Has anyone ever



told you just enough about a book to peak your interest? That is what we can do in the classroom through book talks. By sharing the salient parts of each of these books, students will be better able to choose one to read (if that is your purpose) or to approach the new text with a curiosity and interest that merely assigning books to read does not evoke.

Since two of Curtis’ books are historical fiction pieces, it would be enlightening for the students to talk with people who have lived in the eras depicted in *Bud, Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. This text-world connection could be done in two ways. First, students could develop an oral history of the time by conducting interviews with family members, friends, or acquaintances who had life experiences with the Great Depression or the Civil Rights Movement. The information gathered individually could be shared in an exciting round table discussion in which the interviewers take on the role of the person or persons they interviewed. Another way to help students expand their prior knowledge of these times in our history would be to invite guest speakers into the classroom. It would be helpful for students to spend time planning the interviews by developing together a list of questions to be asked. As students read the texts, they would be able then to make connections between what they are reading and what they learned from their interviews, thus increasing their levels of comprehension and understanding of the issues relevant to each story.

During Reading

Classroom teachers, of course, should decide on the best way to use Curtis’ three texts, whether the whole class reads each book together, or students choose which of the three to read. In either case, a student-written classroom chart, as in Table 2, of the story elements of each book would be an interesting project.

Table 2

	<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	<i>Bucking the Sarge</i>
Genre			
Setting			
Time			
Protagonist			
Secondary Character(s)			
Problem			
Solution			

A more individual project would be for students to use reader response logs as they read the texts. When I used this strategy, I provided the students with “shape books” made from die cuts as an extra incentive for their writing. For *The Watsons* we used car-shaped journals, ala the “Brown Bomber; for *Bud, Not Buddy* we used suitcases; for *Bucking the Sarge* we used paint cans! These small books are fun for the students to use and the writing space is small enough so as not to intimidate reluctant writers. To encourage students to make connections with the text, divide the logs into three sections: text-self, text-text, and text-world. Be sure to model for the children how they would respond in each of these sections. Text-self: What in this story reminds you of something that happened to you



or to someone you know? Text-text: What have you read in this story that reminds you of another story you've read or heard? Text-world: What have you read that reminds you of things that are happening in the world today? By encouraging the readers to write about these connections, they are able to move away from writing that sounds like book reports and move toward real reflective writing.

Another way to increase students' interaction with the stories as they read would be for them to write diaries as if they were a character in the text. As they read, they could discuss various events that happen during the story and then reflect on how and why they affected the character. Sharing their diary entries would evoke rich conversation!

Students would also benefit from discovering "Found Poetry" as they read the texts. For this activity, students would take sections of the story and, choosing very carefully, create a found poem. The poems could then be read aloud and discussed. Here is an example from *Bucking the Sarge* that would encourage conversation about this aspect of Luther's life:

Moving Day
The begging and crying and wailing
of freshly out-on-the-street people
is always sad,
and before you get used to it,
it will cost you a bunch of sleep. (p. 45)

By selecting pieces such as this one, students would be able to share important aspects of the texts relating to the characters and the issues relevant to the story line.

As readers ourselves, we often take the time to mark a particular spot within a text as we read. Perhaps it's a quote that surprises us; it may be an event that serves as a turning point in the story; it may show an aspect of a character that we hadn't noticed before. Students reading classroom texts, however, may not be able to enjoy the luxury of marking in their books. Therefore, a simple solution would be to provide a small pad of post-it notes to the students for use as they are reading. This no-bother technique would certainly provide the impetus for students to make connections with the texts during reading.

After Reading

Jim Trelease tells us that we "paper and pencil" books to death in school. When speaking at the NCTE Conference in 2001, he asked his audience to reflect on how often as readers we rush to make a diorama after reading a new book! Rather, he said, we should do what Oprah does: TALK about books! Curtis' trio of young adult books richly lend themselves to talk! Literature discussion groups would be a wonderful strategy to use after reading these books. The groups could be formed in two ways.

First, if everyone is reading the same book, why not make smaller groups for discussion. Rather than forcing the conversation through teacher-developed questions, consider allowing the conversation to flow naturally. When I have done this, I prepare some open-ended questions that I put in envelopes on the tables, so that if the discussion lags or gets too far off track, the questions can bring the students back to the topic. However, if literature discussion groups are a natural, usual part of your classroom, you will find that the envelopes may remain sealed!



Another way to use the literature discussion would be to have mixed groups, so that in a group of six, for example, two would have read about Kenny, two about Bud, and two about Luther. Since all three books have a young male as the protagonist who is facing a difficult problem, discussion should come easily. Students are usually anxious to tell others about the books they have read, especially when the main characters are as multi-faceted as these boys! Curtis' books lend themselves beautifully to using a Venn diagram as a graphic organizer for comparing and contrasting the stories. This mixed-group method of discussing the stories would provide a perfect opportunity for students to work together to visually represent their discussion.

After students have read about Bud, Kenny, and Luther, they will, no doubt, have some lingering questions about the boys. Writing to Christopher Paul Curtis (in care of Random House Children's Books) to ask these questions would certainly be a viable and worthwhile option. However, before putting pen to paper, it would be well for the students to get to know Curtis a bit. One way to do that would be for the students to listen to (or read) an interview of Curtis that was aired on the Tavis Smiley Show on PBS on January 11, 2005. Simply go to: www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley and click on the archives tab. Another source for an interview is <http://summerreading.nypl.org/read2002/chats>.

Curtis' style of writing is such that, as readers, we feel as though we really come to know Bud, Kenny, and Luther. Therefore, the students might enjoy working together in small writing groups to develop sequels to the books. This would be a way for students to answer their own "what will happen next" questions about the characters. Working in small groups would have the additional advantage of encouraging the readers to engage in focused talk about the books and the characters, supporting their ideas by referencing the text. Discussions such as this often provide new understandings regarding a story by listening to the viewpoints of other readers.

Websites to Explore

There are many websites that will provide more information about these texts and Christopher Paul Curtis. Here is a sampling:

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog

www.carolhurst.com/titles/watsons.html

www.multcolib.org/talk/guides.html

Bud, Not Buddy

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog

<http://eduscapes.com/reading/bud/>

www.readingmatters.co.uk/books/bud-not-buddy.htm

www.pe.umanitoba.ca/cm/vol6/no11/bud.html

www.multcolib.org/talk/guides.html

Bucking the Sarge

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog

www.commonsemmedia.org/reviews/review.php?id=2868&type=Book

www.teenreads.com



Final Thoughts

One of the wonderful things about young adult literature is that it has great appeal for teen readers as well as for adult readers. Christopher Paul Curtis' books are excellent texts that can be enjoyed by readers aged 10 to 100! Curtis' strong characters "hook" us as readers. We come to care about Kenny, Bud, and Luther; we worry about them; we want to defend them; we cheer for them. I encourage you to come to know Christopher Paul Curtis and his books. You and your students will be the richer for it

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When Cultures Meet, What's a Teacher To Do? Highlighting the 'Cultural' in 'Literacy as a Socio-cultural Tool' *Cindy Bird*

ABSTRACT

Cultures determine identity in that they prescribe the “food, festivals, and fashion” of their members; for example, rap music, baggy pants and gestured dancing identify the hip hop culture (recognizable to both “members” and “non-members”). Cultural identities are created and maintained by “literacy” -- the ability to read and write the “texts” of a culture. Thus in this broad sense, literacy is a socio-cultural “tool,” and mastering it means “success” within a culture. The purpose of this article is to explore the socio-cultural nature of literacy as it relates to identity both for teacher and student, and to examine the use of literacy as a tool for “success” in the culture of school. The article concludes by delineating four pedagogical choices: the “uni-cultural,” the “uni-cultural *plus*,” the “multi-cultural as motivator,” and the “multi-cultural as curriculum.” These are available to all teachers who stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures -- their own, the school’s, the classroom’s, and their students’.

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Not long ago I heard a commencement address wherein the speaker spent several minutes listing the multiple communities to which an individual belongs. He spoke of the usual race, ethnic, and gender communities, but also of “minority” cultures such as student, teacher, parent, public transit rider, and member of a bowling team. His point was that although every person is simultaneously a member of many communities and cultures, the key to “success” in any of those cultures is to “know where you are and who you are” at any given moment -- a phrase supporting the idea of self-identity as a resultant of cultural determinism (“*where* you are”) and self-awareness (“*who* you are”).

Cultures determine identity in that they prescribe the “food, festivals, and fashion” of their members; for example, rap music, baggy pants and gestured dancing identify the hip hop culture (recognizable to both “members” and “non-members”). Cultural identities are created and maintained by “literacy” -- the ability to read and write the “texts” of a culture. Thus in this broad sense, literacy is a socio-cultural “tool,” and mastering of that tool means “success” within a culture. The purpose of this article is to examine and explore the socio-cultural nature of literacy as it relates to identity both for teacher and student, the use of literacy as a tool for “success” in the culture of school and public education, and the pedagogical choices available to all teachers who stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures -- their own, the school’s, the classroom’s, and their students’.



The Socio-cultural Nature of Literacy Related to Identity

Gaffney and Anderson (2000) conclude that the major theoretical changes in the field of reading have progressed from behaviorist to cognitive to socio-cultural. The behaviorist view sees reading as essentially “decoding” of the printed signs, and the purpose of reading instruction being to help learners “break the code” (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). The 1970s brought a major paradigm shift from behaviorism to cognitive science, from discovery of meaning to creation of meaning: the concept of schema (loosely defined as knowledge “structured from experience,” Smith & Swinney, 1992) was “reinvented” and “text processing” flourished (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000). The emphasis was now on reader--text interactions (Leland et al., 1999), with the belief that reading involved a “stable set of intellectual processes” (Bloome, 1989) -- reading thus included the ability to comprehend the text so that the contents “made sense” or were meaningful to the reader.

The third view of reading, according to Gaffney and Anderson (2000), emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s when socio-linguistic and socio-cultural theorists began to draw on the earlier linguistic and social constructivist work of Vygotsky (1930; 1934) and to re-focus attention on “language in use” (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000) -- the idea that language and reading occurred in a social situation. In this model of reading as social practice, the reader recognizes the cultural embeddedness of both the text and herself.

As went reading , so goes literacy.

The emergence of this “social practice” model of reading meant the emergence of literacy also seen as a “social practice.” This new view of literacy resulted in a movement labelled New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1999, 2000; Maybin, 2000). This “new literacy” movement spawned a paradigm shift; a conceptual framework developed for what Barton and Hamilton (2000) called “situated literacies.” No longer did “literacy” mean just “reading and writing”; now it meant “reading and writing” as a “social practice” (Street, 2003), a practice occurring in a specific time, space and cultural context -- a specific social or cultural situation.

Conceptualizing literacy as a social practice means that literacy refers to “context-bound language practices” (Verhoeven & Durgunoglu, 1998). When viewed as context-based and situational, literacy becomes not the acquisition of a neutral set of cognitive skills, but a linguistic “tool” for use in specific contexts and situations -- the contexts of social and cultural situations (Street, 2003). Thus literacy becomes a “tool” for use by social groups and cultures to mediate their existence, growth, and identity. As a socio-cultural tool, literacy mediates the mental activity of both culture as a whole and individual group members (Homer, 2002). In other words, reading and writing become significant to and influence the thinking of the members of a social group or culture. However, at the same time, reading and writing remain individual cognitive abilities. Attempting to reconcile literacy’s dual aspect of individualized competencies and interaction in social contexts, Homer (2002) characterizes a child as “an active constructor of knowledge who is, at the same time, embedded in a culture that transforms her development” (p.266) -- a culture that also selects and determines the “texts” and “literature” recognized as “valuable” or permitted and encouraged to be read within a culture.

A culture in which a child (or any language/literacy user) is embedded need not be thought of solely in terms of an ethnicity or race or religion. Some people, including the commencement speaker above, may refer to these “cultures” as social groups or as “communities.” Gee (1991) prefers to call them “Discourses” with a capital “D”:



[a Discourse is] a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network.” . . . Think of a Discourse as an “identity kit” which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize (Gee, 1991, p.3).

This metaphor of the identity “kit” carries the implication of construction and development *into* an identity: a “kit” must be assembled or appropriated to be of service. For example, the gingerbread house “kit” I purchased still required construction and effort on my part before I had a finished, “identifiable” gingerbread house on my kitchen counter. For the process of construction and development into a cultural identity, Heath (1984) uses the term “language socialization” to describe the way individuals become members of various communities. [Hereinafter for the sake of clarity and brevity, and setting aside anthropological and sociological distinctions to the contrary, I use the term “Discourse” as synonymous with “culture,” “social group” and “community.”]

Taking on the identity of and being associated with a Discourse means that a person can operate within a Discourse by accepting and conforming to the “values, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, ways of learning, and ways of expressing what we know” (Finn, 1999, p. 108). These “ways of” require a language of some sort. Thus “operating” within a Discourse includes using the language of that Discourse: receiving and producing the language, reading and writing the language -- being literate. The idea of “success” in a Discourse, then, is sometimes measured by the degree to which a person has “mastered” the language and literacy of that Discourse, has become “literate” within that given Discourse. For example, some cultures have special initiation rites or “rites of passage” for their children when they near the age of puberty or thereabouts. At that point, the children become “full members” (or adults) of the culture and Discourse -- gaining an identity by having shown mastery of the “literacy” of language, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and values of that Discourse. In another example, the culture of mainstream American education requires its members to display mastery, “full and effortless control” (Gee, 1991, p.8), of its Discourse literacy -- the academic literacy of public education, or mainstream “school literacy.” This culture provides for 13 years of formal training (K-12), after which the child (non-adult) is deemed “educated” and undergoes a “commencement” into life as an “educated” adult person.

While “successful” mastery of the literacy of the mainstream school Discourse earns a child the identity of “educated,” it is wise to keep in mind that this mainstream school Discourse is not the only Discourse to which a child belongs [I use the term “child” here to refer to any “non-adult” in the mainstream American culture, a person under the “legal age”]. Indeed, school culture is only one of many secondary Discourses in which a child develops. Generally, a new born child has little say in the matter of obtaining a primary Discourse (“we can’t choose our family”); membership in many subsequent “secondary Discourses” (Gee, 1991) is also mandated, not optional nor voluntary. For example, compulsory education laws illustrate this point. However, a very key point to be made about Discourses and membership is that one person, child *or* adult, never exists in just one Discourse. The old adage of “you can choose your friends but not your family” aptly describes the difference between mandated and voluntary Discourses; it also illustrates the concept of multiple and simultaneous membership in Discourse communities. A person, whether child or adult or student or school teacher or anyone else, is never a member of just one Discourse. Everyone, students and teachers alike, resides in a myriad of Discourses simultaneously. As adults and professionals, teachers possess the psychological agility to leave, most often, their myriad of Discourse identities at the classroom door



and become, for the mandated time required, a prominent member of the education profession and upholder of the mainstream school Discourse. Children, on the other hand, by virtue of their developing psychological concepts about self and identity, are less able and experienced at selecting and adjusting their identities to match the socio-cultural situation of the classroom.

As a point of note, this matter of identity formation is not exclusive to the adolescent child, although development of identity and self-awareness are key components of the socio-cognitive developmental stage of “adolescence” (Kroger, 1989, 2003; Dusek & McIntyre, 2003). All children in the K-12 public school system are simultaneously members in multiple Discourse groups: from immediate family, extended family, ethnicity, race, religion, social peers, and economic class, to the hip hop culture of teens or the community of Sponge Bob Square Pants fans. All children have identities in various stages of development and formation and acceptance within these communities.

Specifically for this article, we can visualize two children (of any K-12 age) attending public education in the State of New York: both are simultaneously members of multiple cultures and users of multiple literacies. One is a member of a visible ethnic minority, and her ethnic literacies may perhaps be more easily discernible than the multiple, rap-music text-messaging literacies of the other, white majority student. Both arrive at their classroom doors. There at the entrance, they meet an academic-based school culture with a specific type of literacy as its primary tool for success.

Literacy as the Tool for “Success” in School Culture

I want to make it clear that by “school Discourse” I do not mean that school culture which dictates the formal and informal social structure of school -- where sixth graders rule the playground and juniors never date freshmen. Instead, I refer to the academic, scholarly side of the culture of mainstream public schools -- where curriculum and homework reign, and reading ability determines the “success” of mastering the cultural identity.

As Moats (1999) for the American Federation of Teachers reports, “reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends . . . Any child who doesn’t learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life” (p.5). This statement implies some of the underlying assumptions within school Discourse about literacy as a tool for cultural mastery -- specifically that the extent to which a child learns to read school-based texts determines the extent of that child’s knowledge acquisition and “learning,” and that identity (or “labeling”) as a member of the school community occurs “early” in a child’s association with this Discourse. Moats’ words also makes a clear statement about the perceived prominent role of membership in school Discourse in relation to membership and identity within other Discourses and cultures -- namely that “failure” to gain mastery and “succeed” in the secondary Discourse of school foretells “failure” in the primary Discourse of life. While I do fully support the idea of formal mainstream education’s vital role in the social and economic lives and developing identities of all children, I do question the notion of “flourishing in life” being dependent upon mastery of school literacy. Following Gee’s (2000) concepts of Discourse and of literacy as the social “capital” within a culture, I would say that to flourish in life, a person must have gained mastery of the literacies of those Discourses most significant to that person at any given time -- plus the ability to accommodate one’s self to that significant culture by knowing “where you are and who you are” at any given moment.

Meanwhile, within the “moment” of formal, mainstream, public school education Discourse,



the fundamental, distinguishing literacy has become the ability to read and write in the rhetorical and logical style of the “academic essay.” This essay-style of reading and writing requires students to think in an argumentative fashion: to identify the “main point” and supporting details of a paragraph, to identify the author’s purpose, and to write paragraphs in a coherent main-idea-support format with explicit, logical transitions between paragraphs. To continue into post-secondary education, a student must prove capable of producing this academic essay; it has thus become the “vehicle through which all students are to demonstrate their [school] literacy” (Trupe, 1997, p.113). This component of academic Discourse has, since its inception in the eighteenth century, been the hallmark of the “educated” person (Finn, 1999). As such, the literacy of the academic essay has permeated the public education system to become part of its distinguishing literacy. In more general terms, Heath (1984) finds from her research that being “literate in today’s formal education system means being able to talk and write about language, to explain and sequence implicit knowledge and rules of planning, and to speak and write for multiple functions in appropriate forms” (p.27). Mastery of this “school literacy” thus brings “success” in the academic culture of formal education.

In his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, Finn (1999) discusses some of the social issues surrounding access to “school literacy.” One of the main issues is the relationship between home or primary Discourse (Gee, 1991) and school Discourse. Finn presents several examples of public school students whose home Discourse and language use are highly dissimilar to the school culture. Interestingly enough, his examples of dissimilar Discourses are not tied to the usual suspects of race or ethnicity; instead, Finn cites the home Discourses of economic classes. For instance, he presents the work of English Sociologist Basil Bernstein, who demonstrates how the home Discourse of the working class is very implicit in nature, in contrast with the more “mainstream” middle-class whose home Discourse is less implicit and more explicit -- and thus closer in nature to school Discourse (Finn, 1999, p.81-82).

Children from those home Discourses and cultures which are dissimilar to the more print-based, rhetorical and explicit school Discourse are what Gee (1991) calls “non-mainstream” (p.10). The now “classic” studies by Heath (1980; 1984) explored the different modes, functions, and uses of language and literacy within two distinct yet geographically close “non-mainstream” communities. Her results indicated that literacy has different meanings and functions for different socio-cultural and socio-economic communities. She also found a “positive correlation” between student high achievement rates in school and home discourses which were “similar” in mode of “language socialization” to the school discourse (the small “d” discourse of language use, which includes literacy abilities). Implications from this study were that the communication, language, and literacy “problems” of non-mainstream children struggling in mainstream school literacy may have their sources in the degree of difference between home discourse/Discourse and school discourse/Discourse. While the issue here concerns children from “mainstream” and “non-mainstream” home cultures, I submit that a larger issue involves those children (mainstream and non) active in and building identities from multiple Discourses (cultures, social groups, and communities). The degree to which those multiple Discourses differ from school Discourse also affects, I believe, the academic performance of those children. The degree of difference may also cause these children to view the classroom door as the entrance to a “foreign” culture. Children who are not readily able to accommodate themselves to this new culture at best find themselves struggling to survive, at worst give up trying to negotiate this foreign culture.

With literacy as the primary tool within this school culture, children who struggle with “reading” as defined in this school Discourse may develop negative self-concepts about themselves as



“readers” -- and as “learners” and individuals. Those “reading difficulties” that produce negative effects on self-concept occur mostly “in academic domains” (Meyer, 2001). For example, the child who struggles to read a non-picture chapter book or a Chemistry textbook may tell parents or teachers that he or she is a “poor reader,” or loudly exclaim, “I hate reading.” However, at the same time, he or she may flourish as a “good reader” of texts in other Discourses: PlayStation3 or mall shopping or Sunday School. When literacy is defined as a “socio-cultural tool,” then the “texts” for reading are those “communicative artifacts” (Graddol, 1994) of that culture or Discourse -- and these artifacts are not always in the form of the printed word. As just one example, basketball players require a literacy which is the ability to “read” the zone-defense of the opposing team, or read a coach’s playpad. As Moats’ (1999) statement examined earlier implies, unfortunately or fortunately, the literacy and “reading” (of nearly exclusively a printed text) required within the mainstream school Discourse carries a greater impact on a person’s life (and importance for that “life” in relation to the dominant mainstream society as whole) than does the “reading” required for any of these other Discourses.

Looking specifically at adolescents and their self-concepts, as readers *and* as persons, Colvin and Schlosser (1998) explain that their work

demonstrates that in the course of the school day, middle school students do attend to academics; however, their primary focus is on the social context of school. Thus, adolescents are developing critical beliefs about themselves as learners at the same time they are constructing multiple dimensions of self, including their self-worth and importance as viewed through the lenses of others. Perhaps it is an artifact of development, but the merging of the personal and academic selves appears particularly critical for the middle school student and may portend a student’s future academic success (p.273).

The work of Colvin and Schlosser thus indicates that it is not alone the “academic self” (partly defined by one’s ability to read the required texts) that influences “future academic success,” but rather the academic merged with the developing personal self-concept of the adolescent. Self-concept, self-worth, and the multiple dimensions of self all serve as constructs of identity. When Maria, the struggling adolescent reader in Colvin and Schlosser’s (1998) case study, entered the school Discourse culture of the classroom, her positive, perceived personal identity of self merged with her negative, perceived academic identity of self. The result was negative:

In Maria's case, her sense of self as a confident and able student assistant in the school office stands in stark contrast to the invisible person Maria became once she she assumed her role as a student (p.280).

Maria’s example helps to raise the question of whether socio-cultural literacy and academic “success” are exclusive. Does reading success within school Discourse also mean the loss of non-school cultural identity? Or, just as the professional teacher leaves his or her other identities outside the classroom door when assuming the role of spokesperson for school Discourse, is a child also required simply to “leave outside” the classroom his or her other identities formed from membership in other Discourses?

So now we return to our two “visualized” children of any K-12 age, one a visible ethnic minority and one heavily entrenched in a techno-rap non-print popular culture. They are still standing there at the classroom door -- complete with their multiple Discourse literacies and identities -- peering



at the academic-based school culture. What happens next to the identities (and literacies) of these children depends on the pedagogical choices the classroom teacher makes.

Professional and Pedagogical Choices for Teachers

One large assumption in this article's argument is that the abilities, not only to determine one's identity and consequent responsibilities at any given moment simply by knowing "where" one is and whom one is required to be, but also to set aside other identities and fulfill the roles dictated by the culture and Discourse wherein one finds him or herself, are developmental abilities. That is, they develop as self-awareness and awareness of "others" increase (Dusek & McIntyre, 2003). As mature adults, certified teachers, I will assume, possess this ability to set aside other identities and allow the identity of their immediate Discourse to guide their linguistic and physical behaviors. Further, I also assume that as employees of the State of New York, public school teachers will seek to uphold and model the literacy and "educated" identity prescribed by the Discourse of State public education -- they will both choose to *and* be capable of choosing.

Children, on the other hand, are at various stages along this developmental continuum leading to the maturation of an "identity-choice" ability. They cannot always leave their myriad of Discourse identities and cultural memberships outside the classroom door on the shoe rack. Instead, they stand there at the door with all their identities and memberships in their arms.

The role of the teacher is to help these "doorway" students enter into the school culture and "succeed" in school -- where success means competence in reading the school Discourse to the degree of attaining "the curricular standards" (*Learning--ELA*, 1996, p.v). However, *how* the teacher performs that role depends upon his or her foundational beliefs about education and teaching and literacy and reading, and about the socio-cultural nature of literacy as a "tool."

These foundational beliefs, whether the teacher is consciously aware of them or not, influence the teacher's professional and pedagogical choices. Therefore the teacher who asks, as this article's title does, "what do I do now?" would be best advised to make those unconscious, implicit beliefs more explicit and conscious, before these doorway encounters occur. Gunning (2005) offers the strategy that "examining your practices should help you uncover your beliefs" (p. 8). Teachers, indeed everyone, can find their theories by their actions. Seeking and finding those theories, foundations, and beliefs develop teachers into more reflective practitioners. The more teachers then know about *why* they make certain choices, the more options and choices teachers discover available to them.

The more teachers know about the socio-cultural nature of literacy, the more choices they will see available to them when considering how to deal with the students' cultures and school Discourse culture, especially when the variance between them is significant. I propose that informed teachers can detect four choices available to them:

>"uni-cultural" choice:

ignoring all other cultures and literacies and teaching only the mainstream school culture and its literacy;

>"uni-cultural *plus*" choice:

ignoring all other cultures and literacies and teaching only the mainstream school culture and its literacy *plus* teaching a critical literacy that questions the mainstream culture;

>"multi-cultural as motivator" choice:

allowing non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the classroom as



motivators and scaffolds into the school-ordained curriculum of mainstream culture;

>“multi-cultural as curriculum” choice:

incorporating non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the school curriculum in order to develop meta-level cognitive and linguistics skills.

These choices reflect the teacher’s perceptions of his or her own identity as a professional and as a public employee.

Because this socio-cultural aspect is a relatively “new” one in the evolving concept of literacy, the old metaphor of teacher as “gatekeeper” to the school knowledge still presents itself as a choice for teachers. Under this metaphor, the teacher ignores (or refuses entrance to) the cultures and Discourses the students bring to class; instead, the teacher exclusively promotes the mainstream school Discourse and its literacy. As a gatekeeper, the teacher functions much like a child safety-gate -- prohibiting promotion within the school system until the child is “ready” (possesses sufficient school literacy ability) to move into the next level of school without the possibility of “harm” caused from being in a situation for which the child is inadequately prepared and “unready.” Such a uni-cultural stance should not be quickly dismissed as “narrow” or “insensitive” or “prejudicial.” Consider for a moment the school district that desires all its elementary students to have an equal access to the literacy that offers school “success” and subsequent “success” in the dominant society of the country. In one case I know of, every student in that public elementary school follows the same reading program -- the intent being to provide all children with a literacy and literate identity that will give them equal footing in the labor market. Further, the New York State *Learning Standards for English Language Arts* (1996) are designed to “apply to all students” (p.v). The work of New York State certified teachers is, after all, to strive to have “all students” work towards “attaining the curricular standards” (p.v) of the State public education -- again, reaching standards indicative of possessing a literacy and literate identity that will give them equal footing in the labor market. Desiring all students to “succeed” in the mainstream culture is, I submit, quite fair-minded, sensitive, and caring.

While this uni-cultural approach may perhaps sound hegemonic to some, it also serves to highlight another possible teacher choice -- attainment of the school’s uni-cultural literacy “plus.” The “plus” refers to adding critical literacy to mainstream school literacy. Teachers may choose also to introduce students to a “critical” literacy, wherein students learn the reading and literacy skills not only “necessary for access to . . . the dominant culture group,” but also for “disruption of” that group (Hinchman & Moje, 1998, p.118). In classrooms where teachers choose to add critical literacy to their curriculum, teachers still strive to assist students in attaining the State mandated English Language Arts Standards, but they also encourage their students to develop their sense of self-worth and “voice” -- as minds capable of and voices “allowed to” question the majority. In terms of identity, students in these classroom communities may see themselves and identify themselves as part of the dominant culture, by virtue of having acquired its literacy. At the same time, however, their acquiring of critical literacy provides students with the identity of “non-majority” -- removing one’s self far enough outside of the dominant culture to critique and “disrupt” it. Unfortunately, this non-majority identity is difficult to picture because it is defined in negative terms of what it is *not*, rather than in positive terms of what it *is*.

In both of these uni-cultural choices, the teacher is ignoring or negating the students’ own cultural affiliations and identities, the multiple Discourses which the child brings to the classroom door. The teacher is in effect replacing them with membership in a different (often “foreign”) culture.



In the final two choices I discuss, the classroom teacher acknowledges the students' multiple cultures, their embedded literacy skills, and the identities developed within them.

At the primary school level, Marsh (1999, 2000) researched an intervention strategy wherein she incorporated the primary child's popular culture element of the *Teletubbies* television show into the early childhood language and literacy curriculum. Findings from her work with six and seven year olds "indicated that the incorporation of themes from popular culture into the curriculum motivated children whose interests are usually excluded from the curriculum" (Marsh, 2000, p.130). Thus Marsh met the students at the classroom door and allowed them to bring in their non-school Discourse of television popular culture, which she then employed as a tool for motivating the students into more "school Discourse" curriculum work -- the "multi-cultural as motivator" choice.

At the high school level, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) chose to use the students' non-school Discourses as "ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different worlds, while also helping these students develop academic skills" (p.88). Working in an urban multicultural high school, Morrell (2000) incorporated the teen popular culture elements of Hollywood films and rap music into his curriculum. He explains the reasoning behind his choice:

What I have attempted to demonstrate is that students already possess many of the skills that we, as educators want to impart to them. However, by not allowing them to tap into their huge reservoirs of [non-school-attained] knowledge, we also prevent many from accessing these skills to navigate the traditional curriculum (Morrell, 2000, p.29).

The decision to begin student learning with what they already know from outside of the school Discourse classroom and then scaffold curriculum knowledge onto that non-school knowledge represents another example of the "multi-cultural as motivator" teacher professional and pedagogical choice.

The fourth category of teacher choices for what to do when school culture meets student multiple cultures at the classroom door is the "multi-cultural as curriculum" choice. This choice originates in the ideas of Gee (1991), who feels that "teaching and learning are connected with the development of meta-level cognitive and linguistic skills. They will work better if we explicitly realize this and build the realization into our curricula" (p.10). Thus teachers have a choice to build into the classroom curriculum an explicit meta-cognitive awareness of differences between the students' own Discourses and the school Discourse. An example of this procedure is the strategy of "code-switching." Essentially, code-switching is making students meta-cognitively aware of the linguistics of their own cultural discourse(s) (linguistic systems), then of the school discourse, and then teaching them both *when* it is appropriate to use each "code" and also *how* to switch between the two (or more) linguistic codes (Colvin, 2004). One result of teaching this meta-cognitive awareness is that students develop bi-cultural literacy skills; they may initially write a composition using the literacy of their own primary, home culture, and then "switch the codes" and re-write the material into the "acceptable" literacy of the school Discourse.

Wheeler and Swords (2004) examined code-switching and its explicit meta-cognitive/meta-linguistic awareness as a tool for transforming and unifying culturally diverse classrooms -- classrooms from the grade 3 level to high school and college levels. They found that code-switching created an academic environment that both validated the students' home language/literacy and simultaneously maintained school literacy as the classroom norm. This code-switching approach to literacy instruction



teaches students that their home language is not “wrong,” nor are they “inferior” for using it (Nichols & Colon, 2000). Rather, the students learn that the literacies of their multiple Discourses are inappropriate for use in the formal settings of school Discourse such as the classroom or in written essays. These classrooms where teachers choose not just to acknowledge the cultures and resultant identities of their students, but also to incorporate those literacies and identities into their curriculum provide examples of where the “cultural” in “literacy as a socio-cultural tool” is highlighted for the benefit of all participants in the classroom community.

Standing in the Doorway

As all teachers stand in their classroom doorways at the meeting place of multiple cultures, the question does become, “what’s a teacher to do?” While the answer may emerge from one of the four choices discussed herein, the actual choice reflects the individual teacher’s perceptions of his or her own identity as a professional and as a public employee. From my own perception, the public school teacher is a “front line” promoter of school Discourse and educator in school literacy, with a cultural and “community” responsibility to help students “succeed” in the school Discourse through mastery of school literacy. I believe the first step for any teacher in this procedure of making a choice is recognizing that he or she does indeed have a choice. The teacher who has never previously thought about the existence of (or need for) such choices will find, through meta-analysis and reflection on past actions, that he or she has in fact been daily making such choices.

The second step in this choice-making procedure I see as identifying the issues spawned by the socio-cultural nature of literacy and learning more about their dimensions and aspects. The reader who has come this far has already done just that. Now is the time for conscious choice-making.

Teacher choices regarding the socio-cultural nature of literacy and the meeting of multiple literacies, cultures, and identities at the public school classroom door include the uni-cultural choice, which ignores the non-school Discourses and literacies of the students and promotes only the Standards-based school literacy of the “educated,” the “uni-cultural plus” choice, which also ignores the non-school Discourses and literacies of the students but also promotes a non-majority questioning identity, the multi-cultural as motivator choice, which uses non-school literacies and cultural-identities in the classroom as motivators for school literacy, and the multi-cultural as curriculum choice, which incorporates non-school literacies and cultural-identities into the school curriculum through a meta-cognitive lens.

Perhaps a final step in this choice making procedure is an acknowledgement that these choices are not once-in-a-career decisions. Our two visualized children of multiple cultures with multiple literacies, standing at our classroom doors ready to meet our academic-based school culture and its specific type of literacy, may transfigure into a kaleidoscope of children each year -- perhaps even each month. As well, different school districts may impose choice restrictions on its teachers. However, what remains is a need for teachers to become more reflective on their own cultural and Discourse awareness. Since the choices teachers make reflect their perceptions of themselves and their own identities as professionals and as public employees, individual teachers should discover their own theories and perceptions through their own actions. Then through self-reflection and introspection, they may make decisions about the types of choices that best fit their professional identities of who they are when they are leading a public classroom -- to “know where you are and who you are” at any given moment.



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Rich Versus Poor: Family Literacy in the Elementary Language Arts Curriculum

Rita Moore and Vicki Seeger

ABSTRACT

Two teachers challenge the rich versus poor metaphor which designates the school culture as superior to the home culture as they examine teachers' perceptions of how family literacy is represented in the elementary language arts curriculum.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rita A. Moore is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Montana-Western in Dillon, Montana where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Reading, Language Arts, and Education. Her research interests focus on teacher research and innovative approaches to teaching reading and writing in elementary through high school classrooms.

Vicki Seeger is a 3rd grade teacher at Pleasant Hill Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas. She is a ten-year veteran in the Seaman School District. She received her National Board Certification in Literacy in 2004 and her Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction, Literacy from Washburn University in 2005. She is a 2004 Milken Educator.

Transformative pedagogy develops through educational efforts in which people are encouraged to become knowledge producers, not knowledge receivers. (Spielman, 2001, p. 763)

Teachers often connect home and school literacies through an additive, not a transformative lens. Emphasizing family literacy and culture as a dynamic process (transformative) rather than as a fixed, insulated content (additive) (Erickson, 1990; Hancock, 2003; Nieto, 2002; Spielman, 2001) is a complex process. School climates are difficult to alter in any significant way unless teachers who are leaders guide other teachers and parents beyond the historical expectations of previously assigned roles of outsider versus insider, of rich versus poor.

In this writing, elementary teachers' perceptions of the representation of family literacy in the language arts curriculum of three K-6 schools are explored by two colleagues: Vicki, a fifth grade teacher at one of the schools, and Rita, a university professor. Eighteen teachers from grades K-6 in one suburban and two rural schools examined their practice for links to family literacy learning. The student population may be described as largely Caucasian with low to upper-middle socio-economic status. The schools are located just outside a large urban center.

Rich Versus Poor

The treatment of a child's personal, social, and cultural literacies within the school culture shapes the child's sense of belongingness and ultimately affects achievement (Christian & Bloome, 2005; Osterman, 2000). The literature suggests there is little evidence linking authentic home culture and literacy to school curriculum (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Marling & Paugh, 2005; Nieto, 2002). Teachers



often follow the “deficit” theory rather than the “wealth” theory in regard to the variety of literacy experiences children bring from their homes to the classroom (Linder & Foote, 2002). Student life experiences and life stories from which literacies develop both *affect* and *effect* learning (Gee, 2001b). For example in the world of reading: “Comprehension of written . . . language is as much about experience with the worlds of home, school, and work as it is about words” (Gee, 2001a, p. 714).

Family Literacy in the Language Arts Curriculum

Five statements focused a survey in which 18 teachers were asked first, to rank on a Likert Scale of one to five their perceptions of how family literacy and/or family practices were represented in the language arts curriculum. Please see Figure 1 for a brief description of the statements and a numerical summary of responses. Second, teachers were asked to provide curriculum examples supporting their responses. Since the sample size is small the lists of family literacy activities from the three schools are combined. These are in Figures 2 and 3. The response rate surveys was 100%.

Teachers’ Perceptions

To give us an overall picture, we asked the teachers to rank their perceptions of how well the language arts curriculum supported home literacy in their classrooms. Fourteen teachers showed confidence in ranking statement two (information sharing with parents). Sixteen (16) teachers showed confidence in ranking statement three (home to school learning connections, and statement five (understanding family literacy). In other words, the teachers did not perceive a lack of family literacy connections in the language arts curriculum as they knew them

Figure 1. Teachers’ Ranked Responses. Five is high and one is low. N=18

Survey Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. Classroom environment reflects families and the community		7		4	7
2. Classroom provides information from school to home (newsletters, parent conferences, etc.)			4	6	8
3. Curriculum draws from home literacy utilizing home to school connections as learning resources.		2	2	6	8
4. I have expressed to or shown my preservice teacher the importance of home to school connections.	6	2	3	4	3
5. I have a good understanding of the backgrounds, issues, and family literacies of the children in my classroom.			2	9	7

The numbers in the boxes represent the number of respondents.



Family and school partnerships mean far more than sending home newsletters or encouraging parents to attend school events. While these are worthy practices, they fail to address the deeper issues integral to two different cultures: family and school. The teachers' responses revealed that much of the time the school culture was the authority--the dominant culture (Leland & Kasten, 2002). The image of rich versus poor prevailed which suggested the need to examine practices upon which partnerships rather than deficits could be built. There was a divide in how teachers perceived their actions in regard to including parents and families in the curriculum and what they actually did. Vicki examines this phenomenon through this example:

When a parent at one of the district schools began home schooling her son she was asked to come to a School Site Council meeting and explain the home schooling procedure. The parent made the comment that she could now understand why her child's teacher "does all those things for writing" such as brainstorming story ideas and expanding word choices. This comment caused me to reflect on my own lack of competence in informing parents about why we teach what we do in the classroom. The school climate almost promotes a sort of secrecy about what we do and why we do it.

Additive and Transformative Curriculum Examples

When asked to list as many examples from their classroom curriculum that they thought demonstrated connections to family literacy, the teachers created lists. Rita then categorized the lists as transformative or additive curriculum; counting the number of participants per category. In Figure 2, thirteen of the teachers listed one or more responses categorized as "additive," while in Figure 3 five teachers listed one or more responses categorized as transformative.

Figure 2. Additive Curriculum Examples. N=13 teachers

- Send books home for students and parents to read
- Tips for parents in newsletters
- Send reading book home on week-ends with slip for parents to sign
Accelerated Reader books sent home nightly.
- Parents sign a slip when the student is ready to test.
- Sight word lists sent home for parents to help students learn.
- E-mail events of the classroom to parents.
- Hosting a "parent read aloud" day.
- Send directions home to parents on how to edit the child's writing.
- Reading contests for pizza
- Asking parents to read and respond to children's writing
- We discuss differences in home life and that it's okay to be different
- Various business sponsored reading incentive programs
- Volunteers, Parent Teacher Organization, Celebrations
- Read-a-thon pledges for Christmas
- Teacher generated newsletters to inform of upcoming events
- Relate book situations with home situations
- Parent teacher conferences
- Grade cards

**Figure 3. Transformative Curriculum. N=5 teachers**

Family message journals
Writing about the history of their names (Why did your parents choose your name?)
Brainstorming topics from home life to write about in writing workshop
Interviewing parents, grandparents, and the residents of the community to learn about what schools were like when the interviewee attended our school.
Memoir writing that involved parent interviews
Listening to the Walls Talk: A Fourth Grade Study of Community History that may be viewed at: "<http://www.millennium.scps.k12.fl.us/wallsfocuskansas.html>"
Student generated newsletters that elicit the writing and research interests of a wide variety of family members

The activities categorized as “additive” clearly carry the message that the school is the authority. There are tips for parents in newsletters and even discussions about how it’s “okay to be different,” however, the definition of different may originate from the viewpoint of the school culture. None of the activities transform the curriculum to first include family literacy practices, customs, or beliefs. For example, instead of talking about it’s “okay to be different,” first, focus on the kinds of people in their families and the kinds of things they read about and talk about at home.

Critical literacy may be taught using children’s literature to segue into sensitive home and cultural issues but it is important to remember that connections to personal experiences are what validates learning. Critical literacy raises awareness about equity and social justice as well as understanding one’s own personal and social literacy (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, in press). Children’s literature provides an excellent framework for examining family and cultural values (Hancock, 2003) within the language arts curriculum but it is not enough to examine someone else’s words. The classroom must provide spaces where home and school literacies conjoin. Dudley-Marling and Paugh (in press) explain:

In school settings, students often use written and oral language to infuse their personal, social, and cultural identities into the “official” curriculum” - what Dyson (1993) refers to as “staking a claim.” Interpreting texts through the lens of personal experience, drawing on their lives outside of school in their writing, and spontaneous “talk-around-the-edges” (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991) are among the means by which students “stake a claim” by inserting their social, linguistic, and cultural identities into the curriculum. (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, in press).

Under transformative curriculum, the family and community are an active presence in the curriculum. Neither are given a position of power over the other; both cultures are learning together. Consider this entry from a family message journal, (a shared writing between a second grade student and her mother). These message journals were used as reading texts in one of the second grade classrooms. (All names are pseudonyms.)



Dear Mommy,

My other family message journal has not any more space in it so I got a new one. It is very exciting writing in a new Family Message Journal. I am reading The Moonstone Castle Mystery right now. We are on the letters U and V in the cursive writing alphabet. We are making a quilt of what we did and liked doing in school!

Suzie

P.S.: please write a whole page if you can!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dear Suzie

A quilt about school would be very interesting. I could do a very big quilt of all the things I like to do at work. I like to read cases that tell me about the law. Today, I read cases and statutes (Laws) to give Governor Gray advice on what he can do to fix the state's budget problems. If people don't agree to pay more taxes (dollars to the state) we will have to cut \$150 million out of the money that pays for schools. That is lots of money. Many schools will have to fire teachers, nurses, secretaries, and computer workers. I think this is a very bad idea.

When you grow up and finish college, I hope you find a job that you will enjoy as much as I enjoy my job. I love you.

Mom

In the next example Vicki explains how she expanded what had been a completely student generated classroom newsletter to include family members' participation and interest. The following excerpt highlights the importance of mediating family literacy with classroom curriculum to support the greatest number of learners:

The two students who are editors for the month enlist their parents to contribute an article. So far, we have had 100% participation, and the parents have decided what they will write about although the students sometimes make suggestions. After Mrs. Grace went to Scotland, the students wanted her to write a fictional account of what it was like to live in a castle. She was thrilled to do it, and had lots and lots of personal information from her trip. Mrs. Derby contributed an article about web sites, and you probably remember that she is our computer para [professional]. She knows exactly what we're doing in the classroom and noted web sites that had something to do with what we are studying.

This past month, Alice's dad contributed an article about Biff Henderson. It was an event that he attended, a subject (car racing) that he knows a great deal about, and he was excited about meeting a TV celebrity. Another thing: his wife was appalled at his first draft, so they went through the writing process at home!

The other article this past month was from David's mother. Their son, Geof, was diagnosed with diabetes when he was a 4th grade student with me. She really wants people to



understand the disease (and she is a school nurse paraprofessional). Then, David picked up on her idea and wrote about having a brother with diabetes. Anne and Taylor will be the next editors. Even though we won't write until the end of the month, they are both ready for ideas for their families.

Anne is going to interview her grandmother who is deaf about what it was like to grow up deaf. Anne and I took an American Sign Language class during the summer to learn sign language. Now she teaches the entire class sign language each day at the end of the day. Taylor is going to interview his dad when he goes to Oklahoma for Thanksgiving about what it's like to move around with your job.

Culture and Transformative Curriculum

Integral to success for teacher and learner is understanding what defines family culture and identity. It is not “quaint artifacts or isolated folklore” (Nieto, 2002, p.55) which pose the danger of defining cultural traits within school curriculum in isolation thus “fragmenting and trivializing our understanding of people’s lifeways as we freeze them outside time, outside a world of struggle in concrete history (Erickson, 1990, p. 23). The literature clearly denotes that literacy rituals of families are not perceived as contributors to literacy development; in general, they are overlooked (Bloome, Harris, & Ludlum, 1991; Nieto, 2002). One of the examples of transformative curriculum Vicki listed is creating a website, “Listening to the Walls Talk,” based on interviews with parents and community members about old buildings in the community in which the school was located. Rich local history came alive through these stories as her former 4th grade class members received a first person glimpse into the history of their community, not from textbooks, but from people they knew and trusted. The web address is listed in Figure 3.

Those with the greatest success in transforming the curriculum to reflect attitudes, language, and culture of all of the children are teachers who mediate curriculum issues through conversations with parents about the backgrounds, experiences, values, and expectations of the home culture (Spielman, 2001). These conversations take on the tenor of establishing relationships, rather than reporting data about levels of student achievement. This is particularly revealing with struggling readers and writers.

Teachers know a great deal about how children who struggle often devalue themselves as learners—what they “believe about schooling gets in the way of instruction” (Henson & Gilles, 2003). School is a place where they may not be successful, but home and community is a place where they can meet expectations in the rituals and routines of daily familiarity (2003). They know a lot about the environmental print of their surroundings and the daily events of their community. Bringing the home culture into the school culture begins to bridge the gap, leaving students feeling less alienated and in more familiar territory. Key to that process is changing what both the school culture (teachers) and the home culture (families) believe about each other’s role in the literacy development of children.

Discussion

Transformative curriculum is not cosmetic: it seeks to establish a critical understanding of culture and beliefs, ideas, customs, language, and ritual that define us as humans (Erickson, 1990). For example, differentiating instruction for multicultural understandings requires taking into account the home culture and language of the children as individuals rather than approaching the issue in a one size fits all fashion (Fisher, 2002; Leland & Kasten, 2002). Vicki explains:



Often, an educator's idea of differentiating instruction in a multicultural classroom consists of labeling classroom items bilingually and including literature from the students' cultures. While these are important to a classroom, they do not scratch the surface of becoming a classroom rich in multicultural understanding of the home.

Teacher preparation programs fail to prepare candidates to differentiate instruction through the acknowledgement and understanding of individual family backgrounds (Fisher, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd, Grisham, Richards, Fisher, Wuthrick, Hammons & Richmond, 1998; Linders & Foote, 2002). And, while curriculum standards or school improvement plan goals may include infusing family culture and literacy, the instructional approach remains largely additive (Linders & Foote, 2002). We believe that to understand the literacy development of others, teachers must be aware of students' funds of knowledge (Allen & Labbo, 2001, Moll, 1992). They must realize that teacher and family mediated learning is integral in developing transformative home and school connections and that the many additive kinds of activities that designated parents as outsiders and lesser authorities create unseen barriers for sharing and learning from one another.

Teachers as peer models for reform

During a recent discussion with another teacher from one of the two rural schools with whom we worked, we learned that in schools where teachers model the transformative approach to curriculum design, other teachers are likely to follow. For example, one of the most consistent examples of this kind of modeling was demonstrated with the use of Family Message Journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) in all three of the schools in kindergarten and second grade. In the follow up discussion we learned that this family literacy and teaching strategy spread to other classrooms in the school. One teacher extended the project to include parent observation of the child's progress based on the child's goals and the parent's observations. The parents write:

Dear Ms. Simpson,

As you already know, we really love the family journal. We have so much fun writing back and forth to each other that we all forget it's a learning tool for her. We think the family journal has taught Debbie how to communicate through writing. Deb feels so comfortable with her writing that she often writes letters to her grandparents. We do think this journal is a great way to monitor her progress. We would like Debbie to focus a little more on her punctuation and for her to end her sentences instead of continuing her sentence with the word "and."

We look forward to every letter. Thanks for including it in the daily classroom activities.

Sincerely,

Ron and Susan Jackson

Modeling and leadership among teachers who understand how to transform curriculum to include family literacy may change the way their peers perceive the role of family literacy in the curriculum. According to one teacher's experiences as a teacher in quest of this model, "you have to try it



to feel its effects. It's like moving your kids into a comfort zone where they know a great many of the answers."

Concluding Thoughts

*Now I ask you what's your story?
and don't you tell me you don't
got one,
cause you do.
It just depends on how hard you look.*

(Alvarez, 2003, p. 290)

The passage from the above poem, *Life's Quilt*, was written by a fifth grade student, Lisa Alvarez who was searching for a place in an unfamiliar curriculum. Teachers may not understand the connections between how children acquire literacy both in and outside of the classroom (Allen & Labbo, 2001; Linder & Foote, 2002; McCaleb, 1997), but they will likely teach children whose literacy backgrounds, cultures, and communities are dissimilar to their own (Banks, 1993; Nieto, 2002). The stories we all have bridge learning to understanding. Teachers who connect learning to their students' backgrounds--to their life stories--are much more likely to be successful (Knapp, 1995; Spielman, 2001).

Transformative versus additive curriculum is a difficult paradigm for teachers to grasp but when you consider that everyone has a story to tell, then the metaphor of rich versus poor can change. We must change school climates and cultures steeped in the historical notion that the school's role is that of information giver to those perceived as less knowledgeable--the family. This pre-assigned role creates a barrier for teachers who might otherwise understand the vital connections between home and school literacy. Then, we begin to learn from each other's stories.

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The 6Rs Approach: Developing “Critical” Writers Among Poor, Urban Students in a Summer Literacy Program

Brett Elizabeth Blake and Richard Sinatra

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the implementation of the 6Rs writing approach into a summer literacy program offered to poor, urban children in New York City. Taking a cue from Rosenblatt (2004) the authors believe that readers and writers add onto their understandings and extensions of language as they engage in and transact with new readings, new writing formats, and new learning environments. Further, through presenting actual student samples of writing, the authors show that these children, as readers and writers, can also learn to think and respond more critically to the texts they read and write, questioning, for example, stories and meanings that surround gender, race, and class, while meeting all-important state and city standards.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Brett Elizabeth Blake is Associate Professor and Associate Chairperson of the Department of Early Childhood, Childhood, and Adolescent Education at St. John’s University. She is the author of several articles and books on adolescents and literacy.

Richard Sinatra is Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Human Services and Counseling at St. John’s University and is also the author of several articles and books.

I wish I were a chill slimmy monster
Yo Yo Daniel
He is a bad monster so Daniel
Crawled to the Monster and
The bug ate him and
The cock-a- roach ate him too
(Carlos, Age 9, 2003).

“How did you get your kids write this?” “What does it mean?” “How does it meet the standards?” and “My kids say they have nothing to write about” are among the many comments we have heard over the last several years among teachers in New York City and the surrounding suburbs when presented with the above “Wish” poem modeled on the late Kenneth Koch’s writing models/prompts from the early 1970s (Koch, 1970; 1973).

Together, both authors have conducted countless workshops among 100s of teachers on “best practices” for helping students to learn to write (and to learn to write “critically”) and to learn how to connect students’ writing with their reading, and vice versa. Interestingly, it has been *among teachers* that we first learned (and learned the most) about the current state of teaching writing in our schools today, leading us to seriously rethink our notions of what writing programs *can* look like in classrooms in the 21st century.

Specifically, we found that among the teachers with whom we worked, most of them said that they did *little or no* writing at all with their students in their classrooms. In fact, in most cases, we found



only 2 to 3 teachers in each in-service workshop who felt she or he completely understood, had time for, and therefore could justify introducing the varied writing approaches presented to them today, especially considering the pressure placed on them by their districts and by state standards and high-stakes testing. And yet, when we introduced the “6Rs approach to writing” into a summer literacy program among urban, poor children (who also reported that they did not typically write much during the school year) we heard both students and teachers exclaiming, “wow,” or “it’s amazing,” and, “I can see how it could work!”

Providing extended educational opportunities for poor, urban children during out-of-school time when parents often need to work or to care for other siblings, has become a major concern of educators, government and community organizations, and parents themselves. One intent of the federal Twenty-First Century grant initiative is to support school-based academic and recreational programs when traditional schooling is not in session, such as during after school, weekends, holidays, and summers (US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, 2003). Furthermore, during the long summer “off time,” the resources of learning and schooling are “turned off” for economically “disadvantaged” children limiting their capability for academic gains while the same is not true for their middle-class counterparts according to Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel Olson (2001). However, the “summer slide” can be avoided while state standard requirements are supported (Borman, 2001; King & Kobak, 2000). Such good out-of-school programs should include a wide range of options, provide hands-on activities related to a thematic interest, and have an academic focus aligned with the work being done in the classroom (Pardini, 2001).

This paper describes the rationale, design components, and program results of a summer literacy program called the “6Rs approach” offered to thousands of urban, poor (The summer literacy program is part of a larger comprehensive summer project, CampUs, described below). Other practitioners and providers may wish to use the structure of this approach to achieve an integrated and coordinated way to increase children’s overall literacy development during out-of-school time while connecting to state English Language Arts standards and impacting positively on their lives. Inherent in this approach is the belief that what one reads can influence what and how one writes. Taking a cue from Rosenblatt (2004) we believe that readers and writers add onto their understandings and extensions of language as they engage in and transact with new readings, new writing formats, and new learning environments. Further, children, as readers and writers, can learn to think and respond more critically to the texts they both read and write, questioning, for example, stories and meanings that surround gender, race, and class (See Blake, 1995, 1997).

The 6Rs Program Rationale

Two major considerations guided the structure and literacy implementation of the 6Rs approach. The first was forged by a sense of mission of its four major program sponsors – the After-School All-Stars (formerly the Inner City Games Foundation), The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), The New York City Board of Education, and St. John’s University. Their common mission goal was to provide opportunities for urban, poor youth during off-school time by engaging them in educational, athletic, recreational, and community enrichment programs while, at the same time, disengaging them from the potential “pitfalls” of inner-city life witnessed in substance abuse, poverty, littering, and “socially deviant” behavior.

In three 45-minute periods over a ten-day period, in support of the common purpose we focused on three themes: (1) beware of the dangers of substance abuse (say NO to drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes);



(2) show respect for the community and environment (don't litter and pollute); and (3) strive to be a good person and citizen (be of good character at home, at school, and on the playing fields). In the children's trade books and literature used in small group settings we followed what Rudman (1995) likened to an "issues approach", in which problem situations found in stories mirror what actually occurs for peoples in society. Often known as the practice of "bibliotherapy", an issues approach offers a way to provide guidance and protection through reading. Such a thematic focus also helps both teachers and students think about meaning while promoting positive attitudes towards the very acts of reading and writing (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1999). Furthermore, where students write about what they read, the engagement of the process of writing enhances their ability to learn to write (Cohen & Spenciner, 2005). The writing plan accomplished with pens, pencils, and keyboard asked children to reflect upon these issues and consider the meanings found in the trade book readings.

The second rationale was to firmly support the major components of the English language arts and technology standards of the state and city by: (1) the engagement of children in wide and varied readings; (2) the production of discussion, written papers, and computer projects about issues or topics in which they had to produce evidence of understandings; and by (3) creation of a multi-media computer project in which they had to write, format, gather, and organize information (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1997). In New York City, the dropout rate for completion of schooling had increased for all students categorized by gender, native language, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status with the greatest increases for Hispanic, African American, and immigrant students. Research had clearly indicated to the department that the higher dropout rates were related to the increasing standards for promotion and graduation. These standards required an accomplished ability to write.

New York State like most states across the nation has begun to institute (and re-institute) various writing tasks as part of their state assessment requirements. For instance, students at fourth and eighth grade levels were introduced to "benchmark standards" in the English Language Arts by which, in large part, students could achieve success by writing acceptable papers based on responses made to textual readings. (This integrated reading/writing act was evaluated by the use of rubrics or scoring scales ranging from a level "1" as being inadequate writing to a level "4," defined as being "advanced writing proficiency." A level "3" indicated acceptable standards for writing). For differing writing tasks, students address the writing criteria of meaning, organization, development, language use, and mechanics.

In New York City, however, students have fared dismally on these assessments: 4th grade students performed "poorly" over the last four-year period with students achieving a level "2," or "below acceptable language arts standards" with scores at 67%, 58%, 56%, and 53.5%, while eighth grade middle school students performed even more poorly with 65%, 67%, 67%, and 70%, achieving "below writing competency" in the same four-year span. As a result, the state commissioner of education has urged that urban middle school students in particular concentrate their studies heavily on reading and writing, recommending that students reading at least 25 books a year and write at least 1,000 words a month (New York State Education Department, 2001b).

According to the National Commission on Writing (2003) writing is believed to be a crucial strategic skill for students since it is, "the mechanism by which they learn to connect the pieces and details of [all] their knowledge." And yet, recently the Commission has reported that the practice of writing among our nation's schoolchildren is both dismal and woefully ignored. The Commission noted that while many effective models of how to teach writing remain prevalent in the American school culture, the practice of applying these in the classroom is minimized. The Commission recommended that the time devoted to student writing should be doubled, that writing should occur across the curriculum, and that writing should occur during out-of-school time (2003).



This neglect of the power of writing, especially among at-risk, urban students was not always the case. Beginning in the late 1960s through the mid-1990s, research on the writing process approach was prolific (Atwell, 1987; Blake, 1992, 1995; Calkins, 1983, 1986; Dyson, 1992, 1993; Gere & Abbott, 1985; Graves, 1983, 1986, Murray, 1968). This research showed quite clearly that children can and do write, and they can and do write well. Further, research found, children from varied linguistic backgrounds and from diverse homes, for example, through the writing process approach, were more motivated to write, improved their spelling and grammar usage, and developed a greater sense of community, voice, and self through writing at all grade levels and across all ability and socio-economic groupings.

In the classroom, too, the tenets of the writing process approach were applied to the practices of the writing workshop, where students found themselves orchestrating their own writing from beginning to end: brainstorming or prewriting, drafting, revising, editing (often with peers in peer conferencing settings, or with the teacher in a one-on-one conference), and publishing and/or sharing in author's chair; ready to revise, edit, and read aloud again. Reports that teachers and students were flourishing in writing abounded.

And yet, by the early 1990s, there had befallen a curious silence about the future state of the writing workshop as reports of its success virtually disappeared. Dyson (1992) believed it was because of the rigidity that had taken over classrooms, where the writing workshop had become a "lock-step" method for students to follow. (This, of course, was in direct contrast to Calkins' original notion of "recursive, overlapping" steps where students brainstormed, drafted, edited, published, and repeated the cycle again and again). Other writing researchers like Blake (1995) believed that too much emphasis had been put on the process, rather than the product, or the "cultural texts" the students subsequently created, coupled with the fact that districts were beginning to de-emphasize writing altogether in favor of reading and math (A fact that the National Commission on Writing (2003) now confirms), while Lensmire (1993) believed that children's writing had simply lost its critical edge, leading both teachers and students to put less emphasis on its importance.

Whatever the exact reasons for the demise of the process approach to writing in classrooms and students' poor performance in writing overall, groups like the National Commission have realized that the lack of writing programs in the schools has and will continue to have, dire consequences on students' abilities to use written language and to communicate effectively at levels, and across all socio-cultural groups.

The Sponsors, Setting, and Participants

Children between the ages of 7 to 13-years old came from a number of housing sites operated by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) that provides affordable housing for low and moderate-income residents throughout the city's five boroughs. According to its 2002 resident characteristics, a total of 174,195 families with approximately 69,000 children in the 7 to 13-year-old range and with an average gross income of \$15,685 lived at its housing project sites. NYCHA's mission, however, is involved in more than just providing living space. Through its Department of Community Operations, NYCHA offers youth an array of educational, cultural, and recreational programs at its 115 community centers citywide. It is also concerned with providing a safe and secure learning environment and embraces programs for its youth that have as their foci ideas to help overcome the ills of inner-city life, such as poverty, drugs, violence, and hopelessness. Because CAMPUS was a program highly favored by



the Department of Community Operations, NYCHA continued to be the major funding source over an eight year period.

During the summer of 2000, 1,028 children/clients from 25 housing project sites attended some or all of the 10 days of each cycle (there are a total of 2 cycles; running concurrently); in 2001, 1,094 children from 27 sites attended; in 2002, 1,078 children from 24 sites attended, and in 2003, a record 1,297 students from 26 different sites were in attendance. Each year, from about 110 to 249 children are bilingual in English/Spanish; from 112 to 140 children were in currently or had been in the recent past, special education classes in their respective schools; from 55 to 76 children would enter second grade and from 35 to 50 children would enter eighth grade in the new academic year. The majority, or roughly two-thirds of each summer's students were African-American and would enter grades three through seven in the fall of the corresponding year. Roughly one-quarter to one-third of each year's participants were returnees from a previous year's camp.

Role of the Researchers and Data Collection

We used qualitative inquiry to see how children intertwined their reading and writing as they created "critical" written pieces for two, major, interrelated reasons. First, like Geertz (1973), we sought "thick description" in not only searching for the kinds of strategies that these poor, urban students utilized in becoming "critical," but how they actually *constructed, created with, and presented* these strategies to the researchers. Second, ethnographic inquiry allowed us, as the researchers, the opportunity to describe the children's strategies within the *naturalistic setting* of the classroom itself. Indeed, it is this facet of ethnographic inquiry that has as one of its most important features, the feature of *context*. That is, in examining (and subsequently, analyzing) the strategic approaches that poor, urban students utilized as part of the implementation of the 6Rs writing program, we have taken great care to describe the events as they evolved in the natural setting of the summer school literacy classrooms, shaped, "in particular contexts and [not completely] understood if removed from those contexts" (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 144). Describing these contexts and how the children learned and worked within these contexts becomes useful theoretical and descriptive data needed by others who may wish to undertake similar projects within similar programs.

Data were collected over a period of four summers, however, in this paper, only data from the summer session of 2003, are presented.¹ The authors acted as participant observers, moving from class to class, observing, engaging students in writing activities along with both the mentor and pre-service teachers, working side by side with particular students on revision strategies, for example, and selecting specific pieces to be included in this research project.

The Literacy Program Framework

The CampUs summer school program was a full day program in which the children split their time between sports (swimming, soccer, football, and basketball) and academics, i.e. literacy (reading, writing, and technology). Eight practicing teachers with advanced degrees in Reading/Literacy Education and three certified computer teachers made up the key training and mentoring staff of the literacy component of the project. These mentor teachers had served the project through a number of consecutive summers and were quite knowledgeable in training others to implement the 6Rs approach. The mentor teachers met in planning sessions from April to June of the academic year and reviewed both old and new books



related to the three themes. In addition, the mentor teachers planned initial training lessons for potential new staff members.

A key ingredient aiding the smooth implementation of the 6Rs approach was the establishment of a low and manageable pupil/teacher ratio. This ratio was accomplished by recruitment of from 40 to 45 pre-service teachers from the School of Education each year. The pre-service teachers were trained (a full two weeks prior to the children's arrival) in classroom management techniques, conflict resolution ideas, behavior management strategies, and actual lesson preparation. They spent two days learning the children's software programs and four days with the mentor reading/literacy teachers. They previewed the books to be used by the children, saw demonstrations of and practiced model lessons incorporating the steps of the 6Rs approach, planned concept and story map usage with particular readings, and learned how to assist children with written development by focusing on the qualities of writing as indicated on the New York State writing rubric.

Program Implementation

The 6Rs approach has six interconnecting, recursive steps, and incorporates many of the best practices of literacy instruction, including, crucially, what we've learned about how the reading and writing processes support and build upon one another. Further, in this age of standards and accountability, the 6Rs approach supports many national and state standards in the English Language Arts, a critical fact that, whether we agree is useful/harmful and/or authentic, is a reality in today's classrooms. We would be doing children a disservice if we did not help them connect their work to the standards, as well as to help children to understand the kinds of rubrics that state exams are using to measure their success. It is only in giving students access and ownership to the standards to which they will be held, that students can truly be free to take control of their learning.

The 6Rs approach follows the "steps" as shown in Figure One; steps that revisit many of the original steps of the writing process. First, students *read*. Next, through an interactive discussion with their peers, they use critical thinking skills to *reason* and brainstorm the text ideas. Next, students *retell* and *reconstruct* the meanings of the reading through the use of an organizational plan with story and concept maps; (*R*)*write* a narrative account or informational report using their map as a guide; learn of the qualities of writing and scoring weights of a *rubric* system, and *revise* their initial drafts by not only conferencing with their peers, but by close mentoring provided by the teacher. Finally, the students self- and peer-evaluate written pieces against the rubric scale. As in the recursive nature of process writing, students may re-read, re-write, and/or "repeat" any of the steps above.

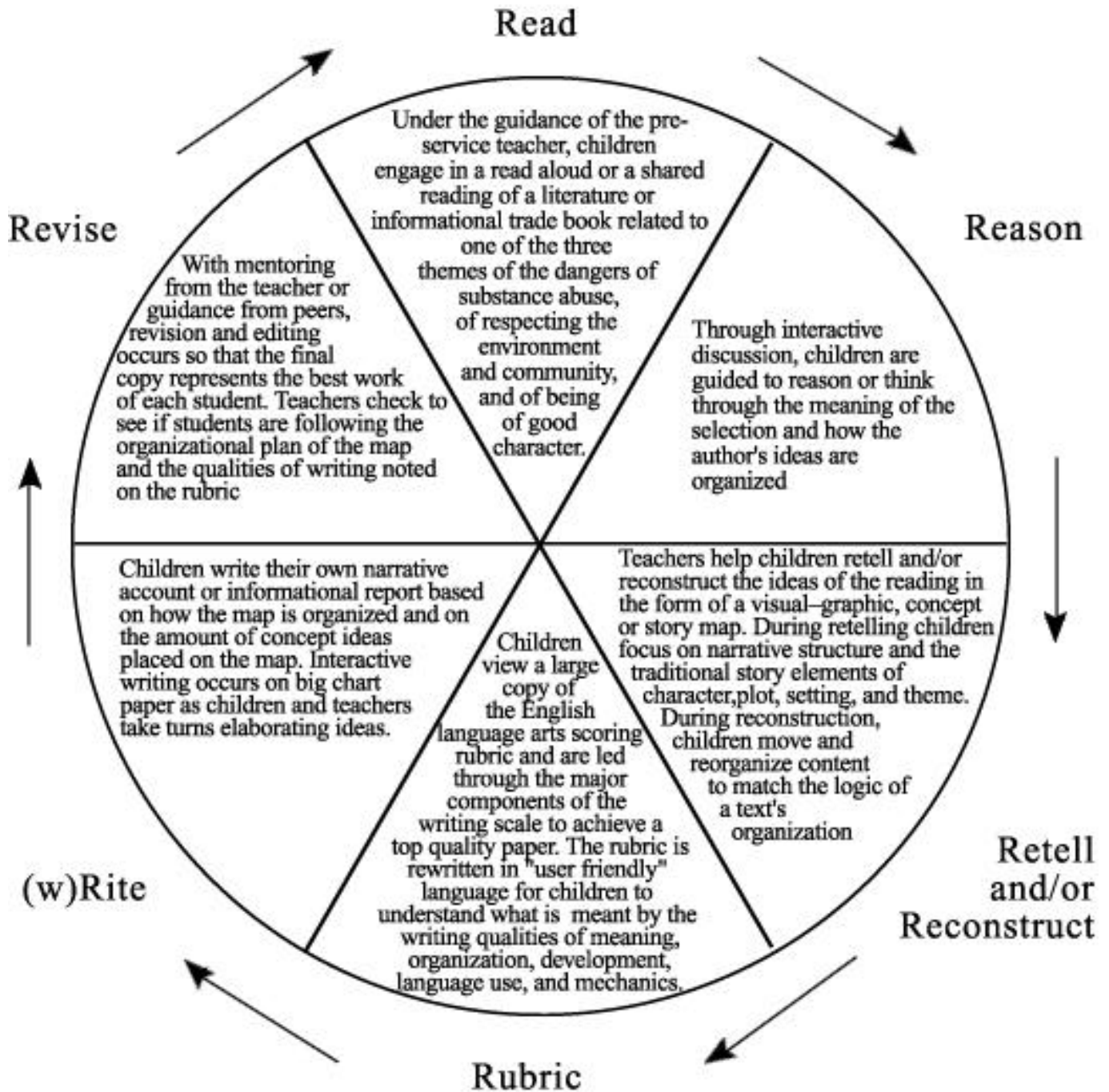
Background Support for the 6Rs Approach

Writing and planning for writing after reading are the central features of the approach. As students learn the big ideas associated with the writing process, they learn to control structure through writing and learn how writers organize their information to help readers understand what they wish to tell. This is a crucial component of the writing workshop for the 21st century, where standards, test tasks, and rubrics often reign supreme.

The thinking and literacy processes involved in the "reconstructing" and "retelling" aspects of the plan make use of the idea of visual representation of ideas through "maps". Concept and story maps, also



Figure 1: The 6Rs Approach



known as semantic maps, webs, clusters, and graphic organizers, serve as a major program strategy to help children formulate and organize their ideas before, during, and after an initial writing. Information based on the reading of a trade book is written either by the teacher who elicited the information during



the verbal discussion stage of “reasoning” or by the children themselves as they puzzled out the concepts and ideas of the text.

Researchers have reported that all students can improve in reading comprehension and planning for writing when they have been shown how text ideas are structured in narrative and expository readings and when they have been provided with visual models of text organization (Davis, 1994; Vallecorsa & deBettencourt, 1997; Wong, 1997). Many of the studies in the literature have also reported positive effects of concept map use for vocabulary and reading comprehension development when small groups of children and youth were taught in controlled settings (Boyle 1996; Englert & Mariage 1991). Furthermore, providing writers with visual frameworks of text organization gives them a framework for producing, organizing, and editing compositions and has a positive influence on writing overall (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991; Wong, 1997). With mental plans of how stories and informational readings are organized, children can form mindsets or mental schemata of how text is organized to assist them in future comprehending and composing processes and can approach texts in more predictable ways (Meyer, 2003).

Daily Process

Reading – the first “R” in the “6Rs” approach – was supported by the use of trade books. Small collections of trade books, often known as “text sets,” were strategically used by teachers as they reinforced the major themes of the program. Research has shown that the addition of trade books to the writing workshop helps in the development of oral language and reading ability, assists in vocabulary acquisition, and increases children’s motivation to read and to write in school settings and at home (Galda & Cullinan, 1991). Harvey and Goudvis (2000) mention that short texts such as picture books are more accessible than full-length novels and textbooks. Trade books are also packaged in attractive formats that make them easy and “user friendly” to offer children in a summer educational climate, for example. Our use of fiction and non-fiction trade books served as the “magnifying glass” vehicle to enlarge and enhance the children’s interactions with the messages of the three themes (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). The books were categorized by both theme and reading level/content for younger children (7 to 9 year olds), older children (10 to 13 year olds), and for students from other cultures learning a second language. The “character development” books were all children’s literature and picture books in the narrative story tradition, while informational books as well as storybooks were found in the other two thematic groupings: the dangers of substance abuse and respect for the environment.

Teachers used differing concept map structures that represented how various reading and writings were organized. Some of the more popular maps used by teachers to help students both comprehend and connect story elements and expository information while providing a structural plan for the reconstruction through writing have been described in the literature (See especially: Harp & Brewer, 2005; Reutzel & Cooter, 1999; Sinatra, 2000) and include:

- a number of maps which represented stories by plot episodes and which contained question prompts for story grammar elements;
- a map which represented stories that featured a character’s problem and how the character solved and learned from that problem;
- a map which enumerated the steps-of-a-process such as what occurs to the body when a harmful substance is used;



- a map which described a central topic as in a “spider map” which develops from the central topic to the surrounding details;
- a cause and effect map which was often used with the substance abuse and littering topics; and
- a compare and contrast map, used when two book characters or two harmful substances were developed in detail.

The mapping step was often followed by a discussion about writing and about how reading can provide a number of ideas to develop in writing. Children were then presented with the qualities of writing and weighting scale noted in the project scoring rubric. (The components of the rubric were written in a more “user friendly” way for children, and 20 large copies of the children’s rubric were made and hung in each of the project’s classrooms). Teachers and students discussed what features of writing would make a good paper as they viewed the rubric, and children would return to look at the rubric as they engaged in the on-going drafting, revision, or editing process.

Children wrote their own individual papers while viewing either a group-constructed map or their own filled-in map as they were reminded of the qualities of writing noted in the displayed rubric. Project teachers interacted freely with the children as they wrote often answering questions posed by the children about their writing, such as “does it sound good?” or “is this correct?” After teacher and peer interaction and suggestions, a rewriting was accomplished. Once revision and editing were completed, children would share their reading of their papers to a buddy or the whole group with the final “polished” piece finally being displayed on the classroom wall under the appropriate theme title.

Program Success: Revealing Thoughtful Writing

In the next section, we present samples of the students’ writing that revolve around the particular themes emphasized in the summer school program. Each theme evoked different levels of enthusiasm from the children, but each, were explored by the children, using the 6Rs approach, in new ways. (Students’ pieces are presented in the original, unedited form so as to preserve their voices, except where meaning would be lost).

Theme of Substance Abuse: Making good or bad choices

My favorite experience was when my group read a book called, “The House that Crack Built.” I enjoyed when we wrote about the book. The book had a message to never do drugs and to always make the right choices. If you don’t make the right choices there will be consequences and sometime there not good!

(Tiffany, Age 12, 2002).

Like Tiffany, for many of the students in the summer camp program, the theme of “substance abuse” necessarily meant writing about making good and bad choices around drug use; written pieces that one might expect to be extremely scripted considering the countless drug prevention seminars like the popular “Just Say No” program that these children were required to attend in and out-of- school. And yet,



by introducing this theme through the 6Rs approach, using various trade books, children's literature, and mapping to organize one's thoughts, the substance abuse theme was presented in a fresh way, and was reflected in the students' written pieces.

Anastasia completed the following piece after she had engaged in the first 3 steps of the 6R's approach: *reading* the book, "The House that Crack Built" (Taylor, 1992) using *reason* and critical thinking to have a discussion about the book with her peers, and *reconstructing* the meaning of the book and her own experiences and understandings into her own words onto a "Classification Map" (See Figure 2):

Choices

Making choices are very important. The choices are important because these choices rule your life. Good choices lead to a good life. You can become a hero by saving someone or just Doing the right thing. Bad choices are the wrong choices. When you do drugs it messes up your life and if you have a child it messes them up. So Right!

(Anastasia, Age 11, 2003).

Anastasia's piece not only met the New York State Education Department's (2001a) English Language Arts Standards 1 and 3, for example (students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding, and, students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation, respectively), but also for Standard 2: students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression. Anastasia enthusiastically informs us how drugs cannot only mess up one's life, but a child's as well. Instead, she suggests (as seen in the Classification Map), people will be "smart and regular," as well as "not cry" and "not hurt each other" by making the choice not to do drugs; a response in direct contrast, we believe, to what any other "typical" writing task may have required. Here, using the 6R's approach, she has been afforded the opportunity to express herself within the context of the issue at hand. In other words, she is offering us a peek into who she is; how she feels about drug abuse, and how she believes other people should act when faced with making good and bad choices.

Theme of Protecting the Environment: Cause and Effect

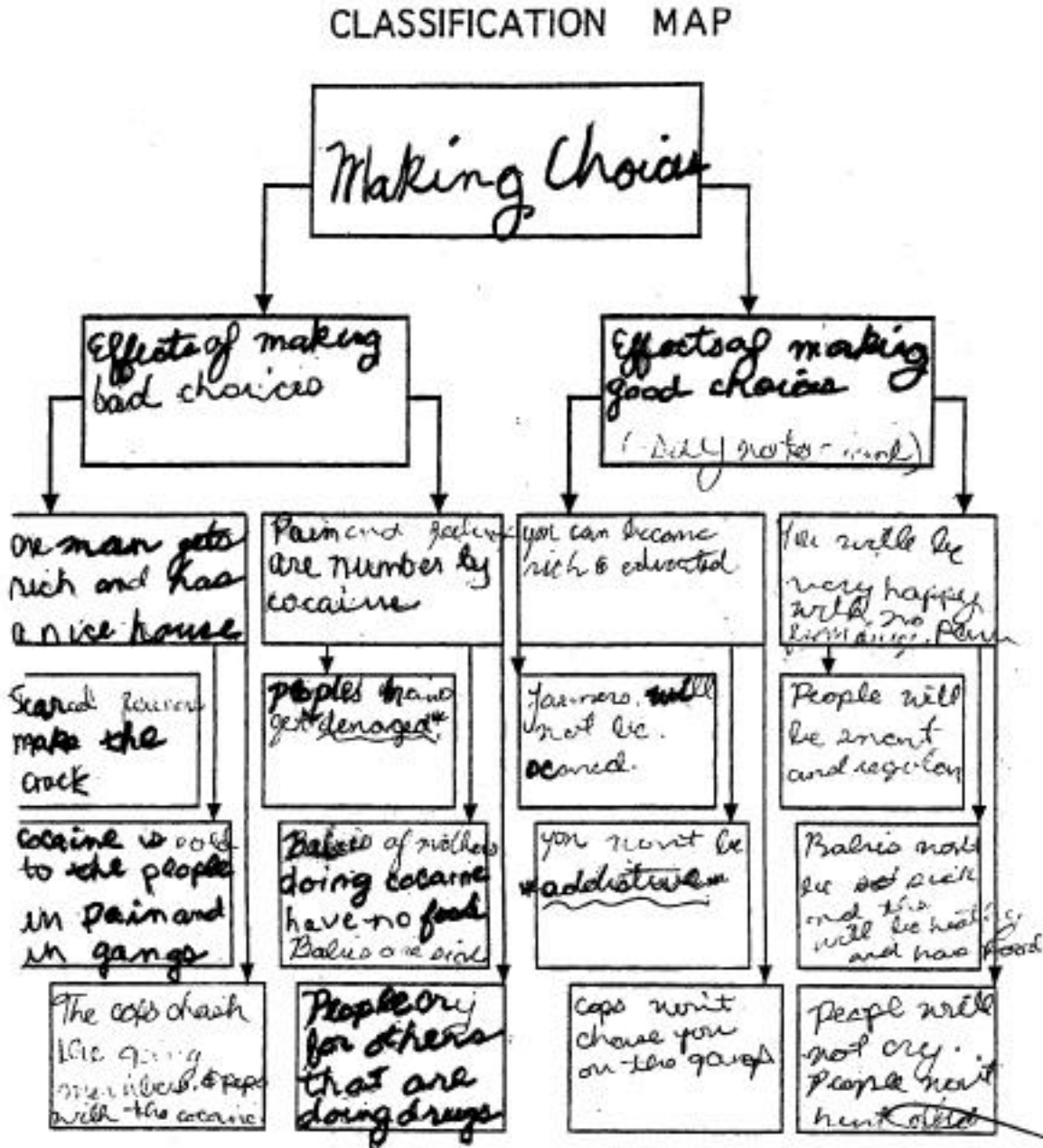
Another of the summer program's major themes was: "Respecting the Environment." Many trade books were chosen to support an exploration of the theme, and the students responded in a variety of ways. Once again, however, by using the 6Rs approach, many of the students were not only able to interpret and better organize the material they were reading and writing, but also were able to relate the salient issues of maintaining a clean environment to their own lives. Here, the students were most interested in talking and writing about garbage and litter in the city streets—a problem many children found far more pressing than oil slicks, recycling, and de-forestation. For example, in Figure 3, Jamal and his class have prepared a "Cause and Effect Map" using the book, "Just a Dream" (Van Allsburg, 1990) in preparation for writing pieces of their own.

Theme of Good Character: Challenging Segregation and Racism

The final theme from which the students produced various written pieces, was "being of good character." Interesting, from these students' points of view, "being of good character" quite often seemed



Figure 2: Classification Map

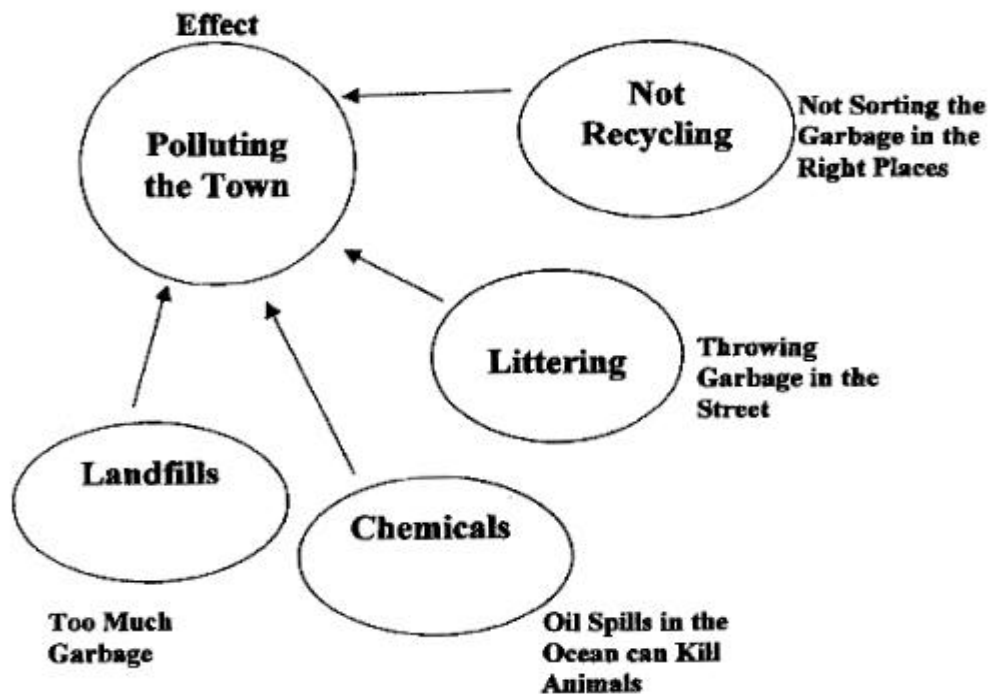


STUDENT _____ CLASS / TEACHER _____
 TOPIC NAME OR TITLE The man that made bad DATE _____



to gravitate toward a discussion of racism; its causes and effects, its historical roots in sports, like major league baseball, for example, and its place in today's world. Many of the students were very astute about the evils of racism, and most were able to discuss it on a level many of us were amazed to hear.

Figure 3:
Cause and Effect Map: Multiple Causes for One Effect



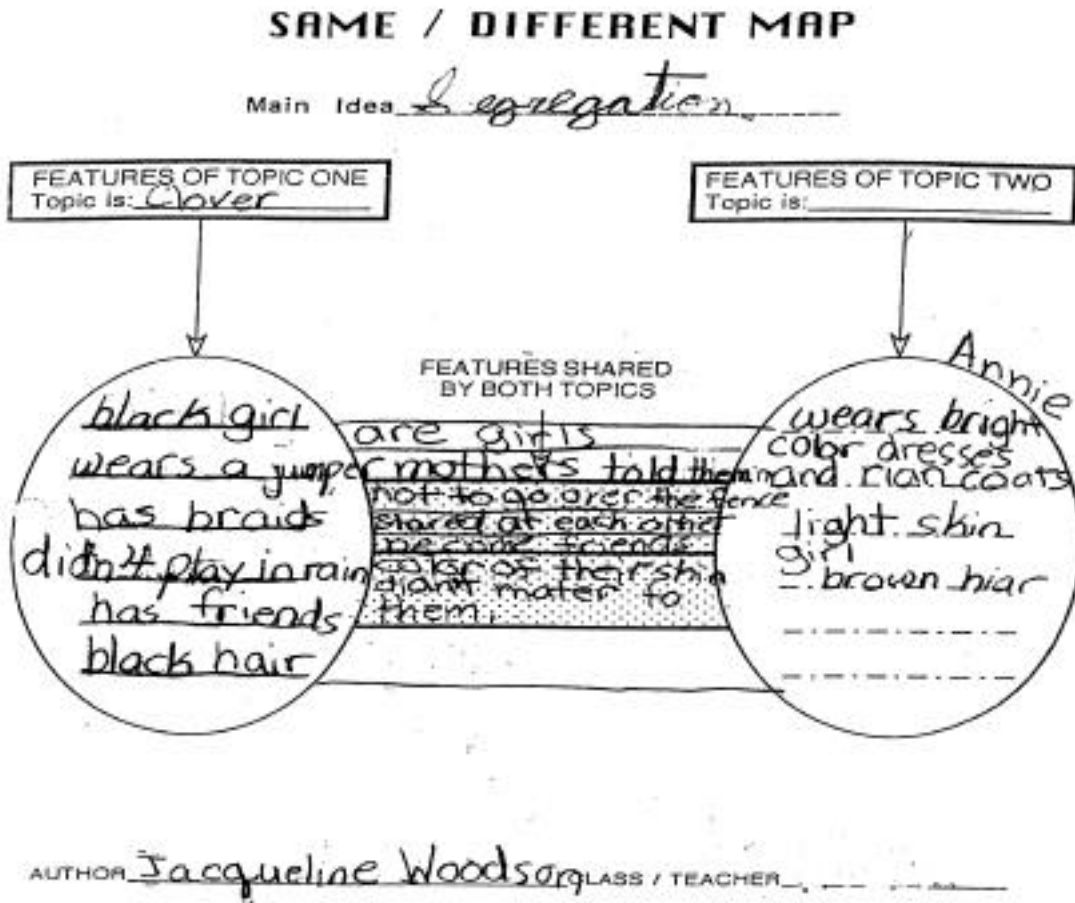
Topic: Respecting the Environment
Author: Chris Van Allsburg
Title: Just a Dream

The major trade book that was used to support this theme was, "The Other Side" (Woodson, 2001). This book beautifully describes and explores two school-aged girls' feelings and reactions to racism in their own community; a theme, once again, that our students understood very well.

In the following piece, 9-year-old Kiara begins the writing component of the 6Rs approach by filling out a "Same/Different Map" listing the main idea as "Segregation." Here, Kiara organizes the information about the two main characters in the book, highlighting the similar features that each girl shares. (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4: Same/Different Map



Kiara then joined in a lively class discussion about the book through which the class then organized its thoughts onto a large map being constructed at the front of the class. Next, each student began to draft a piece, checking his or her writing against the project rubric and sharing ideas and changes with each other and with the teacher. Finally, Kiara, like the other students, produced written pieces of her own.

The Other Side

Dear Annie,

I think Segregation is wrong because the color of our skin doesn't matter. I think that Segregation is wrong because we should be able to live together. I feel sad that white skin people and black skin people can't respect all races. I think Annie is of good character because she didn't make fun of Clover's skin color.

Your friend, Kiara

(9 years old, 2003).



Notice that it is when Kiara is given the opportunity to write a piece of her own, that we are able to hear her voice, a voice distinctive not only by its form (Kiara writes a letter to one of the characters, Annie), but also by its message: respect all races!

Using the metaphor of the fence found in the book, Kiara finished her piece by drawing and cutting out pink pickets, pasting her story panels to the pickets, and displaying it alongside the other students' work on the classroom wall.

Implications for Practice

In the previous section, we have presented samples that show how poor, urban students in a summer literacy program through the "6Rs approach" can and do write given the time and the opportunities to do so. Further, their writing can and does match state and national standards, can and does connect to other content areas as they learn to write across the curriculum, and most critically, we believe, can and will continue to help students become "thoughtful" as they also learn to become more tolerant and more understanding human beings in a global, multicultural society. Kiara's piece on segregation may be the most poignant example of students' thoughtful approaches and strategies toward writing.

Specifically, the 6Rs approach not only firmly supported particular New York State standards, as discussed above, but also supported many of the national standards recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996). These standards suggest in part that students should: (1) "read a wide range of texts...to acquire information, help society, and for their personal enjoyment; (2) "students should read a variety of literature of different genres...to better understand human experiences; (3) adjust their written, spoken, and visual language to communicate effectively in different situations, and (4) recognize the audience for their writing and use the writing process to communicate effectively with them". All the students did read a wide range of texts and responded to these texts in ways that did, indeed, help them to "acquire information," (e.g. recycling), "help society," (e.g. racism), and for their "personal enjoyment," (e.g. "Writing helped me expand my mind). And, the students also learned to write for different purposes, across the curriculum, as they acquired new information. For example, the theme of "respecting the environment" was an easy fit to other content area topics, especially in math, science, and social studies. This would be critically important for students to understand how to do as, once again, state and national exams are asking students to make these connections explicit.

Implications and Conclusions

In sum, we believe the 6Rs approach to writing may be a success because it:

1. reaches a large number of poor, urban students who need supplemental work on their academics; both in reading and writing
2. is taught by pre-service teachers who will take this knowledge into the field
3. satisfies state and national calls for more emphasis on writing, and,
4. affords students opportunities to add onto their understandings and extensions of language (Rosenblatt, 2004) as they become more engaged, thoughtful, and critical writers.



Both the teachers and the students in the program felt very positive about using the 6Rs approach to writing. Currently, however, there are major changes being implemented (in curriculum, in personnel, in instructional services) in the New York City school system (as in other school districts around the country) giving rise to several questions: First, will teachers be able to make their own decisions about how they would like to best teach writing to their students? Second, will the students feel they have the opportunities and the “permission” to transfer their knowledge of “mapping” or “reasoning,” for example, for use on their writing tasks? In New York City, for example, the Chancellor has just mandated more standardized tests at regular intervals for public school students. These tests are purported to be very short, multiple choice tests that will gauge whether children will be ready for the much more lengthy state exams in math, science, and the language arts. More tests, less time, and fewer choices renders the time needed for the mental engagement necessary for writing even more hard pressed in classrooms today.

While more work may be needed and similar programs implemented to support the authors’ findings here, we believe that the 6Rs approach as described above can be a successful model for teaching writing to poor, urban students for four major reasons. First, it helps them to meet national, state, and local/district standards in writing; an area the National Commission on Writing has called critical. Second, the 6Rs approach affords these students additional opportunities to become more engaged, thoughtful, and critical writers; a feat most researchers (Allington, 2002; Blake, 2004; Blake & Blake, 2005; Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Sinatra, 2000; Tompkins, 2003) believe will help students to add onto their understandings and extensions of language in their academic learning overall. And third, and perhaps, most importantly, the 6Rs approach may help students to not only raise challenges to stereotyped interpretations of characters (Think of Kiara’s response to the book, “The Other Side”) as they move away from interpretations based solely on expectations of the “mainstream” culture, but also to begin to learn to challenge assumptions around race, gender, and class that pervade their own ideological positions about themselves and the world they live in.

And finally, as in the words of the National Commission on Writing (2003, p. 13) we hope, too, that:

Writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytic capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions...[but] above all...*they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful* (emphases ours).

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Other Suggested Children's Books

Character Development

Marzollo, J. (1997). *Soccer cousins: Companeros en el futbol*. NY: Scholastic en Espanola.
Thomas, P. (2000). *Stop picking on me*. NJ: Barrons Juveniles.

Substance Abuse

Greene, S. (1981). *The boy who drank too much*. NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell.
Vigna, J. (1995). *My big sister takes drugs*. Albert Whitman.

Respect for the Environment

Berenstain, S. & Berenstain, J. (1991). *Berenstain Bears don't pollute anymore*. NY: Random House.
Leedy, L. (1991). *The great trash bash*. Holiday House.

Multicultural Literature

Adoff, A. (1994). *My black me*. NY: Dolton.
Bartoletti, S.C. (2001). *Black potatoes: The story of the great Irish famine, 1845-1850*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
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ⁱ The data collected previous to the summer reported here were analyzed using quantitative methodologies. Students were evaluated on their writing using a four-point scale as prescribed by New York State. 58 to 63 percent of the students as a mean group showed gains in their writing over this three year period (with a .26 to a .30 gain where $p < .000$). The consistency of these gains has been documented. Data presented here are qualitative in nature as the authors decided that the previous quantitative data could not (and did not) capture adequately the contexts in which the students wrote (i.e. within the three major themes) as well as the "critical" nature of their written pieces.



Spring 2005



Read in order to live.
(Gustave Flaubert)

One must be an inventor to read well.
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Books dissipate the custodian and safeguard of police states— ignorance.
(Voltaire)

Thank you...
authors for creating,
and publishers for supplying these excellent
tools to
entice our children to love reading.

Please Bury Me in the Library (Gulliver, 2005) is an outstanding collection of 16 kid-friendly poems about reading, by J. Patrick Lewis. “Eating Alphabet Soup,” “Great, Good, Bad” are among the titles of these literacy-based verses. Each poem is illustrated by Kyle M. Stone whose beautiful acrylic paintings, though sometimes a touch ghoulish, are always warm. If you are a librarian, if you love to read, if you want to make someone love to read, then you’ll want to own **Please Bury Me in the Library**.

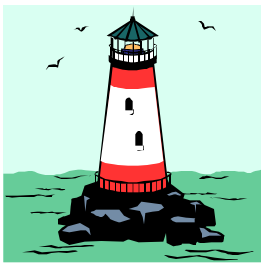
Primary Level

What’s the Magic Word? (Harper Collins, 2005), by Kelly DiPucchio, is the story of a newly hatched chick that is blown around the farmyard by a strong spring wind. He keeps asking to enter different animals’ homes, but in each case needs to discover a magic word to gain entry. To get into the doghouse for instance the magic word is “Bow Wow”! The chick keeps learning the range of barnyard passwords as the wind sweeps him from animal to animal. The final gust takes him to his starting point—his own nest. And what is the magic word? Of course it’s PLEASE. Marsha Winborn’s whimsical illustrations of the animals are outstanding. She has made the animals so appealing that children reach out and touch the pages.



Sleepy ABC (Harper Collins, 2004) was first published over 40 years ago and it's as good today as it was then. Margaret Wise Brown's simple rhymes and Exphyr Slobodkina's quilt-like paintings create an alphabet sure to make young ones feel cherished, safe and definitely sleepy. What a great addition to every toddler's library!

Anne Mortimer, the illustrator of **The Lighthouse Cat** (Harper, 2004), absolutely loves cats. You can tell by her rendering of each of the cats that appears in this outstanding picture book, with text by Sue Stainton. A fishing boat is caught in a storm and is unaware that the wind has blown out the candles in the lighthouse. The dangerous rocky shore is no longer marked; the danger is imminent. Mackerel, the lighthouse cat, saves the day by rallying all of the cats in the village to join him in the lighthouse. Their eyes shine brightly enough to warn the fishing boat and everyone is saved.



What a happy ending!

The Perfect Tail (Chronicle Books, 2004) by Mie Araki is a perfect *book*, for young children curious about animals and their tails. Fred, the rabbit, is looking for the perfect tail because he is unhappy with his own. In his search he admires and wishes he had the tail of first a raccoon, then a mouse, porcupine, peacock, and even a rhinoceros. His quest leads him to the realization that he should be happy with the tail he has. Children will delight in the child-like illustrations, also by Mie Araki. They'll also understand and enjoy the moral of this Hans Christian Andersen-like tale.

Remember the song "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More"? Karen Beaumont has taken that rhythm and written **I Ain't Gonna Paint No More!** (Harcourt, 2005).

Imagine a young artist left alone with lots of paint. There go the walls, the ceiling, and of course the painter himself—who *must* get covered before Mom comes back! "I'll just paint my hand, then I ain't gonna paint no more, no more no more..." Now do you think our little painter does stop at his hand? The illustrator, David Catrow, partnered with Karen Beaumont earlier in **I Like Myself!** (Harcourt, 2003). As in that book his zany illustrations in this new work will keep you laughing, but also will give young artists ideas—so don't leave the paint too accessible! This light-hearted book will appeal to all ages.



Early readers will find **Don't Get Lost** (Greenwillow Books, 2004) a warm-hearted tale about friendship. Little piglet and his friends decide to venture along the fields that border their home. Their mothers warn them to be careful and not get lost. They race and play hide and seek until it is time to go home. Can you imagine what happens next? Pat Hutchins is both author and illustrator of many children's first readers. This is one of her best.



Intermediate Level

Hanoch Piven has created sympathetic caricature-portraits of some earlier US Presidents in his interesting **What Presidents are made of** (Atheneum, 2004). Andrew Jackson fought duels and was known for his hot temper so his “portrait” includes a pistol as his mouth and bullets for his eyes! Ronald Reagan’s face is made up of, you guessed it—jelly beans! There are little anecdotes that accompany each portrait in this enjoyable though unconventional look at seventeen of our Presidents. The book’s last two pages contain a Presidential timeline with each of our President’s *official* portrait, from George Washington through to George W. Bush.

Don Quixote and the Windmills (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) retells and updates the story of Cervantes’ legendary hero in this new adaptation by Eric A. Kimmel. Señor Quexada has read so many tales of knights in shining armor, castles and dragons that he begins to believe he is the great Don Quixote himself, and sets off to fight some giant monsters. The reader is taken back in time as Señor Quexada becomes *Don Quexada*, with his faithful companion Sancho Panza. This imaginative, well-composed book could easily be used to stimulate discussions and comparison with the original novel.

Jack Prelutsky has given the reader a collection of seventeen haiku in **If Not for the Cat** (Greenwillow Books, 2004). Ted Rand’s beautiful illustrations help the reader solve the riddle of each haiku. The subjects selected for this collection are not the common household pets. Jellyfish, ants and bald eagles are among the unlikely candidates here. This collection of haiku will be returned to often, and may inspire Intermediate and Young Adults to create and illustrate poetry of their own.



My House is Singing (Harcourt, 2004) by Betsy Rosenthal is written in verse. The author invites us into her home and wanders from room to room, sharing a poem unique to each room. We move from an inviting bedroom to a secret hide-away. Children might be enticed to create their own poem about a special place in their home, or even in the classroom. Margaret Chodios-Irvine illustrated this beautiful book—*filled* with special places—especially for elementary children.

In celebration of the Centennial of manned flight, Allan Drummond has written **The Flyers** (Frances Foster, 2003). In 1903 a group of children is playing along a beach in North Carolina. The children express what they would do if they were able to create a flying machine. While the children wish and dream, Drummond intersperses the activities of the Wright Brothers as they prepare for their historic first flight. The children dream of a “flying bus” that can carry many people; they also dream of being able to walk on the moon. Then, one December day, the Wright Brothers successfully fulfill their own dream of flying, with a twelve-second controlled flight. Allan



Drummond’s book includes an illustrated timeline covering major aviation events from 1903 to 1969, from the Wright Brothers’ first flight to Neil Armstrong’s walk on the moon.



Bebe Moore Campbell's **Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry** (G.P. Putnam, 2003) is an excellent picture book to use with children living with a family member suffering from mental illness. The story deals with Annie, who has come to terms with the fact that her mother can have sunny days and dark days. Annie has Grandma to turn to during the dark days. She has to carry a heavy burden for her age, but manages to handle it in a mature manner. There are many types of lessons springing from this book. One is how we find the inner-strength to cope with an unhappy situation. Another is tolerance toward those who sometimes have "dark days," and understanding toward those who must live with them. This is an unusual but essential book, to build that kind of compassion.

Author Carol Gorman has written a third delightful tale geared toward the Middle School audience—**A Midsummer Night's Dork** (Harper Collins, 2004). Her main character is the infamous geek Sixth-Grader Jerry Flack, who manages somehow to become president of his class. Gorman brings insight and humor to the trials of being a Middle-Schooler. Her earlier **Dork in Disguise** dealt with cliques, and **Dork on the Run** with bullies. All three are filled with warmth, amusing situations, and a lot of understanding about this difficult age.



Pig (Charlesbridge, 2004), by Jules Older, is a humorous, informative text that discusses the life of a pig. The reader meets wild and domestic breeds and learns how bright pigs really can be. Older's appealing style makes this a great book for the not-so-easy to interest reader. Illustrator Lyn Severance has made her characters (the pigs) adorable! She was, by the way, the original designer of Ben & Jerry's ice cream packaging.

Cathryn Sill has created another high-quality book in her *About...series*. This one is **About Crustaceans A Guide for Children** (Peachtree, 2005), an easy-to-read informative work that explains what crustaceans are, Detailed paintings of understand the variety books there is also an crustaceans, to



how they live, and what they do in their spare time. the varied shell-fish by John Sill help the young reader of creatures included in this category. As always in Sill's 'afterword' that provides additional information about stimulate the interest of young naturalists to learn more.

Young Adult

Powerful Words (Scholastic, 2004) by Wade Hudson is a compilation of the writings of more than 30 African Americans from Colonial days to contemporary times. The collection includes inspiring words from Benjamin Banneker, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Alex Haley, Marian Wright Edelman, and many others. This excellent resource is set up in a very readable style. Each passage is preceded by a brief historical background. After each author's selected piece are a biographical sketch of the author and a section called *The Response*. Wade uses this 'response' to demonstrate how that particular author, by the power of his or her words, influenced changes in American life.



Eleven-year-old Ellie has to take charge of her younger siblings when her mother abandons the family to pursue her dream of becoming a famous actress. Ellie lives in a poor section of town on a dead end street. When the bus comes to pick up the children from her street the others on the bus tease them unmercifully. School is hard because even there the children are marginalized. Ellie has the chance to join the in-group if she rejects her best friend, but has the strength of character to be loyal. The book shows Ellie’s strength but makes the reader feel that schools need to do more to prevent the bullying that brings our youngsters so much anguish. **Here Today** (Scholastic, 2004) by Ann Martin takes place in New York State in 1963, and is an excellent, thought-provoking Young Adult novel based on an unusual premise, but touching on topics every adolescent can relate to.

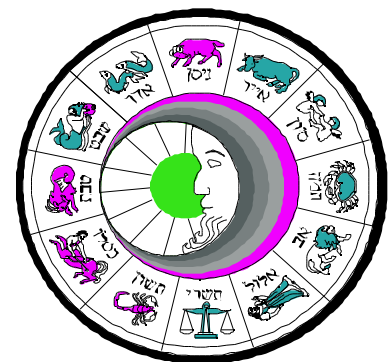
Strength of character overcomes bullying

You don’t have to be from Texas to love this anthology **Is This Forever, or What? Poems & Paintings from Texas** (Greenwillow, 2004) edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. The author/editor (a Texan, of course) collected the work of more than 100 contemporary poets and artists from the Lone Star State. In her introduction Nye claims that the people of Texas are willing to accept you as Texan after you’ve been there only ten minutes! Maybe it should be called the Big Hearted State!

Included in this work is a biographical sketch of each of the contributors along with a full index. The combination of pithy poems and full-color contemporary art makes this a perfect coffee table selection, appropriate for all readers—even non-Texans!

Especially useful for teachers, librarians...(anyone who makes up calendars)

Days to Celebrate(Greenwillow, 2005), by Lee Bennett Hopkins, is a treasury of information, art, and prose illustrated by Stephen Alcorn. Every month’s calendar appears on facing pages and is filled with birthdays, holidays, historic events, inventions, world records and thrilling firsts. Did you know, for instance, that on July 23, 1827 the first swim school opened in the US? Or that on September 24, 1936 the creator of the Muppets was born? Works from more than 60 poets are interspersed over the twelve months so as to make this book also a unique kind of anthology. Stephen Alcorn’s illustrations, influenced by the old almanac “sketch” style, pass from pen and ink whimsy to formal art work in luxurious color. This outstanding book would enhance anyone’s library but is a must for every elementary classroom. The informative discoveries children and adults will make scanning the calendars are boundless, and the interest-level of the material is uniformly high.





Naomi Soledad León Outlaw is a Fifth-Grade girl who lives in an Airstream trailer named Baby Beluga in a town called Lemon Tree, near an avocado farm. She lives with her Grandmother and seven-year-old brother who is bright, but physically handicapped. Naomi is teased at school about her



name, and her polyester homemade clothing. Because she has trouble expressing herself she is considered by her classmates “nobody special.” What they don’t know is that Naomi has a very special talent—she can carve beautiful figures from soap. This skill also serves to soothe her when she is badgered by the children at school. Life with her Grandmother and her brother Owen is happy and peaceful. Then her mother, who left home when Owen

was born, returns, filled with nasty schemes to remove Naomi, disturbing their peaceful way of life. Fortunately Naomi finally finds her voice and the children resist their mother, who tires of the struggle and ends up abandoning the children all over again.

Becoming Naomi León (Scholastic, 2004) by Pam Muñoz Ryan is written with warmth and love. The reader experiences some of the pain of Naomi becoming a Young Adult—but also the pleasure of seeing her evolve, through her art and self-awareness, from mouse to lioness, becoming at last—Naomi Soledad León Outlaw.

The December holidays are distant now but **Sam I Am** (Scholastic, 2004) is not necessarily a book only for Christmas and Hanukkah. Twelve-year-old Sam lives with his mother who loves all the old Christmas rituals, and also his father who would rather just light the menorah and order takeout Chinese on December 25th. His dog Pluto completes the household (since his older sister is away at college).

After Pluto knocks down the Hanukkah bush (it’s really the Christmas Tree but in Sam’s family it’s called the “Hanukkah Bush”) things become very intense as the family tries to celebrate the two different holidays at the same time. Sam, in an attempt to understand the rift that is developing within his family, turns to his parents, to his sister, to his best friend, and finally to God for some answers. Author Ilene

Cooper tackles this subject with warmth, much humor and a great deal of sensitivity, which is exactly what makes **Sam I**



Am into an all year round kind of book!

NYSRA Children’s Literature Committee

Esther Berkowitz, Pat Shea-Bischoff, Suzanne Cecil, Faye Cohen, Debbie Dermady, Kristin Gramlich, Victoria Ring, and Alice Sample (Chairperson)

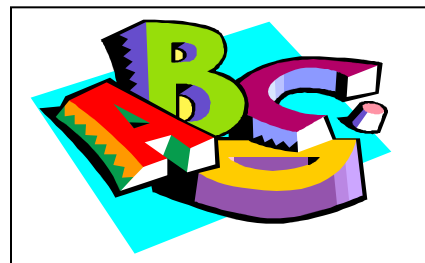


Looking for a Good Book?

Wendy McLeish

Wendy McLeish is a lifelong lover of children's books. She teaches literacy and early childhood courses at Buffalo State College.

We have all encountered experiences in which we have tried to locate the perfect book for our students. With so many books published it may be hard to find just the right one. The following books are ones that I enjoyed. I think you may like them, too.



Ages 2-5

Whose Nose and Toes? Written and illustrated by John Butler (Viking).

This question and answer book is sure to capture the attention of very young children. Butler's illustrations of ten baby animals resemble photographs. The nose and toes of the different animals are presented one animal at a time ensuring that the young reader will turn the page to reveal the entire animal. The repetitive question and predictable sentence structure will appeal to toddlers and give confidence to emergent readers as they read this book time and time again.

Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale. Written and illustrated by Mo Willems (Hyperion Books for Children). 2005 Caldecott Honor Book.

Mo Willems has done it again! His previous books are **Don't Let the Pigeon Ride the Bus!** (Caldecott Honor, 2004) and **Don't Let the Pigeon Eat the Hot Dog!**. Mr. Willems has written a tale about a child's innermost fear. This true-to-life story will be recognized by many parents.

Father and Trixie, a toddler, head off through their urban neighborhood to the local laundromat, with the father carrying the laundry and his daughter carrying her beloved Knuffle Bunny. On the trip home the daughter suddenly realizes she has left Knuffle Bunny behind and tries in vain to communicate the loss to her father. Once home the mother instantly realizes the problem and the family retraces their route to the laundromat in search of Knuffle Bunny. The episode ends with Trixie saying her first words, "Knuffle Bunny".



The trips to and from the laundromat are repeated in a predictable sequence that young children will easily catch onto. The language is simple yet humor is conveyed. The illustrations are an unusual combination of expressive, colorful, cartoon-like characters placed upon black and white photographs. If you look closely you will even find Pigeon in one of the illustrations. This story is sure to be a favorite of every young child.

Grades K-3

You Read to Me and I'll Read to You: Very Short Fairy Tales to Read Together by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrated by Michael Emberley (Little, Brown and Company).

This is a companion book to **You Read to Me and I'll Read to You**. Each of the eight fairy tales is humorously retold with a twist. These twists should encourage readers to pick-up the original version again and possibly invent twists for other familiar tales. The tales are written for two voices. The color-coded sentences indicate who reads; with a third color for the places when both voices read together. Each story ends with the predictable repetitive refrain "You read to me! I'll read to you!" This is an enjoyable book that belongs in every primary classroom library.

Grades K- 4

Even More Parts by Tedd Arnold. (Dial Books for Young Readers).

Tedd Arnold has added a third zany book to his previous two: **Parts** and **More Parts**. He again plays with the curiosity all children have with their body parts. This time he uses 100 body part idioms to humorously explore the fear children have with falling apart. Younger children will be sure to notice that three minor characters: the dinosaur, the tank and the super hero appear on every page. Sometimes the characters serve to extend an idiom by portraying related idioms. The book is a natural to use to teach and explore figurative language.

Grades 1-4

If Not for the Cat by Jack Prelusky, illustrated by Ted Rand. (Greenwillow Books).

Jack Prelusky tries his hand at haiku in this book. He uses this structured form of poetry and rich vocabulary to create riddles for seventeen animals, birds and insects. Ted Rand's double-page illustrations add to the richness of the book. It would be fun to read each haiku aloud and have children guess which animal is described before showing the illustrations. This book is a great tool to add to your haiku unit.

**Grades 4-6**

Sahara Special by Esme Raji Codell. (Hyperion Books for Children). paperback.

This book sings. Sahara Jones repeats fifth grade after being pulled out of special education. Fortunately for her the quirky new teacher, Miss Pointy, believes in getting to know her students. Through unconventional methods Miss Pointy creates a strong classroom community in an urban classroom that allows each of the children to shine. Sahara spends the year dealing with her feelings for her absent father, exploring writing and developing respect for individuality. Both children and teachers will find the story uplifting and inspiring.

Note: Some have criticized the swearing in the book. Ms. Codell defends the use of the few swear words in the book as being authentic to the way urban fifth graders speak. I did not find the use of the swear words offensive, but it is advisable to know your community before using this book with intermediate grade level children.

Ages 10 and older

The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E. L. Konigsburg. (Atheneum Books for Young Readers).

Twelve year old Margaret Rose Kane reluctantly goes off to summer camp while her parents travel to Peru. Camp turns out to be a nightmare, but Margaret Rose is determined to hold onto her individuality in a place where conformity is expected. Fortunately her eccentric uncles rescue her from camp.

As Margaret Rose spends the rest of the summer with her uncles, she finds out why they had not originally offered to have her stay with them. The uncles' beloved backyard towers comprised of scrap metal, colored glass and porcelain are scheduled for demolition...much to the family's dismay. The story explores the theme of empowerment, the definition of art and the freedom of individuals.

This book is a companion to **Silent to the Bone**. You do not need to read it before reading **The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place**. The latter book stands on its own.