



# Critically Reading the Word and the World

Building Intercultural Understanding through Literature

*This collaborative project involves teachers in a small public elementary school in Tucson, Arizona in the USA. They examine the pedagogical issues and strategies involved in integrating international literature into the curriculum beyond a “tourist” approach, encouraging close critical reading in developing children’s understandings of culture and the world.*

Building international understanding through children’s and adolescent literature has always been at the heart of IBBY. Jella Lepman fled Nazi persecution in Germany during WW II, returning as a cultural and educational advisor at the end of the war. Her belief that books can build bridges of understanding to unite children of all countries led her to establish IBBY and the International Youth Library. Through literature, children have the opportunity to go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface-level information about another culture. They are invited to immerse themselves in story worlds, gaining insights into how people feel, live, and think around the world. They also come to recognize their common humanity as well as to value cultural differences.

*Through literature, children have the opportunity to go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface-level information about another culture.*

by KATHY G. SHORT



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Lepman's vision of opening the world for children through literature still remains an elusive goal in many schools and libraries. The availability of authentic literature from a range of global cultures varies dramatically from country to country. Even when the books are increasingly available, many educators are not familiar with the books and are uncertain about their cultural authenticity. They are often unsure about how to use the books since many contain unfamiliar stylistic devices and terminology and are about experiences and settings that, at first glance, seem removed from their students' lives. They struggle with how to help students make the significant connections that move their responses beyond viewing other cultures as exotic or strange. Many unwittingly adopt strategies that are tangential, or even in opposition, to the goals of global education, through, for example, focusing on "we-they" dualisms or superficial features of cultural lifestyles that actually reinforce stereotypical perceptions. Simply reading more about the world can actually negatively influence the development of intercultural understanding.

*Interculturalism is an attitude of mind, an orientation that pervades thinking and permeates the curriculum.*

My research focuses on the challenge of effectively engaging children with international literature to build intercultural understanding. One collaborative project involves working with teachers and administrators in a small public elementary school in Tucson, Arizona. Our research examines the pedagogical issues and strategies involved in integrating international literature into the curriculum and the influence of literature on children's understandings of culture and the world. Teachers at Van Horne Elementary

School have written vignettes about their work in an electronic journal, *WOW Stories* ([www.wowlit.org](http://www.wowlit.org)).

### **Teaching for intercultural understanding**

Teaching for intercultural understanding involves far more than lessons on human relations and sensitivity training or adding a book or unit about a country into the existing curriculum. These approaches typically lead to superficial appreciations of cultural differences that reinforce stereotypes, instead of creating new understanding about cultural perspectives and global issues. Interculturalism is an attitude of mind, an orientation that pervades thinking and permeates the curriculum. It is based on a broad understanding of culture as ways of living and being in the world that are designs for acting, believing, and valuing. Geertz (1973) defines culture as "the shared patterns that set the tone, character and quality of people's lives" (p. 216). These patterns include language, religion, gender, relationships, class, ethnicity, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, family structures, nationality, and rural/suburban/urban communities, as well as the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives held by a group of people.

*This framework highlights multiple ways of engaging with international literature to support children's critical explorations of their own cultural identities...*

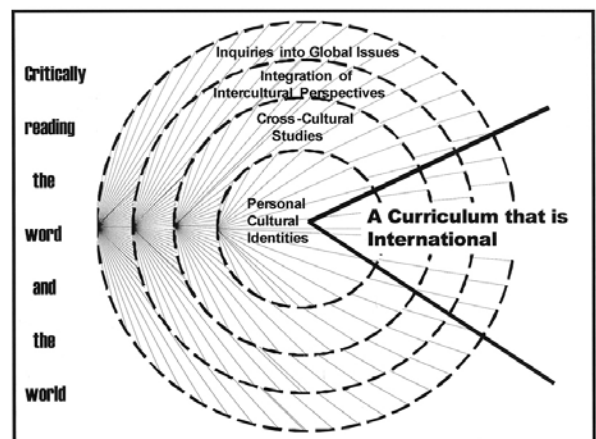
Fleck (1935), a Polish scientist and philosopher, argued that cultures consist of thought collectives that form whenever groups of people learn to think in similar ways because they share a common interest, exchange ideas, maintain interaction over time, and create a history that affects how they think and live. Since most individuals think and act within several thought collectives at a time,

this view captures the dynamic, evolving nature of culture as each person interacts with, and is changed through, transactions with other cultures. These understandings highlight the diverse ways in which culture is reflected in children's lives.

Key scholars in intercultural education (Allan, 2003; Fennes & Hapgood, 1997; Hofstede, 1991) as well as global education (Begler, 1996; Case, 1991) inform my definition of intercultural understanding as an orientation in which learners:

- Explore their cultural identities and develop conceptual understandings of culture.
- Develop an awareness and respect for different cultural perspectives as well as the commonality of human experience.
- Examine issues that have personal, local and global relevance and significance.
- Value the diversity of cultures and perspectives within the world.
- Demonstrate a responsibility and commitment to making a difference to, and in, the world.
- Develop an inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring perspective on taking action to create a better and more just world.

We use a curriculum framework to enact these theoretical beliefs and to organize our curricular work. This framework highlights multiple ways of engaging with international literature to support children's critical explorations of their own cultural identities, ways of living within specific global cultures, the range of cultural perspectives within any unit of study, and complex global issues. The curricular components in the framework interrelate and build from each other to highlight different intercultural understandings. Surrounding these components is an environment in which readers are encouraged to read from a critical stance. We are using this framework to explore the potential that each component offers for children's understandings and the different ways that international literature can be integrated into the life of a school.



### Personal cultural identities

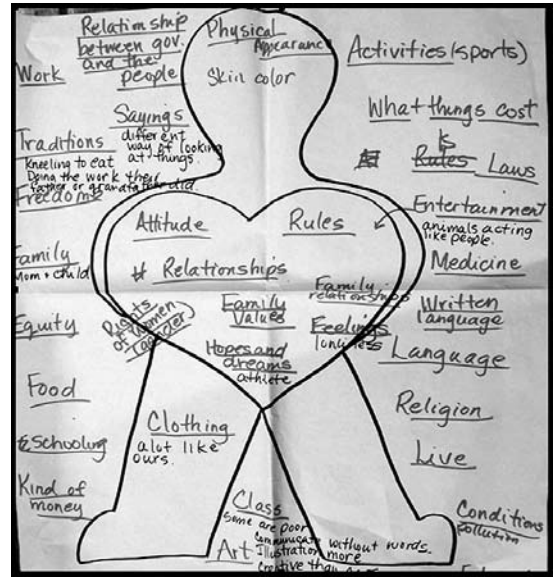
All learners, adults and children, must explore their own cultures before they can understand why culture matters in the lives of others around them. Interculturalism does not begin with the ability to consider other points of view, but with the realization that you have a point of view. Children bring their personal experiences of living in the world and being part of



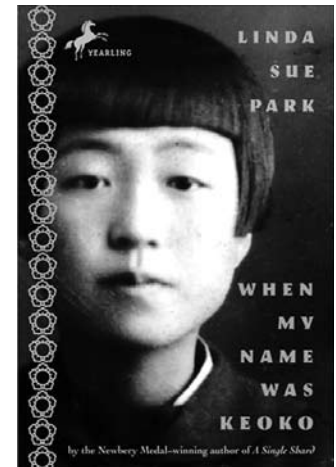
In-depth studies of specific global cultures can broaden students' perspectives and provide a window on the world. Unfortunately cross-cultural studies often take the form of theme units that focus on superficial aspects of a culture through a limited study of the 5Fs – food, fashion, folklore, festivals, and famous people. A cross-cultural study should provide an opportunity for children to examine the complexity and diversity within a particular cultural group. Focusing on food or folklore is a beginning, but can lead to stereotypes and superficial understandings unless students also examine the deeper values and beliefs that are significant within that culture. A cross-cultural study should include literature that reflects complexity in terms of the economic, social, political, aesthetic, moral, historical, and geographical contexts of a cultural group (Begler, 1996).

We found that because our students already recognized the complexity of culture within their own lives, we could use their experience of creating Cultural X-Rays to brainstorm what they might explore about another culture. When fifth-grade students began a study of Korean culture, for example, they used a large blank Cultural X-ray to brainstorm the aspects of identity that they needed to explore to understand this culture.

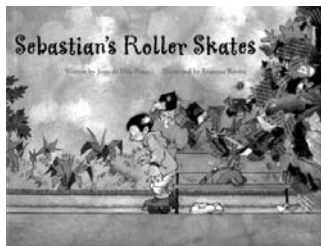
This large chart of brainstormed cultural characteristics served as a place for students to record observations throughout our study as they read from a range of fiction and nonfiction literature. *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002) was read aloud and discussed and students browsed a collection of many picture books and informational books. We found that the books about Korean culture available in the United States were primarily historical fiction and folklore with few contemporary images, leaving the impression that Korean culture was mired in the past with traditional clothing and small villages. We purchased picture books from South Korea written in Hangul to provide contemporary images and to encourage explorations of the Korean language. We also located books that had been recently translated into English, such as *My Cat Copies Me* (Kwon, 2007), and discussed picture books, such as *Waiting for Mama* (Lee, 2007), that students could connect to their lives but which also provided an anomaly because of actions or values that were unexpected from their cultural viewpoint.



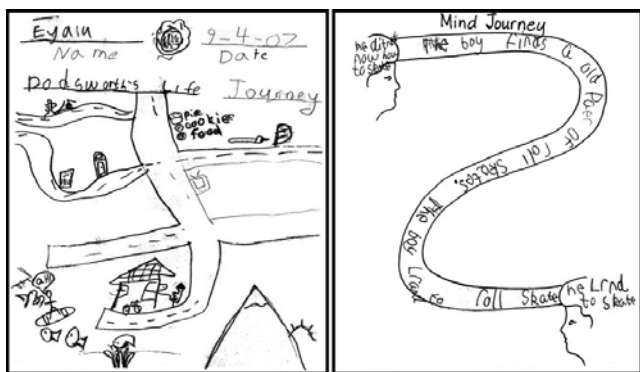
Brainstorm of aspects of identity within a culture (11-year-olds).



*Cross-cultural studies thus provide both a mirror and a window for children as they look out on ways of viewing the world and reflect back on themselves in a new light*



*We have been able to locate global literature on various social and historical themes and topics, but have struggled with finding books from a range of global cultures on science and mathematical content.*



Maps of *The Pink Refrigerator* & *Sebastian's Roller Skates*. (Eyalu & Tanner, Age 7).

The value of an in-depth cross-cultural study is that students look deeply to understand the complexity within a culture and so go beyond the surface-level explorations that characterize this type of study. Not only can these studies provide a window on a culture, but they can also encourage insights into students' cultural identities. Students come to deeper understandings about their own cultures and perspectives when they encounter alternative possibilities for thinking about the world. Cross-cultural studies thus provide both a mirror and a window for children as they look out on ways of viewing the world and reflect back on themselves in a new light.

### Integration of international perspectives

While an occasional cross-cultural study is appropriate, literature reflecting a wide range of cultural perspectives needs to be woven into every classroom study, no matter what the topic or curriculum area. We worked to integrate the stories, languages, lifestyles, and ways of learning from many cultures into units of study across the curriculum, not just for one or two special

units each year. Whether the focus was folklore, family, living at peace with others, the moon, or fractions, we tried to incorporate literature reflecting a range of global perspectives. Otherwise, interculturalism can be viewed as a special unit instead of an orientation that pervades everything.

We took on a school-wide focus on "Journeys," beginning with a conceptual understanding of journeys through connections to children's lives. We discussed literature, such as *Once There Were Giants* (Waddell, 1997) and *The Pink Refrigerator* (Egan, 2007) and asked students to map their own life journeys. Their discussions of different types of journeys led to a range of inquiries. The younger students focused on mapping learning and emotional journeys through responding to books such as *No, I Want Daddy* (Brune-Cosme, 2004) and *Sebastian's Roller Skates* (de Du Prats, 2005).

The older students met in small groups to discuss text sets organized around themes that emerged from their brainstorming. Each of these text sets included 10-15 picture books from a range of cultural perspectives around the themes of Beginnings and Endings, Movement and Competition, Dreams and Wishes, Growing and Learning, Pain and Healing, Spiritual and Emotional Pathways, and People

and Relationships. Their inquiries eventually led students to a study of the forced migration of people who have become refugees throughout the world.

We found that integrating literature from diverse cultures into student inquiries provided for a much wider range of perspectives on a particular theme or topic and so encouraged more complexity in the issues that students considered. They cannot settle comfortably into the issues that are part of their own cultural perspectives only, but are challenged to go beyond that worldview. We have been able to locate global literature on various social and historical themes and topics, but have struggled with finding books from a range of global cultures on science and mathematical content. Those books rarely appear to be selected for translation and publication in North America.

### Inquiries on global issues

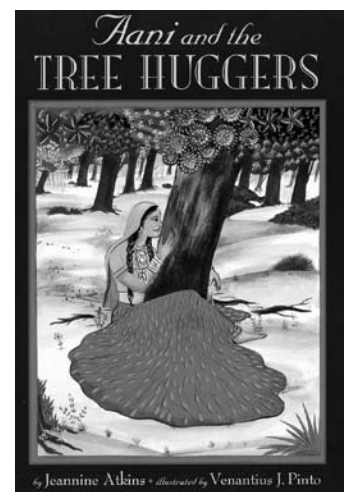
Another curricular component that is significant for building intercultural understanding is developing inquiries that focus on specific global issues, many of which highlight difficult social, political and environmental topics, such as violence, human rights and social justice, environmental degradation, overpopulation, poverty, language loss, race and ethnicity, and economic imperialism (Collins, Czarra, & Smith, 1998). Students occasionally need to study a global issue in-depth and over time to understand the local and global complexity of an issue and to consider ways of taking action in their lives. These studies are essential in encouraging students to go beyond talk and inquiry to determine how to take action to create a better and more just world.

We engaged in a school-wide inquiry on human rights that each classroom took in different directions. We began with developing a conceptual understanding of rights through connections to children's lives. We knew that children often complained about events they saw as "unfair" at

school. We read aloud and discussed books such as *A Fine, Fine School* (Creech, 2003) and *The Recess Queen* (O'Neill, 2002) and invited students to create maps of the school on which they located unfair events. These maps supported students in searching for the rights that were involved when they felt something was unfair. Students created lists of what they believed their rights were at school and noted which rights they felt needed to be addressed in their own context.

*Reading critically is the stance that race, class, and gender matter in how we interpret and analyze our experiences in the world as well as in the texts we encounter.*

We moved students beyond a discussion at the local level to the broader global issues through browsing books from many different parts of the world that reflected a range of human rights issues, including *Aani and the Tree Huggers* (Atkins, 1995), *Brothers in Hope* (Williams, 2005), *Selavi* (Landowne, 2005), and *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa, 1993). We also read aloud and discussed books such as *The Carpet Boy's Gift* (Shea, 2006) to examine the strategies that children use to take



## Children's Books Discussed

Anzaldúa, G. (1993) *Friends from the other side* San Francisco: Children's Book Press

Atkins, J. (1995) *Aani and the tree huggers* New York: Lee & Low

Brune-Cosme, N. (2004) *No, I want daddy* New York: Clarion

Creech, S. (2001) *A fine, fine school* New York: HarperCollins

D'Adamo, F. (2001) *Iqbal* New York: Aladdin

de Deu Prats, J. (2005) *Sebastian's roller skates* Ill. F. Rovira La Jolla: Kane/Miller

Egan, P. (2007) *The pink refrigerator* New York: Houghton Mifflin

Kwon, Y. D. (2007) *My cat copies me* LaJolla: Kane/Miller

Landowne, Y. (2005) *Selavi, that is life: A Haitian story of hope* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos

Lee, T. J. (2007) *Waiting for mama* Ill. K. Dong-Sung New York: North-South

Mandelbaum, P. (1990) *You be me, I'll be you* LaJolla: Kane/Miller

O'Neill, A. (2002) *The recess queen* Ill. L. Huliska-Beith New York: Scholastic

Park, L.S. (2002) *When my name was Keoko* New York: Yearling

Perez, L. (2002) *First day in grapes* Ill. R. Casilla New York: Lee & Low

Shea, P. D. (2003) *The carpet boy's gift* Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House

Shin, S. Y. (2004) *Cooper's lesson* Ill. K. Cogan San Francisco: Children's Book Press

Waddell, M. (1997) *Once there were giants* New York: Candlewick

Williams, M. (2005) *Brothers in hope* Ill. G. Christie New York: Lee & Low

action in their own contexts. In their classrooms, students engaged in a range of inquiries that included discussions, based on their interests, about literature relating to particular human rights issues such as child labor, gender inequity, undocumented immigrants, and homelessness. Throughout these inquiries, students particularly noted the strategies characters used to take action and used these strategies to take action on some of the issues they identified in their own school context.

### Critically reading the word and the world

All components of a curriculum that is international should be permeated with “critically reading the word and the world.” Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) used this phrase to indicate the importance of raising issues of power, oppression, and social justice. Without a focus on critically reading the word and the world, the four components could easily become a superficial tour of culture where

students learn about internationalism as tourists who pick up isolated pieces of information. A tourist curriculum is based on the assumption that “if we all just learned more about each other, we would like each other and the world’s problems would be solved.” This approach does not consider difficult issues of social justice and so students are unable to make real changes in how they think about and relate to others.

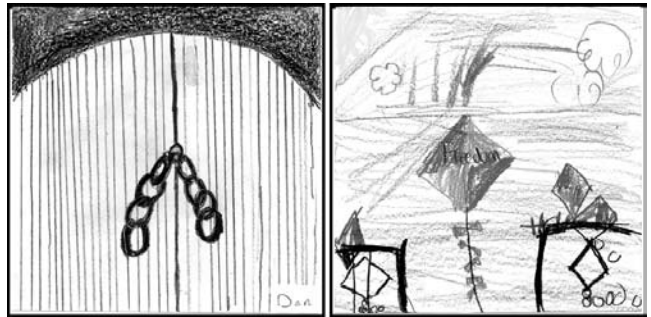
Reading critically is the stance that race, class, and gender matter in how we interpret and analyze our experiences in the world as well as in the texts we encounter. Freire argues that students need to wrestle with ideas and words, not just walk on top of them. Reading the word and the world from a critical stance provides the opportunity to question “what is” and “who benefits” as well as to consider the “what if” of new possibilities. We noticed, for example, that students initially avoided talking about issues of racism by taking a position of colorblindness and stating “It doesn’t



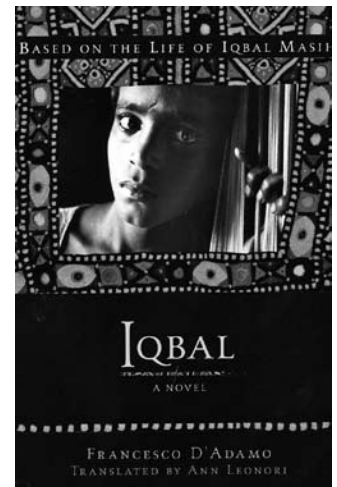
matter what you look like on the outside, it's the inside that counts.” These statements deny that skin color matters in how people are treated and is one essential aspect of cultural identity. Colorblindness allowed students to walk on top of words, but they needed to be challenged to wrestle with the difficult issues of racism in their lives as well as in the broader world. As always, we began with books close to their lives – such as *First Day in Grapes* (Perez, 2002) about a Latino child who is treated with prejudice – before moving into literature on these issues from a range of cultural perspectives.

Critically reading the word and the world involves students in thinking critically and questioning the way things are and the power relationships they observe in order to consider multiple cultures, perspectives, and ways of taking action. We encouraged students to take this critical stance whether they were looking at their own personal cultural identities, engaging in a cross-cultural study, considering multiple perspectives across the curriculum, or examining a difficult global issue.

In critically examining issues of child labor, for example, a group of nine-year-old children created “Sketch-to-Stretch” responses where they symbolically explored meaning through visual images (Short & Harste, 1996). Dan responded to *Iqbal* (D’Adamo, 2001) about a boy who led an influential movement to protest child labor in Pakistani carpet factories with a sketch of a broken chain to show the boy’s escape from the looms and as a symbol of his freedom, inner strength, and intelligence. The dark colors at the top of the sketch reflected Iqbal’s anger. Gaby responded to the same book with a sketch of the sky and a kite as symbols of freedom breaking through the fence as a symbol of oppression.



Sketch-to-Stretch responses to *Iqbal* (Dan & Gaby, age 9).



### Final reflections

This curriculum framework provides a means of evaluating what is currently happening within a classroom or library context to support the development of intercultural understanding through literature. What is working well can be identified along with what is missing or needs to be strengthened. Although all aspects of this framework will not be in place at one particular moment in time, they should all be available to students across the school year. We found that interactions across the framework can build complex understandings of interculturalism. The components of personal cultural identity and cross-cultural studies focus students on developing conceptual understandings of culture; the integration of international books across the

curriculum develops their conceptual understandings of perspective; and inquiries on global issues highlight conceptual understandings of taking action. All of these understandings are essential for interculturalism as an orientation for approaching life, both inside and outside of school.

Children's engagements with literature have the potential to transform their worldviews through understanding their current lives and imagining beyond themselves. Students do need to find their lives reflected in books, but if what they read in school only mirrors their own views of the world, they cannot envision alternative ways of thinking and being. These experiences need to be embedded within a curriculum that is international, or their potential to challenge students to critically confront issues of culture is diminished or lost. A curriculum and literature that are international offer all of us – educators and students – the potential for enriching and transforming our lives and our views of the world.

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