



Intercultural Explorations

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Abstract: This paper describes the experiences of first-grade children who engaged with international and multi-cultural children's literature. They initially identified their personal cultural identities and then explored the global culture. Using qualitative methods, I collected and analyzed data using grounded theory and constant comparative methods. I found that 1) exploring surface level aspects of culture helped students identify deeper levels of culture, 2) intercultural journeys helped students identify and make connections to aspects of a global culture, and 3) the students' learning went beyond standards.

Key words: International children's literature, intercultural studies

While children's literature can mirror readers' knowledge of who they are and their personal boundaries, international and multi-cultural children's literature can broaden and enhance their views and "extend the phrase 'like me' to include what they thought was foreign and strange" (Rochman, 1993: 9); it has the capacity to break down borders. Incorporating these genres into classroom literacy practices can support children by widening their perspectives of the world, building their insights about others, and challenging stereotypes. In this paper, I recount a study with first grade students, six- and seven-years old, as they explored their personal cultural identities and the cultural identities of another global culture through international and multi-cultural children's literature.

Theoretical framework: Cultural models

Cultural models are theories we generate to make sense of the world and our experiences in it (Gee, 1999: 58). They are rooted in socially and culturally defined practices and describe what we believe about events and people in the world. Because they shape our judgments and beliefs, our cultural models are often our first thoughts about what is expected or normal for a particular situation. In this sense, cultural models condense our views of the world, working somewhat in the way stereotypes do, helping us understand complex realities by focusing on important things and leaving out some of the details. All of us have large supplies of cultural models in our minds, pictures about



our experiences in the world or with school or with literature, and we treat these pictures as if they depict what is typical.

Context

This study incorporated the first two elements of a curricular framework (Short, 2008: 4) for intercultural explorations: 1) studying personal cultural identities and 2) making intercultural explorations. Although we used multiple genres for learning about these two topics, e.g. print and digital materials, photographs, videos, and music, international and multi-cultural children's literature served as our main resource.

The first part of the framework helped students identify and understand what mattered in their own cultures. In this stage, I wanted students to develop a general understanding of the term, *culture*, and more importantly, I hoped they would come to understand that each of us has a culture that guides how we act and think in our everyday lives. To delve into these ideas, we relied on children's literature, dialogue about our reading, written and artistic responses to the books, photography, as well as specific classroom experiences to extend these concepts.

The second part of the framework supported students in identifying points of view beyond their own as they explored perspectives of another global culture. Making this intercultural journey involved reading fiction and non-fiction picture books, using multiple media resources such as videos, CDs, the Internet, etc. and engaging in classroom experiences such as readers' theatre, dance performances, and intercultural x-rays.

Methodology

I collected data from fall 2009 through spring 2010 in a first-grade classroom with 21 students and their teacher. I met with the children 15 times in the fall and 12 times in the spring. Each meeting lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Data included notes on weekly meetings with the classroom teacher as well as emails we exchanged. I kept a teaching journal in which I wrote my plans for each classroom meeting as well as my reflections on what happened as it related to the students' learning. I collected student-



created artifacts such as copies of their writing and drawings, the photographs they took, video tapes of class events, photographs, and the cultural x-rays they created. I also decided upon storytelling as an approach to data collection (Davis, 2007: 169) because the children's stories would help me better understand their conceptions of culture. I made audio-tapes and transcribed the children's storytelling.

Data were analyzed through open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 45). I read and re-read the written data sets and studied the students' artwork, photographs, videos, and audio-tapes, coding them using grounded theory and constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 242). After studying the codes, I generated tentative themes, made revisions, and worked through idiosyncratic data (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 72). Triangulation (Berg, 1994: 5) was achieved by searching for themes that occurred across data categories.

Discussion

Through this analysis, I constructed three themes about what had happened across the 2009-2010 school year, finding that 1) exploring surface level aspects of culture helped students identify deeper levels of culture, 2) students identified and made connections to aspects of a global culture very different from their own, and 3) in the process of crossing borders, the students' learning went beyond standards.

Exploring surface level aspects of culture helped students identify deeper levels of culture

The children used their personal cultural models to connect to the cultural models of others. We read about children in our country and across the globe, and I purposely named aspects of culture the children noticed, and what they noticed was juxtaposed against their lived experiences. The children named their experiences, their cultural models, and held them up to the light of the cultural models of other children. They were able to broaden their perspectives by identifying aspects of another culture as it related (or did not relate) to their own experiences.



The children easily identified aspects of culture that were on the surface, those that could be seen or heard, for example languages, homes, foods, celebrations, clothing, etc. I intentionally fore-fronted our discussions by asking the children to think about what was really important about the surface aspects of a person's culture, and through extended discussions, the children also began to make connections to deeper levels of culture, explaining that what was really important about homes or languages or families. While we used many strategies to work toward an understanding of both surface and deeper levels of personal cultures, I found one strategy to be especially helpful, cultural x-rays, an outline of a person with a heart drawn inside it (Short, 2008: 5-6). Surface level aspects of culture are listed around the outside of the outline, and the values and beliefs people hold in their hearts, the deeper levels of culture, are written on the inside.

In order to document what they had been learning about culture I asked the children to take photographs of what they perceived to be their culture and then to write about it. With the help of disposable cameras that they took home –and their parents– they returned with photographs of family members, homes, pets, holiday celebrations, and family sports activities. We decided to bring the photographs together in a book called, “The Best Parts of my Culture.” The book included the children's photographs with descriptive vignettes they wrote.

Students identified and made connections to aspects of a global culture very different from their own

In pre-planning the study with the teacher, we decided that for the second part of the curricular framework, “crossing borders,” we would present the children with an overview of multiple cultures from around the world and have them choose one that engaged them. I created text sets of books that described experiences of the people of three countries as they are seen in folklore, fictional picture books, and contemporary non-fiction books. The students chose to study the Masai people of Kenya. We supplemented our reading with print and non-print resources, experiences such as Readers' Theater, and as a culminating activity, we returned to cultural x-rays. They



served as an engaging way for students to bring together what they had learned about themselves as cultural beings and what we had learned about the Masai people.

In the process of crossing borders, the students' learning went beyond standards

Recognizing the teacher's many responsibilities, I worked with her to incorporate first-grade standards into my work with the children. For example, first grade Social Studies standards include identifying personal identities and the ways that people are alike and different in the United States and the world. These standards were naturally and authentically embedded in the intercultural explorations. Additionally, first-grade reading standards require that students respond to reading with creative dramatics, writing, and visual arts. We were able to interweave these standards seamlessly into the intercultural explorations by including readers' theatre, writing in response to reading and to the photographs they took, and the visual arts in their illustrated response journals. However, the interdisciplinary possibilities went beyond our careful beginning-of-the-year planning to meet standards.

The students had the opportunity to read both extensively and intensively, reading broadly and in-depth about a topic. While the children read extensively with the many books and materials that I brought to their classroom, they also read some books intensively, wanting to learn more about a particular point that puzzled or intrigued them. When this occurred, I found as many resources as possible that explored the questions the children generated, for example questions about pets, homes, or schools around the world. In small groups, the children read the books and/or looked through the illustrations or photographs, talked together about what they were learning, and then reported what they had learned to the class. These forays into self-directed, in-depth learning continued throughout the semesters as the children explored topics of interest and concern.

The children exceeded their own expectations for reading as well as the expectations of their teacher. I did not know their reading abilities, and when it came time for the children to choose reading parts for the readers' theatre, I encouraged them to



volunteer for any part they wanted. Afterwards, one of the boys wrote a letter to me that described his experiences, “I like when we did the readers theater. I loved my part. My part was narrator 2. The sentences were long and the words were very hard but I could still read them”. This student was proud of his performance, noting that he was able to persevere through challenging materials. He exceeded his own expectations. In a further example, another student not only exceeded his own expectations but surprised his teacher with his reading. He practiced his lines, and he read slowly, pronouncing each word carefully, placing emphasis on certain phrases to help convey the meaning, smiling throughout his performance. He told me that, “I loved, loved being in the readers’ theater”. Afterwards, the teacher told me that this student struggled with the simplest reading materials. She could not believe how well he read his part and how engaged he was with the experience.

Implications for Teaching

The curricular framework that engaged students in intercultural explorations created a learning environment in which the children could learn by connecting to and building from their life experiences. The framework allowed students to acknowledge their community knowledge, their academic knowledge, and their interests and concerns. In searching for an understanding of their personal cultural identities, children were able to move between their home lives, the literature we read, digital resources, and their academic learning. They made connections among many parts of their lives inside school and beyond classroom walls.

Through this exploration, students were able to authentically engage in language arts topics such as reading and writing, as well as performance activities such as readers’ theatre and dance, and social studies topics such as studying the lives of people from different parts of the world. This kind of invisible pedagogy creates classrooms in which “things must be put together” (Bernstein, 2000: 109-110), one in which teachers and students, home and school knowledge, and content across disciplinary areas were “put together” as opposed to many traditional classrooms that “keep things apart” such as



different kinds of knowledge (e.g. home and school) and subject areas (e.g. language arts and social studies).

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