

# Exploring Culture through Children's Connections

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*In this article, Kaser and Short complicate children's cultural identities by situating their discussion of multiculturalism within the context of "bid's culture."*

MIGUEL: I think that corn dancers are like our folklorico dancing.

JOE: No, they are not the same. When an Indian dances, it is a kind of prayer. We pray by dancing.

BRAD: But, why do you still do that? You pray to the sun and stuff, and you are supposed to pray to God. I am Christian and I pray to God.

CLASS: (Murmurs) We are Catholic and we pray to God.

JOE: I am Catholic and I am Indian also. We pray to one God, but we believe his spirit is in all of nature. There is like a spirit for each thing in nature. Indians dance all their lives, like from age three. The whole tribe goes to dances. It's not like you can choose.

This dialogue grew out of children's connections to literature within a classroom context where they were encouraged to bring their lives and cultural identities into school. Through their literature discussions, children considered diverse perspectives in how they viewed themselves, each other, and the world. We believe that this type of dialogue is one means of supporting a broader view of culture and that this might lead to a greater possibility for social change.

When we entered the classroom as children, we were expected to be "ready" for school—we either adjusted to school or were left behind. When we entered the classroom as teachers, schools had begun to change, most notably in recognizing the differing experiences that children bring from home. Our initial experiences with multicultural education were characterized by a superficial focus on ethnicity, where each ethnic group was studied in isolation as a theme study, a learning center, a set of books, or a special monthly focus. We soon grew dissatisfied with this approach because it set people apart with the assumption that more information would lead to more understanding which would, in turn, bring about mutual valuing and a change in behavior (Banks, 1994). The approach narrowly defined culture and eliminated important characteristics that shape each of us as people. It also implied that ethnicity was static and uniform, rather than dynamic.

Our dissatisfaction led us to explore approaches which build on children's home experiences (Moll, 1992; Taylor &

Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) and the diverse ways in which children learn (Leland & Harste, 1994). However, our thinking about diversity was restricted because, while schools continued to value diversity, they did so *only* as long as students could meet society's narrow standards for excellence-as long as they turned out to be the same.

We believe that difference is still not respected or acted upon. Schools continue to focus on the same end points for all students despite the fact that it is difference, not sameness, that makes a democracy strong and creates powerful learning environments (Edelsky, 1994). Through building on the different ways of living that students and teachers bring to the classroom, new possibilities are created in everyone's lives. We wanted to explore classroom settings that valued everyone's strengths.

In this article, we will share Sandy's attempts as a teacher to highlight diversity and children's cultures in more authentic ways. The "I" voice is Sandy's to indicate her role as a teacher researcher. The "we" voice reflects the thinking we did together.

### EXAMINING CHILDREN'S CONNECTIONS TO CULTURE

I teach in a Tucson school that serves a diverse multiethnic working-class community. Despite my best efforts, my "multicultural" lessons had never led to powerful classroom sharing about children's own connections. I searched for a vehicle that would connect home and school and signal to children that who they are is of value in school. I devised a cross-curricular, literature-based Family Studies Inquiry to encourage students to explore their own experiences and roots and therefore to understand themselves (Kaser, 1995). The students themselves became the curriculum, with the study of family as a framework and literature discussion as a vehicle for response. The flowchart to the right shows how the curriculum actually developed over the year.

#### I realized I was still operating under a restricted view of culture.

I saw one of my responsibilities as providing students with access to books that might contextualize their diverse perspectives. Books were chosen to encourage students to explore their own cultures and those of others inside and outside the classroom. Although I collected the books, students were given choice in selecting books to examine more closely. They also had the freedom to explore issues within those books that were of greatest importance to them at that moment. In their literature circles, we hoped that students would share issues related to the literature in an authentic

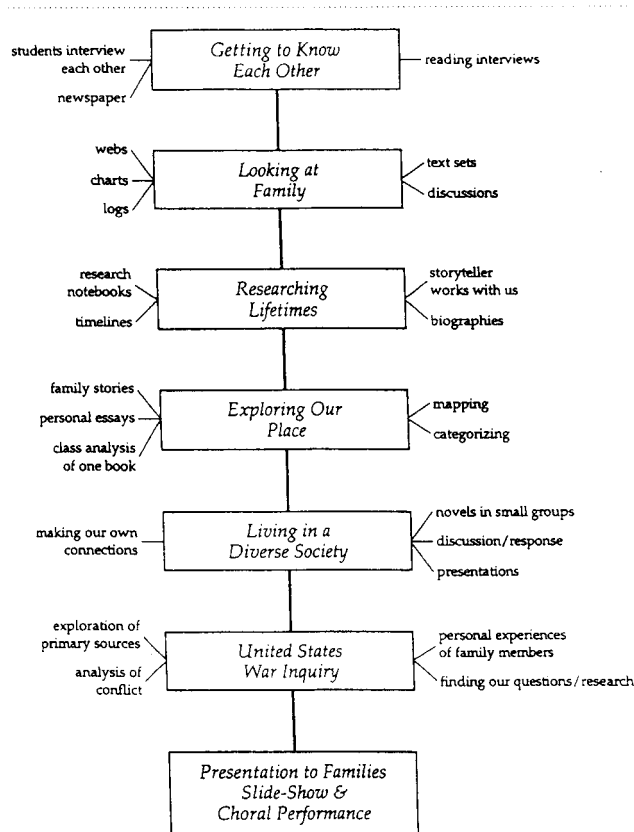


Figure 1. Curriculum Flowchart of Family Studies Inquiry.

way through collaboration, reflection, and dialogue- How does my family compare to the family in the story?" "How do my traditions compare to your traditions?" "What would I like to know more about?"

The literature circles consisted of small groups of four to five students who engaged in conversation and dialogue about a book (Short & Pierce, 1990). Sometimes students used discussion strategies, such as creating a web of their connections, sketching the meaning of the story using "Sketch to Stretch," or sharing significant quotes through "Save the Last Word for Me" (Short & Harste, 1996) to facilitate their thinking.

Throughout these experiences, I collected student artifacts, took field notes, kept a teaching journal, and tape recorded literature discussions. To make sense of the data, I constructed profiles of three students to document individual responses across the year. Throughout this process, Kathy and I talked frequently about a wide range of curricular and research issues. While issues of culture pervaded the entire curriculum, we decided to focus on literature discussions in order to examine children's talk and thinking about culture. From previous experiences, we knew that these discussions were particularly generative for this type of talk. Focusing my data collection on these discussions within the broader classroom context was an important strategy for me as a teacher researcher.

As students shared issues that were significant to them, I realized I was still operating under a restricted view of culture. I had assumed that, because the students came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, issues of ethnicity would be the most important aspect of culture that they would want to explore. I searched for books that reflected many different ethnic perspectives. What the students taught us, however, was that culture can never be defined that narrowly for any person. While ethnicity mattered to them, other aspects of their own cultures, such as gender, religion, family, community, and social class were sometimes of greater importance to them or were interwoven with issues of ethnicity and race.

### Examining Children's Own Cultural Identities

To understand the cultural identities that were most significant to children, I examined three students closely to see what issues occurred repeatedly in their conversations and writing across the year (Kaser, 1994).

*Rosanna's Connections to Family.* Rosanna connected with the Family Studies Inquiry immediately and talked with her family all year long about their history and traditions. As she shared her stories, the whole class gained a rich sense of her values as a Mexican American. The children saw her stories as authentic knowledge, based on the experiences of a member of the classroom community, rather than mandated learning.

Yet, from the beginning, Rosanna was most interested in issues of family structure. While her focus on family was obviously intertwined with her ethnic heritage, family-structures-as-culture was her most significant area of inquiry that year. She examined a text set on families and listed issues that concerned her, such as "the possibility of dad being laid off, kids with two families, favorite belongings of families, expectations for boys and girls, families of different races, and foster families." She was particularly interested in foster families and researched this topic throughout the year.

It was Rosanna's self-directed research and discussion of family structures that moved the class to consider situations different from their own—an essential move if they were to understand and respect difference. Students began to see family structure as part of their cultural heritage rather than valuing one kind of family over another.

*Brad's Connections to Family and Religion.* Brad began the year with a strong focus on family and generational cultures as he pursued books and conversations about grandparents. The first text set Brad explored dealt with grandfathers and led to the following discussion about his connections:

BRAD: My grandpa used to take us fishing in Pinetop. We did a lot of stuff like that with him. He died and we don't do that stuff ... well, sometimes we do things like that and fish, but I miss him.

JOE: I just wish I could have done things with my grandfather. I wish I knew stories that my grandfather would have told me.

DAN: Me, too. Brad, you were lucky. I will have to wait and see if my grandfather will tell me stories in heaven. But it is still sad for you.

Brad later chose to read *Racing the Sun* (Pitts, 1988) which deals with a grandfather/grandson relationship. He continued to work through the death of his grandfather in the group and made a web in his log about his connections

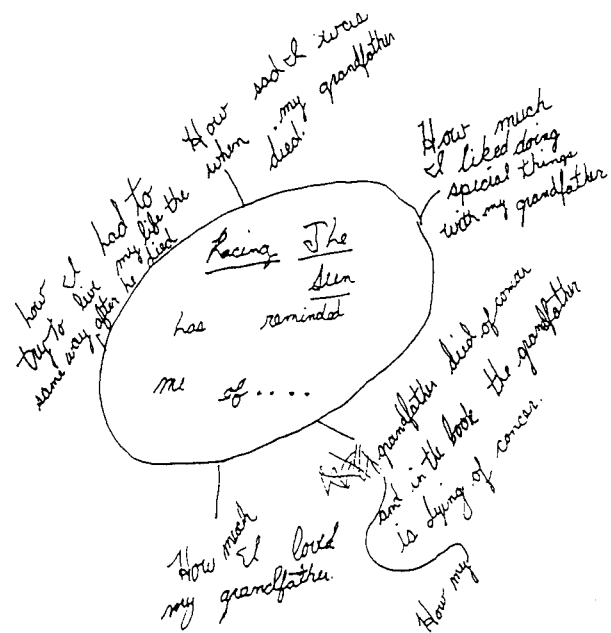


Figure 2. Brad's Connection to *Racing the Sun* (Pitts, 1988).

The Family Studies focus gave Brad the opportunity to revisit his experience through literature, talk, and writing. Within his discussion group, he found a friend in Joe who shared stories of his own grandfather. Discussions of grandparents led naturally to discussions of heritage, and, although Brad had a strong Mexican American and European American heritage, the cultural aspect that seemed of greatest importance to him throughout that year was religion. Midway through *Racing the Sun*, Brad made this log entry:

I connect with the book in a religious way. People say that the point of time we're in now is the new age. My family and I have to keep our Christian ways as does the grandfather in *Racing the Sun* who has to keep his Indian ways. Next time, we may want to talk a little about people in our families who do and don't keep up with the family's background.

Brad did a considerable amount of writing on religion, and contributed to a class discussion comparing his view of God to his perceptions of American Indian views of God. His interest in these views grew out of his friendship with Joe, a Pima Indian.

The family inquiry also allowed Brad to explore his family's religious belief system and what it might mean to him in the future. He spoke thoughtfully about religious traditions within the larger class community Brad contributed in an authentic way to the class' understandings of cultural diversity and encouraged others to share and ask questions. In the past, he had always taken a leadership role in group situations and often ignored others' perspectives. Perhaps through the personal nature of his inquiry into his grandfather's death and religion, he became more respectful of others' viewpoints and contributed to the group instead of feeling he had to be the group leader,

*Joe's Connections* to Ethnicity. Joe became eagerly involved in the Family Studies focus and quickly chose the "grandfathers" text set to discuss. Joe enjoyed the format of literature circles and wrote in his log after the first session: "It went really well. Everybody just jumped right in."

Joe "jumped in" during this first session by talking about his favorite book in the set, *Knots on a Counting Rope* (Martin, 1987). He explained that his grandfather had been a Pima dancer and talked about attending gatherings where the old people tell stories. He referred to the illustrations to help his classmates imagine what his grandfather looked like as he danced.

The second book Joe read was *Racing the Sun* (Pitts, 1988). While Brad chose this book because it was about grandparents, Joe was drawn to the fact that the main characters were Navajo. He made the following observations in the group discussion about the grandfather's desire to return to the reservation to die:

JOE: In the city, he was home alone with the family working. He wanted to go to people who were more into their culture, like he was.

BRAD: The father did not want to go, it says on page 117. For the same reasons—each one wanted to stay in his own culture.

JOE: Brandon [the grandson] wanted to go because he was getting interested in his culture. He was getting closer to the grandfather. The grandfather shared stories, chants and jogging, and growing plants. Besides, the father did go back.

After the group spent a few minutes discussing what happened when the family went to the reservation, Joe raised an issue that was important to him:

BRAD: Well, anyway, I think the book is about how to take on the new ways without having to give up the old,

JOE: You shouldn't give up on your heritage.

BRAD: Yeah, but, sometimes people aren't proud of heritage because traditions seem silly.

RANDY: It doesn't seem up-to-date. He even calls it "the old ways."

BRAD: I think the father was just trying to get away from the stereotyping of Indians—riding horses, shooting arrows.

JOE: Yeah, well, I still think people should stay in their heritage, but no one in my family is into it. Like that guy in the story, they want to go on with life and pretend they are not Indian. I feel more like Brandon. I'm interested.

MARCUS: I'm like Brandon, too. I want to remember.

In this discussion, Joe took on the stance of an authority as the only American Indian in the group and drew upon his connections to his own ethnicity. It was apparent throughout the year that Joe was thinking through what being Indian meant to him. He developed an awareness of how people around him viewed their own ethnic heritage and how they, in turn, are viewed by the broader society. Joe clearly saw the Family Studies focus as a place where he could articulate his concerns and understandings. He felt a sense of identity with the Indian characters in the books he read, and was more participatory in discussions about these books. Joe expressed disappointment that his family seemed to place more importance on becoming part of mainstream society than on developing their own ethnic uniqueness. I introduced Joe to a resource teacher who supported him in finding people and materials to further his inquiry. His focus on ethnicity contributed to and was interwoven throughout class discussions of culture. As a result, the Family Studies focus helped draw him closer to rather than set him apart from his peers.

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Because Kathy and I had not decided ahead of time which issues students needed to study or how they should respond to what they read, students were able to create meaning for themselves. Although I created the instructional framework, learning took place because students could make connections to their knowledge and experiences, searching out new information based on their interests and needs.

The use of quality children's literature that was enjoyable and culturally diverse was crucial to the Family Studies focus.

The literature selections enabled a range of issues related to culture to surface, and students knew they could do their own thinking and could enter into dialogue to make sense of the literature and their own lives.

### Expanding Our Definition of Culture

As we examined children's talk and how they chose which aspects of their cultures were most significant that year, we realized the importance of defining culture as all the ways in which people live and think in the world. 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, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, family structures, region, and rural, suburban, and urban communities.

According to Fleck (1935), thought collectives are groups of people who 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 about culture were important to us for several reasons. One was that they allowed us to see the diversity of children's own interconnected talk and issues of culture. Another was that they removed the "other" within the classroom. When culture is defined only as ethnicity and race, many people view culture as a characteristic of particular groups and as outside of the experience of everyone else. From this perspective, multicultural curriculum remains a separate unit or book, not a characteristic of the learning environment. We realized that, when students and teachers recognize the cultures that influence their own lives and thinking, each becomes more aware of how and why culture is important to everyone else. These understandings do not devalue culture or promote cultural "sameness," rather, they highlight differences across cultures as important and valued in creating community and pushing everyone's learning.

In examining children's talk, we also noted that it was important that children choose the aspects of culture they did and did not want to discuss. Based on what I knew about the children's lives, we noticed that some students chose not to talk about particular issues of their cultural identities. We respected their right to make these decisions. On occasion, we observed that students were able to discuss some of their concerns by talking about a character from a book rather than about themselves.

### UNDERSTANDING "KID CULTURE"

As we examined the transcripts, Kathy and I noticed that there was one aspect of culture which we had consistently

overlooked. Students often discussed how a book related to the culture they shared with members of their age group, an identity we came to think of as "kid culture." These issues went beyond differences in their personal histories and cultural identities to a set of shared kid values.

### Students' Views of Kid Culture

One day, I read aloud *Angel Child, Dragon Child* (Surat, 1983), the story of a Vietnamese girl who is ridiculed because of her ethnic dress. I hoped the book would spark a discussion about accepting differences. Instead, the class was incensed that someone had not told the girl how kids dress in school. It was clear that students read people by the way they dress and that they knew how to dress to give the right message to peers.

- ROSANNA It was sad in the book when they teased her because she was different. They said she wore pajamas.
- MANNY: Yeah, that was pretty dumb. Somebody should have told her to dress like all the other kids. She has to fit in more. How you dress in school is important.
- ROSANNA It's important because people look at you and judge you by what you are wearing on the outside.
- JOE: Most people dress according to their personality. Like some people are all laid-back and some come to school like fashion plates.
- BRAD: And you can tell gang members by how they dress. And the gang wanna-he's dress like gang members and act all cool, but everyone knows they are not in the gangs.
- ROSANNA Like if you are a nature person who goes hiking and stuff, you wear khaki clothes and hiking boots, even if you are not hiking that day
- MANNY: And she just walked in and communicated, "Hey, look at me. I'm different." She was different enough.
- BRAD: If it was us in Vietnam, then we would be the different ones.

The next day, Dan brought the book up again. He said he felt sorry for the girl because "when you go to a new school you don't always know the rules." From his conversation, it was clear that he meant the implied rules known only by students, not the school rules. He shared his experience of moving to a new school and soon many of the students were telling their own stories about moving. They agreed that moving to a new school was one of the hardest things a kid has to do and adults didn't understand how hard it was. "They just

walk in the door and tell you, boom! 'You have to go live with your Dad' and boom, your whole life is different," said Dan. The discussion then moved into the lack of power kids feel around adults. The class felt that kids made up "rules" for each other because it gave them power for a change.

In later literature discussions, students talked about other issues such as the importance of parents considering how names will affect children and realizing that certain names can be embarrassing. They talked about the difficulty of making decisions because of divided loyalties between family, peers, and their desires as a child. They felt especially strong about situations where parents disagree and the child's decision can be seen as siding with one parent over the other.

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### **We realized that students were connecting cultural diversity with the expectations and culture of their own age level.**

We realized that students were connecting cultural diversity with the expectations and culture of their own age level. The struggle to figure out who they were as individuals was a struggle they shared, irrespective of differences in their family cultural characteristics. This is consistent with Bullivant's definition of culture as "a social group's design for surviving in and adapting to its environment" (1989, p. 27).

Even as early as elementary school, children view each other through their shared definitions of "kid culture"—the underground peer culture of how children at a certain age think about themselves. Lurie (1990) points out, "Anyone who has spent time around children and observed them carefully, or really remembers what it was like to be a child, knows that childhood is also a separate culture, with its own rituals, beliefs, games, and customs, and its own, largely oral, literature" (p. 194).

Children often use peer talk to judge and to control the behaviors of classmates. These kid culture issues of acceptance and rejection touch all aspects of their lives—music, talk, appearance, behavior, values and priorities, as well as ways of maintaining and achieving status.

### **Adults' Views of Kid Culture**

As adults, teachers are excluded from kid culture and we had to work hard to understand and value the ways in which this culture entered into children's talk. Newkirk (1992) found that first- and second-grade children brought a discourse into literature groups which he initially found annoying and believed was "off task." In reexamining this talk, he became convinced that it was a valid form of discourse from children's own culture. Children came to groups "not as total novices but as members of a rich oral culture that has its own repertoire of responses" (p. 9).

While we wanted to encourage children to accept and value differences, significant changes in their attitudes often could not occur because children had another more powerful agenda that we were not taking into account. Kid culture has a tremendous influence on children and frequently involves values that conflict with other aspects of their cultures and with teachers' values. Yet, this culture is left out of curriculum designed to explore cultural diversity. Either we are unaware of it as adults or we assume that children will grow out of it. Other times, we find this culture in conflict with the values of cultural diversity which we are trying to promote, and so we ignore or judge it. For example, we talk about celebrating differences, and yet sameness and acceptance are foundational in the world of kids. Children respond by taking their culture underground and not examining it critically. We also knew that, as adults, we couldn't force children to discuss kid culture issues. We could, however, create an environment in which they felt free to discuss this aspect of their identities.

Students' talk about literature allowed us to identify what was missing in other situations. One day, a School Resource Officer talked to students and had them perform skits about "saying no to drugs" and walking away from those who offer drugs. They were given strategies that incorporated adult language that would be viewed negatively or ignored within their kid culture. Some students had family members who used drugs and belonged to gangs and they knew that life on the streets among their peers just wasn't that simple. They needed language and strategies to avoid drugs that fit their own culture of peers and the street. Because the officer's comments did not connect to their world, they simply rejected his comments as irrelevant and repeated what she wanted them to say without engaging with the issues.

Our experiences convinced us that children feel that the discourse of kid culture has no place in the classroom. When they do not talk like adults, they are judged to be not just different, but deficient. Nodelman (1992) asserts that adults attempt to speak for children, even through children's literature, because adults believe children are incapable of speaking for themselves. They see children as different from, and presumably inferior to, adults as thinkers and speakers. He suggests that some adults view children as innocent rather than lacking in intelligence, but this assumption still allows adults to have "power over children" (p. 30).

### **Providing Space in the Classroom for Kid Culture**

We found that, instead of urging children to get back on task when they engaged in talk from kid culture, they needed structures to support them in exploring this talk openly (and critically) with each other. When presented with an alternative perspective, students need to find where it might fit with what they already know, understand, or have experienced. Time and opportunity for this talk is essential for

children if we really believe that they need to bring their lives into the classroom.

Nodelman (1992) points out that as adults, we will never completely escape the "imperialist" tendencies which are at the heart of our discourses with children. We also can never completely understand kid culture because that culture changes with each generation and, by its very definition, excludes us as adults. However, adults can become aware of the ways in which we oppress and deny kid culture, and we can move beyond thinking children are "like us" or seeing them as "the other."

During the Family Studies Inquiry, I learned to listen to children's comments and ask questions when I didn't understand or value what they were saying. In the past, I would have rejected or ignored their discussions of the importance of dressing in particular ways in favor of what I saw as more direct connections to the book. Instead of judging students, I tried to reply to their comments out of a sincere desire to understand what they were saying (Barnes, 1976). As they expanded on their comments, the class could explore kid culture and social attitudes within their own contexts. However, if my comments or questions communicated judgmental questioning, they immediately stopped sharing any connections to, or reflection on their kid culture.

Kathy and I also found that children needed to talk in small groups where teachers were not present. No matter how carefully I tried to listen empathetically, I was an "outsider" and there were certain aspects of kid culture that were not discussed when I was present. Their humor, for example, was rarely shared with me because they presumed I wouldn't understand or like it. We respected their need to keep some of their discussions of issues private from us as adults.

**When children feel their cultural identities  
have no place in the classroom,  
they often reject the curriculum.**

"If the only talk that matters is that which is patterned off adult conversation, students can conclude that what matters most to them, their culture, has little place in the classroom" (Newkirk 1992, p. 10). Educators have known for years that when children feel their cultural identities have no place in the classroom, they often reject the curriculum, resist learning, and may eventually drop out of school. We believe that these same findings apply to children who feel that adults deny or devalue their kid culture. Children have learned to be silent about that culture around adults and, in so doing, that culture becomes even more powerful in their lives. There is no opportunity to explore or critique their kid culture or to make connections across all aspects of their cultural identities. One of our goals is to help students bring together the cultures of home, school, and peers, and explore

the connections and the dysjunctions across those cultures. In order for this to occur, they need space for sharing issues of kid culture through peer talk in "kid-friendly" schools.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

In thinking about the children's responses to the Family Studies Inquiry, we identified what seemed to be key characteristics of the curriculum which provided room for valuing differences in experiences, ways of learning, and outcomes in the classroom. The first was the importance of setting up engagements that allow teachers to really listen to students. We found that ways of listening needed to be planned into the day, or we missed hearing what children were saying because of the hectic nature of classroom life. Teachers need a sense of students' thinking in order to support them in making connections and building from their own experiences to engage with new ideas. In addition, both dialogue and storying are essential for children in making connections and considering new ideas. Children need to be constantly encouraged to share oral, written, and visual stories from their lives so that they can explore their own connections. Through this sharing of stories, they develop a sense of community which allows them to enter into dialogue with each other. Dialogue involves thinking out loud with others so that their ideas and connections are considered reflectively and critically. Dialogue focuses on inquiry and critique and so takes learners beyond their own ideas to consider new perspectives and ways of viewing the world (Peterson, 1992).

Dialogue in literature circles provides children with multiple perspectives as they enter the story world of the book and share their interpretations with each other. They make connections to their lives and cultural identities and examine other possible worlds through the characters in books and the talk of their peers.

In encouraging dialogue, we are aware that disclosure of self through dialogue or writing is not culturally appropriate for some children. Our belief in the importance of literature and dialogue is the result of our own cultural values. While we remain committed to their role in children's learning, we also believe that we have no right to force children to make personal disclosures outside their family contexts. However, should students choose not to discuss these issues, they can still benefit from hearing others' perspectives and are better able to make thoughtful decisions about what they read.

Another essential characteristic is that the curriculum is focused on inquiry, on children searching for the questions that are significant for them, instead of on "covering" a particular topic through activities. Even when the topic is mandated by the school, children can still find their own questions within that topic. American history was part of the mandated school curriculum for fifth grade, but as a teacher, I waited to see where it would fit with children's

questions. Their interest in time lines and family histories led them to the realization that their own family members had participated in significant events in American and Mexican history. Once the class moved into this study, I did not decide on the topics of study. Instead, students spent time reading and talking so they could determine their questions and form groups based on those questions.

Research that involved children's own families and communities was integral to their inquiries. Children collected oral family stories, researched their family time lines, and interviewed family members. Their experiences in school led them to ask questions and gather data from their families. Sharing this data with each other led them to new questions and research which then led them back again to their families.

All of these characteristics of curriculum are based on our belief that cultural diversity is a strength for building powerful learning contexts, not *a problem to be solved*. Difference, not sameness, makes a classroom and society strong. Along with Sleeter and Grant (1987), we believe that our goal is not to develop multicultural education as an additive to the curriculum, but to create an education that is multicultural.

The goal of schools in our modern global society is to create productive citizens who have marketable skills. The goal of education in traditional oral societies is for children to learn how to become human beings—to figure out who they are and where they fit in the broader scheme of things (Oleska, 1995). We believe that both goals are essential in schools today. To become a citizen but lose yourself as a person is not acceptable within school contexts. Indeed, schools should be places to explore both the common goals that connect us as citizens and the differences that make us human. A strong democracy depends on differences in perspectives and ways of knowing to create new possibilities. If schools truly respect and build on difference, diversity can become a strength for creating powerful classroom learning environments and a stronger democratic society.

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