“Some People Do Things Different From Us”: Exploring Personal and Global Cultures in a First Grade Classroom

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First grade students read and respond to books such as 14 Cows for America and as a result gain deeper understandings about culture.

“SOME PEOPLE DO THINGS different from us because of where they live and what they’re used to. We don’t eat tamales for Christmas but we have other stuff.” I was sitting with a group of first graders who were in the midst of a conversation about Gary Soto’s book, Too Many Tamales (1993). Peter’s comment revealed his understanding that the characters in the book held cultural models (Gee, 1999) different from his about meals that people eat at Christmas-time. This conversation was one of many in which the first grade children engaged as they discussed their personal cultural identities and the cultural identities of people whose lives were different from their own.

The children in this first grade classroom had been reading international children’s literature as well as children’s literature written in the United States in an effort to identify and then articulate aspects of their culture. I adhere to a view of culture as a system of “social value, cognitive, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our lives as well as the lives of others” (Gay, 2000, p. 8). However when culture is studied in schools in this country, it too often focuses on surface elements of culture—what Nieto (2009) has called “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (p. 136).

Breaking Down Borders with Children’s Literature

Children’s literature can broaden and enhance readers’ views of themselves and others. Hazel Rochman (1993) argued that, “The best books break down borders. They surprise us – whether they are set close to home or abroad. They change our view of ourselves; they extend that phrase ‘like me’ to include what was foreign and strange” (p. 9). When we incorporate children’s literature from abroad as well as from the United States into the literacy practices of a first grade class, the potential exists to widen the children’s perspectives of the world and build insights about others. Additionally there exist openings to challenge cultural stereotypes and “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the whole story” (Adichie, 2009).

In this article, I describe the experiences of a class of first-
grade children who engaged with children's literature and crossed cultural as well as academic borders.

**Learning about Cultural Identities with Children's Literature**

Although we used multiple genres for learning about cultural identities (e.g., print and digital materials, photographs, videos, and music), children's literature that presented diverse cultural frames of reference served as our main resource. I chose both international children's literature and children's literature written in the United States that met this criterion. Given the limited number of international books published in the United States, I used a broad definition of international literature:

Books written and published first in countries other than the United States (in English and translation), books written by immigrants to the United States about their home countries and published in the United States, books written by authors from countries other than the United States but originally published in the United States, and books written by American authors and published in the United States with settings in other countries. (Freeman & Lehman, 2000, p. 10)

I did not use the term “multicultural literature” to describe the books I selected that were written in the United States about diverse cultural groups since definitions of multicultural literature can be problematic. One definition suggests that multicultural literature (multi + cultures) “should include as many cultures as possible with no distinction between the dominant and the dominated” (Cai, 2003, p. 271). A second perspective on multicultural literature centers on issues related to race and ethnicity. This stance has been criticized “as racial essentialism that excludes many cultures from the concept of multiculturalism” (Cai, 2003, p. 273), and it often places emphasis on developing social consciousness in European-American children toward the “other.” Another view holds that all people are multicultural and that all literature is therefore multicultural. Cai (2003) argues, though, that multicultural literature is still a “much-needed separate category of literature, for its existence poses a challenge to the domination of all-white literature” (p. 273). To describe children's literature written in the United States about diverse cultural groups, I chose instead a definition that focuses on “ethnic and regional groups whose cultures historically have been less represented than European cultures” (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006, p. 91).

My hope was that in carefully selecting children's literature that illuminated diverse cultural frames of reference that the children would have the opportunity to reflect on the rich diversity of the people in the books. However, I was also concerned with the authenticity of the books I chose. Bishop (2003) defines authenticity as “the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people about whom he or she is writing, and make readers from inside the group believe that the writer "knows what's going on"” (p. 29). As I chose children's literature that represented diverse cultures in the United States and across the globe, I used criteria suggested by Temple, Martinez, and Yokota (2006) asking questions about the authenticity of perspectives, the multidimensionality of the portrayal of the culture, and the cultural details (e.g., if they were integrated and accurate). I relied on recommended book lists to locate children's literature about diverse cultures in the United States, for example lists such as those found in children's literature texts books that I use in my classes (e.g., Galda & Cullinan, 2009; Temple et al., 2011) and in professional journals such as the *Journal of Children's Literature and Language Arts* which review and recommend children's literature that represents diverse cultural perspectives. I used the same criteria for the selection of international titles, and I also referred to journals such as *Bookbird*, and to booklists from organizations such as the International Board on Books for Youth, the United States Board on Books for Youth, and the International Reading Association Notable Books for a Global Society.

**Cultural Models**

Gee (1999) defined cultural models as theories we generate to help us make sense of the world and our experiences in it. They are rooted in our socially and culturally defined practices and describe what we believe about events and people in the world. All of us have large supplies of cultural models in our minds, pictures about our experiences in the world or with school or literature, and we treat these pictures as if they depict what is typical. Because they shape our judgments and beliefs, our cultural models are often our first thoughts or best guesses about what is expected or normal for a particular situation, and we rarely consciously articulate them. Like stereotypes, cultural models also condense our views of the world by helping us understand complex realities in order to focus on important elements and hide other ways of thinking. However unlike stereotypes, which have become pervasive and ritualized across cultural groups, our constructed cultural models are not static. As Keesing (1987) wrote, cultural models are “frameworks of interpretation,” (p. 372) and as such they are fluid and dynamic, leaving room for choice and for alternative constructions.
Context of the Study
This study took place from fall semester 2009 through spring semester 2010 in a first-grade classroom with 21 students. Their teacher, Anne (all names are pseudonyms), was a third year teacher and a former student at the university where I am a faculty member. She had attended a graduate course I taught in which we studied the benefits and challenges of incorporating children's literature in elementary reading programs. Anne was struck by the possibilities inherent in introducing young children to diverse cultural perspectives, and she generously invited me to conduct this study in her classroom. I met with the children in their classroom 15 times in the fall and 12 times in the spring, and each meeting lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

A Curricular Framework
I incorporated the first two elements of a curricular framework designed by Kathy Short (2008) for cultural studies: 1) studying personal cultural identities, and 2) engaging in cross-cultural explorations. The first part of the framework helps students identify and understand what matters in their own cultures before asking them to understand what matters in someone else's culture. In this stage, I wanted students to develop a general understanding of what culture is, 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 reading children's literature, talking about our reading, and responding through writing and art, as well as engaging in planned experiences to extend these concepts. For example, at one point in the fall, I sent cameras home with the children to take self-selected photographs of (what they determined to be) their culture. The students wrote about the photographs they took and brought these together to form a class book. They created personal cultural x-rays (Short, 2008) that looked at surface and deeper levels of their cultural identities. In the second part of the framework, students explored a global culture and identified points of view beyond their own. Making this cross-cultural journey involved using multiple media resources such as videos, CDs, and the Internet and engaging in classroom experiences such as readers' theatre, dance performances, and cultural x-rays about the global culture they studied. Most importantly, however, was the time we spent reading fiction and non-fiction picture books about a global culture, followed by dialogue among the readers.

Teaching as Cultural Inquiry
Instructional strategies have at their center the theoretical beliefs of the teacher who incorporates them; depending on the teacher, the same instructional strategy can look quite different. My beliefs focused on the importance of exploring the cultures of diverse groups of people. Therefore, as I worked with the first-grade children and their teacher, I tried to adopt the habits of mind that a teacher who is a cultural inquirer would embrace. To reach through surface levels and into deeper concepts of culture, I incorporated a stance toward instructional strategies that would allow us to explore the unique experiences of a group of people, their “beliefs, attitudes, values, worldviews, institutions, artifacts, processes, interactions, and ways of behaving” (Harris, 2003, p. 119). Although I chose books that represented diverse cultures, I also thought about the kinds of conversations I hoped to have with the children to explore cultural messages embedded within them. I asked questions such as, “What really matters about (this topic)?” and “What surprised you (or worried you) about (this topic)? Why?” As an example, the children wrote a class poem about the Cuban singer, Celia Cruz. To help them envision Celia's attitudes, the children sat together in small groups looking through the books we had read about her. I asked them to decide what Celia believed and valued. I asked them to think about what really mattered to Celia. They remembered how she valued her family, and how her family believed in the importance of school. They recalled how she loved music and the joy she expressed with the word azúcar. Whatever the instructional strategy – whether drawing or journal writing or dialoguing about a book – I thought of the strategy as a way to slow down our thinking so that we could imagine the cultural beliefs and values of the people about whom we were learning.

The first grade classroom was a lively, active environment, and to help me make sense of what was going on in this context, I kept a research journal. I also collected student-created artifacts such as copies of writing and drawings from response journals, class poems, photographs taken by the children, vignettes written about their photographs, letters they wrote to me, videotapes of special class events, cultural x-rays they created, and the class book the children compiled. In addition, I audio-taped and transcribed the children's storytelling. I decided upon storytelling as an approach because the children's stories would help me better understand their conceptions of culture (Davis, 2007). I prompted them in such a way that they responded in the third person, asking them to tell me a story about “A little girl/boy who wanted to know about her/his culture.” This allowed the attention to be deflected away from them personally and toward a fictional, invented character. Since young children's responses are often susceptible to adults' cues (Weber, 1994), dialogue was shifted away from me and toward them. Daniel, a bright and imaginative student, was
delighted to learn that the story did not have to be “true.”

He slipped in and out of third and first person as he told me
the following story:

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Daniel who
wanted to know his culture, and he was looking for a mom
and dad to be his parents, and his parents taught him how
to eat with chopsticks, knife, fork, and spoons, and he chose
to eat with chopsticks. And so the parents had to get me
some food with chopsticks, and they asked what kind of
pet do I want, and I said, “a dog.” Then, um, and then they
taught me how to speak English and Spanish and they
.taught me how to read. So, um, and the end.

From the children’s stories and other data sets, I learned
some important lessons about the kinds of knowledge the
children were constructing through their reading and
discussions of children’s literature. I found that the children
relied on surface level aspects of culture to identify deeper
levels of culture; they identified and made connections to
aspects of a global culture very different from their own,
and across their cultural journeys, they read extensively,
intensively, and beyond expectations.

Students Relyed on Surface Level Aspects of Culture
to Identify Deeper Levels of Culture

USING PERSONAL CULTURAL MODELS TO
CONNECT TO THE CULTURAL MODELS OF OTHERS
I began the fall semester by bringing children’s literature
that represented diverse cultural groups into the first-
grade classroom. 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, their cultural models. For
example, they read Carolina’s Gift (Diaz, 2002), a story of a
girl in Peru who goes to the market to buy her grandmother
a special birthday gift. The children talked about the way
the characters dressed, their houses, and how Carolina
celebrated her grandmother’s birthday, all in relation to
their own cultural models of dressing, homes, and celebrat-
ings about how their own families celebrated. They were
surprised by the family in How My Parents Learned to Eat
(Friedman, 1984) who used knives and forks as well as
chopsticks. When I asked them to tell me what they thought
about these diverse cultural ways of living, they told me
repeatedly, “It is different but okay.”

Kathy Short (2008) wrote that looking at culture “does
not begin with the ability to consider other points of view
but with the realization that you have a point of view” (p.
4), but young students (as well as many of their adult counter-
parts) find it difficult to articulate and recognize their own
points of view, considering them to be the “norm.” The
students not only noticed the ways that children from other
cultures lived their lives, but in doing so, they began to
identify the cultural models that influenced their personal
lives. In these examples, the children named their cultural
models about holiday celebrations and gift-giving, and
held them up to the light of the cultural models of other
children. They were able to broaden their perspectives by
identifying surface level aspects of another culture as it related
(or did not relate) to their own experiences, and this was
a necessary first step of looking at deeper levels of culture.

BRINGING TOGETHER SURFACE AND DEEPER LEVELS
The children easily identified superficial aspects of book
characters’ cultures, aspects often referred to as the “Five Fs”
—food, fashion, folklore, festivals, and famous people (Meyer
& Rhoades, 2006). However, through extended discussions of
the books we read, they began to make connections to deeper
levels of culture. I would often foreground our discussions by
asking what was really important about the experiences of
the characters in the books. For example, I would ask what
was really important about birthdays or grandmothers or
family celebrations. This question served as means to help
the children re-focus and look beneath cultural surfaces. For
instance, while the children noticed that the outside of homes looked quite different around the globe, I asked them to think about what was really important about homes. They wrote in their journals that the important parts of homes were the insides, referring to them in their journals as “safe places,” “places to play with my friends,” “places to eat,” and “places where my family is.” In another example, I asked them what was really important about schools, and they wrote “how you feel about your teacher” and “your friends,” and “what you learn.” At the opening of this article, I shared what Peter said about Christmastime meals. He explained, “Some people do things different from us because of where they live and what they’re used to. We don’t eat tamales for Christmas but we have other stuff.” Here Peter noted that — at the surface level — the kinds of food families ate at Christmas might be different. However when I asked Peter what was really important about Christmas celebrations, he explained, “It’s important because my whole family is together....and we give presents to each other.” This suggests how certain social practices and beliefs were valued, such as families being brought together to share in gift-giving.

While we used many strategies to work toward an understanding of both surface and deeper levels of the children’s personal cultures, I found one strategy to be especially helpful, what Short (2008) refers to as a cultural x-ray, an outline of a person with a heart drawn inside. Surface aspects of culture, those that are visible, are listed around the periphery of the “person.” The deeper, less-visible levels of culture such as the values and beliefs the characters held in their hearts are written on the inside of the x-ray. For example, the children remembered My Name is Celia (Brown, 2004) and Oye, Celia (Sciurba, 2007), two picture books about the Cuban singer, Celia Cruz. They also remembered a CD of her songs that they listened to throughout the year, commenting that even though they did not understand all of the words, they enjoyed her singing. In fact, Hannah wrote in her own words and spelling about this CD (one that her teacher played often during the day whenever the children asked for it), “The musick...was fantastick. I loved the music. I could just jump up and dance.” Through our discussions of these books and Cruz’s music, the children discovered (and were surprised to learn) that their classmates listened to multiple genres of music at home—from hip hop to hymns, from contemporary to country-western. The children said that the kind of music someone listens to should go on the outside of a person’s cultural x-ray, but the way the music makes a person feel should go on the inside.

After much discussion and practicing using the characters of the books as our guides, the children created personal cultural x-rays thinking carefully about what shows on the outside of a person and what should be put on the inside. The children used descriptive language on the outside of their x-rays; for example, Courtney listed on the outside that she was a girl who spoke English, has blond hair, owns a dog, lives in a house, and eats with a fork, spoon, and knife. However, on the inside, the children’s language was more affective, naming emotional attributes and beginning to articulate their frameworks of meaning. For example, Courtney wrote that she feels happy when she hears music and that she loves her family and dog.

DEFINING AND DOCUMENTING THEIR CULTURE
I continued to name and asked the children to name aspects of culture from the books we read. After reading many children’s books, followed by multiple conversations and experiences with writing, drawing, and listening, the first-graders generated a definition of culture: “What is important to me and my family and how we do things.” With this definition in their minds, I wanted them to document what they had been learning about culture through photography, asking them to take photographs of what they perceived to be aspects of their culture and then writing about them. I informed their parents and provided the children with disposable cameras to take home.
With the help of family members, they came back with photographs of their families, homes, holiday celebrations, gift-giving events such as birthdays and Christmas, and family sports activities–elements that they had determined were reflections of their culture. They also noted that family pets played an important part in their culture. Because of our reading, the children knew that different cultures valued different kinds of pets, and in their writing, they talked about the role their pets played as extended members of their families. In this writing sample, accompanied by a photograph of his cat, Allan brought together concepts of pets and gift giving.

All of the children wrote descriptive vignettes about their photographs, and we incorporated them into a book that the children decided to call, “The Best Parts of my Culture.”

Students Identified and Made Connections to a Global Culture Different from Their Own

THE BEST LAID PLANS
In pre-planning the study with Anne, we decided that for the second part of the curricular framework, “making cross-cultural explorations,” we would present the children with an overview of several cultures from around the world and have them choose one that engaged them. To that end, I created text sets of books about Afghanistan (Khan, 1988; Lofthouse, 2007; Pohl, 2008; Weber, 2006; Winter, 2009) and South Korea (Choi, 2001; Kwon, 2005; Liu, 2001; McMahon, 1993; Park & Park, 1998; Recorvits, 2003) with titles that I felt appropriate for first-grade students. The text sets included multiple genres including folklore and fictional picture books and non-fiction books that portray contemporary views of these countries, as well as links to internet materials. We also chose these two countries because there were no students in the class from either Afghanistan or South Korea who could be cast as the sole cultural representative.

However, the best-laid plans (teaching and otherwise) often go in unintended directions. Having been introduced to the picture book, 14 Cows for America (Deedy, 2009) by a colleague, I wanted to share the engaging story and beautiful illustrations with the children. I brought the book to our next meeting and read it to the first-graders. They were fascinated by this true story of a group of Maasai people from Kenya who gave fourteen cows, animals that represent their well-being and livelihood, to the United States in the aftermath of the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001. The children were touched by the generosity and compassion of the Maasai and wanted to know more about them. The decision about which global culture to study was made by the children’s passionate interest in this story.

We supplemented our reading of 14 Cows for America (Deedy, 2009) with other texts that I (quickly) located in libraries and on-line book stores about the Maasai people (Joose, 2005; Krebs & Cairns, 2004; Kroll, 1997), and although it was difficult to find books about contemporary Maasai culture, I was able to find a few that discussed both the traditional life of nomadic Maasai cattle herders as well as the lives of Maasai people who had moved to the city (Hetfield, 1996; Nicolotto, 2005) and were living more urban lives. I also found on-line photographs of Maasai to share with the children, for example a photograph of an outdoor school that Maasai children near the Tanzanian border attended. It reminded the children of outdoor schools they had seen in Fox’s (1997) book, and these representations of schools continued to challenge the first graders’ conceptions of school and how children could learn in different kinds of classrooms. We found Kenya on a map and talked about how far away it was from our city and state, and I explained that Kenya was a country in the large continent of Africa.
This fact struck a note with one of the boys. With some degree of surprise, he worked his way through a new idea and told me, "They have skin like me. I'm African-American. They must be ...African-Africans," and he mentioned this fact proudly to me on several occasions, finding a way to make a personal connection to the generous and compassionate Maasai.

After discussing the role of Maasai men as warriors charged with protecting their communities, I found videos from the internet of an adumu, a competitive jumping dance performed by the men of a village to show their strength and stamina as warriors. We discussed the underlying beliefs that supported this dance, and the children talked about how important it would be to protect the people and the cows from predatory animals about which we had read. Additionally, I was able to locate a Maasai music CD from the university's music library, one that the children used to accompany their interpretation of a Maasai jumping dance performed in the schoolyard outside their classroom.

Beyond reading, I extended the children's understanding of 14 Cows for America (Deedy, 2009) with a readers' theater rendition of the story. In this strategy, the children took the parts of the characters and the narrator. Props and costumes were not used so that the focus was "on oral interpretation which allows stories to come to life" (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995, p. 187). We began to prepare for the readers' theater with conversations about what makes a good gift. Mark said, "It makes people happy," and Carlos told me that "It is something that people like." However, when I asked the children if they had ever given away something of their own as a gift, the question was greeted with silence. We continued our conversation by imagining what it would be like to give away something about which they cared deeply, as the Maasai had done with their cows. As the children performed the readers' theater, I videotaped it. Hearing the language of the story aloud added a new dimension of meaning. Several of the "actors" adopted deeper voices and added gestures and movement to represent their characters. The children listened intently and carefully to the voices of their classmates. Dialogue during the practices and afterwards focused on the generosity of the Maasai.

As a culminating activity for the cultural exploration of the Maasai, we returned to the cultural x-rays that had helped the children define aspects of their personal cultural lives. Since the children were already familiar with this strategy,
I believed it would serve as an engaging way for them to bring together what they had learned about themselves as cultural beings and what we had learned about the Maasai people. I created a poster-sized cultural x-ray and served as scribe. Small groups re-read and studied the illustrations of the books we had read.

On the outside of the x-ray, they asked me to write that clothing and jewelry were colorful and that some of the people decorated their skin with bright colors for celebrations. They added that the Maasai were tall and had dark hair and skin, and they sometimes used spears as weapons. They noted that boys and girls did not eat their meals together and that they spoke the Maa language. They asked me to include the facts that some were cattle herders who lived in the country and some lived in cities. They explained that mothers carried their babies in "back packs" and that they did not have to wear shoes if they lived in the country. They lived among African animals like lions. However, the children asked me to add items on the inside of the cultural x-ray, too, aspects of Maasai culture that were less visible. For instance, remembering the narrator of 14 Cows for America (Deedy, 2009), a young man who was studying to be a doctor, they decided that the Maasai must value learning and studying. They also noted how the Maasai loved their children and cared for their cows. Because the cows were treated with such kindness, the children decided they must be happy, and pictures of contented cows proliferated.

In addition, because of their gift to the Americans, the children decided that the Maasai must also be compassionate and generous, words we learned along the way and that the children added to the "heart" of the Maasai cultural x-ray.

Across Their Cultural Journeys, Students Read Extensively, Intensively, and Beyond Expectations

READING EXTENSIVELY
Peterson and Eeds (1990/2007) wrote that children need to have opportunities to read both intensively and extensively. As we read across the semester, the children read intensively and often wanted to learn more about a particular point that puzzled or intrigued them from one of our books. For example, when we read Carolina's Gift (Diaz, 2002), students immediately noticed that the main character had a llama for a pet. They were enthralled by the idea of such a pet and they asked many, many questions – questions about what llamas ate, whether you could take them for a walk, how llamas are bathed, and where they sleep at night. I went to the library and found as many non-fiction children's books as were available that described llamas in detail as well as picture books that featured llamas as characters to help the children answer some of their many questions. 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 on what they had learned to the class. These forays into self-directed, in-depth learning continued throughout the semesters as the children wanted to learn more about homes and schools around the world, too. When we read about pets, homes, or schools, I asked the children questions intended to help them get beyond surface level conceptions and explore deeper conceptions of culture related to them. I asked questions such as, "What surprised you or what made you wonder about pets/homes/schools in this book?" and followed up such questions with "Why?" For example, after reading books about homes, the children described how different homes looked around the world. However, when I asked them what surprised them about the homes around the world, Ashley told me that "homes look different but they all hold families."

READING BEYOND EXPECTATIONS
I did not know the reading abilities of any of the children except for what I intuited as we shared books with each other across the year, and because of this I had few pre-conceived ideas about the children's abilities. When it came time for them to choose parts for the readers' theatre, I allowed them to volunteer for any part. The children's excitement level was high as they practiced and prepared for this experience, knowing that everyone would have a part and that their performance would be videotaped. In a letter that Charles wrote me at the end of the semester, he described his experiences with the readers' theatre. In his own words and spelling, he explained, "I like when we did the readers theder. I loved my part. My part was
narrator 2. The senses were long and the words were hard but I could still read them.” Charles was proud of his performance, noting that he found the reading difficult, but he was able to persevere through challenging materials. He exceeded his own expectations. However, Sebastian not only exceeded his own expectations but surprised his teacher with his reading as well. He eagerly volunteered to be Narrator 1, the first speaker in the performance. He practiced his lines with the student teacher and with me, and when the time came for him to start reading, he read slowly, pronouncing each word carefully, placing emphasis on certain phrases to help convey meaning, and smiling throughout his performance. Afterwards, Sebastian came up to me and said, “I loved that,” and later Anne told me that Sebastian struggled with the simplest reading materials and was not a strong reader. She could not believe how well he read his part. Sebastian’s desire to be a part of this whole-class experience allowed him to exceed reading expectations – his and his teacher’s.

Final Thoughts
Going Beyond Standards
I did not want to add to Anne’s already busy teaching schedule as I conducted research in her classroom. Rather, I wanted to incorporate first-grade teaching requirements into my plans for the students whenever possible. For example, two Social Studies standards that first-grade children needed to meet included identifying personal identities and identifying the ways that people are alike and different in the United States and the world. These standards were naturally and authentically embedded in the cultural 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 cultural explorations by including readers’ theatre, writing in response to reading and to the photographs they took, and incorporating the visual arts in the children’s illustrated response journals. However, the interdisciplinary possibilities went beyond our careful beginning-of-the-year planning as the children also read extensively about self-identified topics of interest and read beyond their expectations while expanding their understanding of another global culture.

Bringing Things Together
Aspects of culture are learned as part of the natural processes of growing up in a family and community and from participating in schools and other social institutions. The teaching practices that Anne and I included also had fluid boundaries, creating overlapping disciplinary opportunities. Through this exploration, the 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 learning about people from different parts of the world. Bernstein (1977) wrote that this kind of learning and teaching, what he referred to as “invisible pedagogy,” creates classrooms in which “things must be put together” (p. 532), meaning that teachers’ and students’ home and school knowledge and content across disciplinary areas can be “put together,” as opposed to being “kept apart” as happens in many traditional classrooms.

Possibilities and Potentials of Cultural Explorations
Children’s experiences with literature have the potential to alter their views of the world. The study in which I engaged with the first graders was a step toward that goal. The books I chose and the instructional strategies I used to help the children unpack cultural messages embedded in the books was a beginning, not an ending. The children made strides toward understanding the difficult concept of culture; yet we – children and adults alike – never really “get there.” These kinds of cultural explorations should be consistently embedded across grade levels and content areas so that students and their adult mentors have as a goal “moving toward” deeper understandings of and appreciation for the cultural beliefs and values of people in our communities and beyond.

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Aspects of culture are learned as part of the natural processes of growing up in a family and community and from participating in schools and other social institutions.
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