Opening Eyes, Hearing Voices, and Making Connections;

Gaining a World View through the School Library Media Center

Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected, so today’s students need to prepare for a global society by having competency in information literacy and valuing multiple perspectives. They must understand that the way a particular group sees the world is only one of many possible perspectives and that belief systems are socially constructed, not innate, so they can differ and change based on cultural influences (Banks et al, 2005, p. 23). According to “Democracy and Diversity: Principals and Concepts for Educating Citizens in a Global Age”, a global perspective is the “capacity to see the whole picture whether one is focusing on a local or an international matter. It promotes knowledge of people, places, events, and issues beyond the students’ own community and country through knowledge of interconnected global systems, international events, world cultures, and global geography. It does not privilege certain cultures, while exoticizing and marginalizing others” (p. 23).

So how do students prepare for an interconnected society and gain a global perspective? One way is through their school libraries; using library materials to develop understanding among culturally diverse students and teacher librarians to help students share attitudes and feelings through discourse and reflection to transcend cultural barriers and social differences. Teacher librarians worldwide, from China to Brazil, strive to enhance the curriculum, enrich the individual student’s self-perception and promote lifelong literacy and learning through the best and most honest presentations of life, whether it is in a Norwegian city or a small town in Bhutan (Campello, 2009; Chen & Lee, 2009; Enger, 2008; Lowrie, 1987; Shaw 2005). School libraries can effectively accomplish these goals when teacher librarians and classroom teachers collaborate to plan, deliver, and evaluate learning activities, and administrators support these collaborative learning
communities (Chen & Lee, 2009; Lance, 2002; Lance, Rodney & Schwarz, 2010; Moore, 2005; Neelameghan, 2007; Scholastic Research & Results, 2007). When school libraries are able to create more authentic learning experiences, the library goes from a physical space to a dynamic environment where students connect ideas and gain understanding and knowledge (Campello, 2009; Gordon, 2010b).

The first requirement for gaining a global perspective is functional literacy. Functional Literacy is the ability to read and read well, that is, students must be able to draw meaning and conclusions from the texts they read (Campello, 2009; Odesso, 2007). They must be able to read, write and calculate well enough to function in their society, if they achieve this, they are “functionally literate” (UNESCO, 2010). In order to achieve functional literacy, school children must have access to sufficient reading material, especially books, and be immersed in a reading culture (Baker & Chhetri, 2005; Campello, 2009; Loertscher, 2010). This is especially challenging where books are scarce or books are primarily available in the dominant/national/school language and rare or unavailable in the native language spoken at home. This lack of access to reading material in the child’s native language is more common in countries where indigenous emphasis has been on an oral culture and written language is a recent development, such as Bhutan (Shaw, 2005), or where colonialism resulted in a non-native language as the language of school instruction, such as Ghana (Yitah & Komasi, 2009). The lack of reading material in the student’s native language impedes the development of a reading culture in two ways; first, a child must be able to read in his/her native language to make connections to daily experiences (Yitah & Komasi, 2009), and second, reading exclusively in a language used only for school results in reading becoming strictly a “study-related” duty rather than a tool for personal growth and enjoyment (Shaw, 2005). Reading is also important for social inclusion in the school library setting (Odasso, 2007). Once a reading culture is established, students should be encouraged to derive pleasure in reading. Pleasure in reading requires having
access to texts that students find engaging; texts that reflect their lives, as well as, texts that show how others deal with problems or issues similar to their own (Yitah & Komasi, 2009). When a student understands that academic success and personal growth can be achieved through reading, when they can appreciate the value of reading or better yet, enjoy reading, they have achieved functional literacy and are ready for the next step; gaining information literacy (Todd, 2007).

Information literacy is built upon the foundation of functional literacy, as reading to learn is at the heart of being able to access the information necessary for being productive in society (Campello, 2009). When students can read they can then be taught how to find, evaluate, and use information to create meaning and draw conclusions. Information literacy is necessary to build knowledge and understanding. “It requires the systematic and explicit development of abilities to connect with, interact with, and utilize information to construct personal understanding” (Moore, 2005).

Information literacy compels the student to go beyond the progressive addition of facts, to go beyond the superficial level of merely descriptive; it involves an integrative approach to knowledge construction through the synthesis, coalescence, and reflection on the information accessed (Todd, 2007). If the teaching of information literacy skills occurs at the time of need and is connected to topics students care about so they are asked to “explore information that is meaningful to them, they not only learn faster but their literacy skills grow rapidly; they learn how to learn” (Scholastic Research & Results, 2007, p. 5) and can take pleasure in learning; becoming lifelong learners (Moore, 2005; Todd, 2007). Once students have achieved information literacy they are ready to develop a global understanding and world view perspective, or what I call “cultural literacy.”

Becoming culturally literate is a process. It can “only develop once individuals have mastered insight into their own values and assumptions, which then allows them to possess greater understanding of other cultures’ differing sets of values and assumptions, leading to a meta-cultural awareness and
the capability of considering culture as a distinct component of one’s individual heritage” (Allan, 2003, p. 100). This process begins by students understanding themselves and their own personal views and biases, by becoming aware of their own culture - how it differs from other cultures and shapes their own self concept, which in turn enables them to understand other cultures (Allan, 2003). If school children cannot become open to understanding other cultures, they may slide into ethnocentrism, taking refuge in mono-cultural enclaves and retreating into a tunnel vision view of the world (Chen, 2010). Once students begin to understand other cultures, they can progress to acceptance and respect for other cultures. If they stop at understanding, without moving to acceptance, all that is achieved is adaptation. Adaptation, in this context, refers to strategies allowing someone to function among people with differing perspectives without changing their own beliefs about culture. Once acceptance and respect are achieved, students can move forward toward appreciating and valuing other cultures and viewpoints (Allan, 2003). However, if they fail to fully appreciate and value other perspectives they will only assimilate with the dominant culture (the so-called “McDonald-ization of Culture” (Anushiravani, 2010)). Thus, to achieve a global perspective or multiculturalism school children must learn to appreciate and value aspects of the cultures they encounter; that is, they must reflect on, and then accept or reject
various aspects of their own culture and other cultures into a new multicultural perspective. This process, then, is cultural literacy (Allan, 2003, p. 101-104).

So what can teacher librarians do to facilitate students’ acquisition of these multiple literacies? They can collect and use authentic texts, promote a multilingual environment, adopt an international teaching style and teach democratic citizenship. While accomplishing these tasks, teachers and teacher librarians will likely move through the four levels of Banks’ Model for introducing multicultural literature into the curriculum; content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, and equity pedagogy (as cited in Alexander & Morton, 2007, p. 33). Moving through the levels of Banks’ Model and accomplishing these tasks requires support from school administrators, and most also require integration into the curriculum through collaborative instruction with classroom teachers, as well as, changes in instructional pedagogy (Abilock, 2006; Agosto, 2001). Theses are lofty expectations given the financial constraints and standardized testing requirements facing primary and secondary schools around the world.

Authentic texts are texts that reflect the realities and diversity of the students in the school. Teacher librarians need to ponder the question, “What is it like for a child to want a good book – yet never find one about someone like me?” (Marston, 2010, p. 5). Thus teacher librarians also need to continually assess their collections to assure there are books that will appeal to all segments of their population and that each child will occasionally encounter a story about issues relating to their own lives (Agosto, 20007). Children should find themselves reflected in the library’s texts, in words, pictures, and sound; this type of inclusion is crucial in helping them form healthy self-images and feel a part of the school library community (Agosto, 2001). Multicultural texts should be carefully chosen with attention to accuracy (accuracy in cultural elements, language, and history), expertise (thoroughly researched), respect (lack of stereotyping and condescending tone), purpose, and
overall literary quality (poor quality multicultural texts benefit no one) (Agosto, 2007). In finding books to mirror the students in the school community, the multicultural texts should go beyond the five f’s of food, festivals, fashion, folklore and famous people (Chen, 2010; Short, 2009) as the “purpose of authentic multicultural literature is to help liberate us from all the preconceived stereotypical hang-ups that imprison us within narrow boundaries” (Sims Bishop, 1993, p.43). Thus, “if literature is the mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read or are read to need to see themselves reflected as part of humanity” (Sims Bishop, 1993, p. 43). When children see no reflection or just a distorted misrepresentation of themselves they risk being devalued. At the same time when children only see their own reflection or are given only stereotypical misrepresentations of others, they gain an equally damaging false sense of superiority; thus the importance of authentic texts, reflective of a variety of cultures and perspectives (Agosto, 2001; Short & Fox, 2003; Sims Bishop, 1993).

The five f’s cover only the first of the four levels in Banks’ Model for introducing multicultural literature into the curriculum (as cited in Alexander & Morton, 2007, p. 33), that of content integration (e.g., a brief introduction). The next level in Banks’ Model is knowledge construction. During knowledge construction cultural discussions are added but not integrated into the curriculum. Typical examples would be a teacher librarian or a classroom teacher choosing to add lessons on cultural awareness and stereotyping through discussions of folktales that are common to a variety of cultures. The lessons serve to illustrate similarities and differences and raise awareness of diversity issues, yet are not formally integrated into the curriculum. A common lesson taught at level two is the “Multicultural Cinderella”. This lesson uses the many and varied forms of the Cinderella story found around the world and through time (e.g., ancient tales through modern versions). The various retellings of the story offer glimpses into the multihued worlds of other cultures but do not present personal, individual voices. These stories are often told in picture book
form, so they open the students’ eyes and make them aware of and start to understand cultural diversity (Abilock, 2006), but they lack the depth to connect the students to the point of respecting and valuing other cultures (Alexander & Morton, 2007).

Level three of Banks’ Model is prejudice reduction. It is at this level where the addition of authentic multicultural texts and unique perspectives of distinct groups are formally integrated into the curriculum. “Ethnic literature is added to various subjects in the school curriculum so that students can learn about cultural variances and issues in the contexts of the various cultures studied” (Alexander & Morton, 2007, p. 33). “Through literature, children have the opportunity to go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining surface-level information about another culture. Students are invited to immerse themselves in story world, gaining insights into how people feel, live, and think around the world” (Short, 2009. p. 1). “The best stories tell it from the point of view of ordinary people like us. Stories like these defeat stereotypes...not by making the character a heroic role model or a proud representative of the race, not by haranguing us with a worthy cause, but by making the individual a person” (Rochman, 2003, p. 113). “A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person – flawed, complex, striving – then you’ve reached beyond stereotype” (Rochman, 2003, p. 102). Elsa Marston, a writer whose mission is to “help bridge the fissures of ignorance and misunderstanding that block a great many Americans from positive attitudes toward the Arab people and their cultures” (Marston, 2010, p. 6) bridges her stories between cultures by focusing on life experiences familiar to teenagers nearly everywhere. The young characters in her stories are concerned with fitting in at school, finding a true friend, dealing with family concerns such as divorce, balancing parents’ wishes with their own dreams, and resisting cultural pressures. While the cultural framework of her stories may be specific to the Arab world, the basic concerns of the characters are those of young people most everywhere
Thus students can build connections with other cultures and see the unity of cultures as well as respect their differences.

One nuance to the addition of authentic, multicultural texts is a multilingual environment where students can hear the voices of various cultures. The research regarding literacy from countries that were former colonies emphasizes the importance of texts in the child’s native language, not just the majority language or the language taught in their school. Having texts in one’s native language is important because “reading in the mother tongue means the child is reading within his or her general experience and linguistic scope” (Yitah & Komasi, 2009, p. 251). “Every child has the right to bathe in his own culture, to be nourished by his mother culture before being fed the culture of others” (Gbado, 2008, p. 2). Thus, school libraries should also provide opportunities for all students to hear the voices of the various native languages found at the school. This can be through bilingual stories or by inviting parents or community members fluent in both languages to come and tell a story in the native language and then paraphrase the story in the dominant school language.

“Disregarding native languages can send strong, albeit unintended, messages of cultural disapproval to minority language speaking students” (Agosto, 2001, p. 50), while exposure to these languages in the school setting not only validates the minority cultures but allows for “deeper understanding and acceptance by those in the majority culture” (Agosto, 2001, p. 53). Finally, school library media centers should seek out translations of texts from the minority cultures to demonstrate that other cultures have texts with literary merits of their own and students deserve exposure to these texts (Agosto, 2001). In addition to translations of texts from the school’s minority and ethnic populations, school libraries should include selections of international literature. “International literature refers to books originally published for children in a country other than the United States. These may be works originally written in English or first published in another language then translated for publication in the U. S.” (Clark, White, & Bluemel, 2004). International literature adds
another dimension to cultural literacy as it helps students connect with the wider world and value completely foreign cultures because “it is through literature that we most intimately enter the hearts and minds and spirits of other people” (Clark, et al., 2004, p. 13).

In addition to seeing themselves and others reflected in authentic texts and hearing the voices of various cultures, students also need “to be able to tackle issues of cultural difference, equity, and assumptions about race, class, and gender as they read literature” (Short & Fox, 2003, p. 21). Tackling issues of cultural dissonance means “working with conflict and accepting that conflict cannot always be resolved” (Allan, 2003, p. 107). Instruction can no longer rely on lectures and rote memorization if students are to progress to Banks’ Model level four, equity pedagogy (i.e., critically thinking about social injustice and taking action to mitigate it). Instead, teaching must develop an international style to include planned discussions, dialogues, and small group work that engages the student to think critically about important social issues (Alexander & Morton, 2007; Aoyama-Yazawa, 2008). An international teaching style is exemplified in the way Japanese teachers approach math instruction.

“Japanese teachers believe students learn best by first struggling to solve mathematics problems, then participating in discussions about how to solve them, and then hearing about the pros and cons of different methods and the relationships between them. Frustration and confusion are taken to be a natural part of the process, because each person must struggle with a situation first in order to make sense of the information he or she hears later. Constructing connections between methods and problems is thought to require time to explore and invent, to make mistakes, to reflect, and to receive the needed information at an appropriate time.” (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999, p. 91)
Thus students must have time planned in the curriculum to wrestle with complex issues, engage in dialogues and reflect on different perspectives (Allan, 2003; Gordon, 2010b). Engagement is facilitated by teaching with attention to content (emphasis on important issues over which people disagree), pedagogy (students not just told that controversy exists but invited to wrestle with the nuances of differing positions and perspectives) and climate (school climate encourages discourse, there is freedom to express divergent ideas; even those that differ from the majority and/or teacher viewpoints) (Banks et al., 2005, p. 14). Instruction in the school library media center should help students understand why they need to learn things like reading, history, and citizenship but the struggle is the “Atlas problem of where should Atlas stand to support the whole world” [that is], “when working with students with many different nationalities, cultures, and languages, from where does the teacher stand to find a common foundation” (Allan, 2003, p. 106) for the entire class? The answer is the teacher librarian cannot stand firmly in a single place, but must instead integrate a variety of cultural perspectives (e.g., interculturalism) across all instruction themes (Short, 2009).

Developing interculturalism is a multi-step process. First students must develop an understanding of culture; theirs and others, for “when students recognize the cultures that influence their thinking, they become more aware of how and why culture is important to others” (Short, 2009, p. 4). Understanding personal cultural identity can be taught through books that show characters struggling with some aspect of identity and by making “cultural x-rays”. A “cultural x-ray” is a visual depiction of a child’s internal and external cultural identity using a body outline on a piece of paper, labeling “the outside of their bodies with what is visible to others (language, age, ethnicity, gender, religion) and the inside with the values and beliefs they hold in their hearts” (Short, 2009, p. 4). Classes then reflect on each other’s cultural x-rays so they can see that their perspective is one of many ways to perceive the world and is shaped by their own culture and personal experiences. Next students need opportunities to explore other cultures, not superficially for a single lesson as cultural
tourists, but rather a comprehensive immersion across curricular areas through literature as well as examinations of the social, economic, and political realities of that culture (Short, 2009). An in depth examination of any culture is likely to raise issues of social justice and therefore offers opportunities for teaching democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship is an equity pedagogy; it involves teaching students to “understand how they, their community, nation, and region both influence and are being influenced by today’s global interconnectedness” (Banks, et al., 2005, p. 11) and the concepts of democracy, tolerance, justice, equality, respect, inclusion, human rights, race, power, security and patriotism (Banks, et al., 2005). Students need opportunities to “engage and challenge different bodies of knowledge, cultural codes, and frames of reference to construct their own world views” (Allan, 2003, p. 107). School children need to learn about discrimination and racism; to understand how power operates in relation to diversity, human rights, and social justice issues. They need help seeing the complexity of the world around them and how globalization (the homogenization or “McDonald-ization” of world cultures) can both increase quality of life as well as the inequalities, and how it endangers minority cultures and increases cultural imperialism (Anushiravani, 2010; Banks et al., 2005). Teaching democratic citizenship helps students “consider the difficult issues of social justice ...to change how they think about and relate to others, ...to understand that race, class, and gender matter in how we interpret and analyze our experiences in the world and through books” (Short, 2009).

One way to teach democratic citizenship is to engage students with a world social issue; this process begins by making connections and making the issue relevant to the student’s lives, then introduces the issue on a more global scale so students can see the relationships and why the issue should matter. So, for example, if the world social issue was human rights, students would be given a brief overview of the issue and then asked to examine it locally by exploring events that are
“unfair” in school. They can read books about characters being treated unfairly in school, discuss the human rights involved when feeling something was unfair, develop a list of basic rights for the students of the school, and note which rights needed work. Students would then explore additional literature on a single, more global human rights issue such as child labor and note the strategies used by the characters to take action and then see if they can apply these strategies to their own school to improve their rights and reduce unfair treatment (Short, 2009). Through exercises like these, students learn what it is to be a citizen in an interconnected world, to develop an understanding of responsibility for social change, and gain a world view through the resources of the school library and its teacher librarians.

Thus school library media centers have the potential to prepare students to be 21st century learners; seeing their world with open eyes, hearing the multitude of voices and connecting through a global perspective. School libraries with authentic texts and multilingual environments help culturally diverse students attain functional literacy, information literacy and cultural literacy, as well as feel a sense of social inclusion (Enger, 2008; Odasso, 2007). While teacher librarians, using an international teaching style and through instruction in democratic citizenship, help students share attitudes and feelings through discourse and reflection to transcend cultural barriers and social differences. Some fortunate schools are currently employing these pedagogies in their schools through their school libraries; truly preparing their students to be 21st century learners with global perspectives.

However, in the real world of the school library media center, this reality can only be achieved when this type of learning is made a priority by the school administration and collaborative relationships between the teacher librarians and teachers are strong so instruction is integrated with an emphasis on teaching literacies and global issues while teaching to the test is devalued (Chen & Lee, 2009). Sadly, a recent study found that almost half of U.S. teacher librarians surveyed reported that they “rarely or never” engage in collaborative planning or instruction with classroom teachers (Lance, et
and students worldwide can attest to the lack of international style instruction and a persistent emphasis on teaching to the test. This paper presented a framework for schools to help students excel in an interconnected world. Yet, the challenge remains, for the framework requires collaboration, as well as, an investment of time and resources, both of which are currently scarce in most U.S. public primary and secondary schools. Therefore the next step is to educate school administrators, classroom teachers, school funding agencies (e.g., governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.), teacher librarians, and parents on the importance of adopting a pedagogy that supports 21st century learners and promotes cultural literacy and global perspectives. Where the libraries, themselves, reflect their student populations and include accurate, diverse perspectives from around the world which “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” (Short, 2010, p. 6).
Bibliography


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*Information Studies, 13*(1), 5-22.


A summary report of research on the importance of school libraries. Most of the material is from the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) and used to be available at www.nclis.gov but the NCLIS lost its funding in 2008 and its website no longer exists. Resource was found through citations from several other papers.


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