

Cultivating Cultural Competence: Context, Culture, and Technology of a Global Reading Challenge

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Abstract

Underlying Jella Lepman's founding of the International Youth Library In Munich, Germany in 1949, is the firm belief that reading high quality, culturally specific literature can lead young readers to gain cultural competence. However, there is little systematic research upon which this assertion can be based. This research study, in the preliminary and early results stage, is designed to help fill this evidence gap. The content, culture, and technology in this study that have the potential to break down global walls are explained. Focus was on a convenience sample of 9 and 10 year old readers at 12 urban schools who participate in a Global Reading Challenge at their school, regional, and district level based on twelve culturally specific books. The researchers employed a pre-post test mixed methods design with qualitative methods (interview) based on quantitative methods (survey) and used three models of cultural competence to analyze the data.

Keywords: multicultural youth literature, cultural competence, digital youth, international youth library, global reading

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1 Introduction

In 1949 following the drastically inhumane events of World War II, Jella Lepman, an internationally recognized journalist, established the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany. She ardently believed that high quality literature for youth provides an important vehicle for promoting peace and understanding and that it could play an important role in preventing another such conflict (Lepman 2002). Today the International Youth Library is the largest library for international children's and youth literature in the world, with 32 full-time staff and facilities for researchers, teachers, and youth to examine and study the best literature from many countries. Lepman also spearheaded the effort to establish the International Book Board for Young People (IBBY), an organization founded in 1953 committed to furthering the goals of understanding across numerous countries of the world. Many countries now have national or regional chapters. One of IBBY's main proclamations is "the right of the child to a general education and to direct access to information (IBBY 2013)."

1.1 Problem statement

Inspired by Lepman's work, scholars and professionals have expanded upon it, leading to the frequent statement that such high quality, culturally specific literature can serve as mirrors for children to see themselves, and windows to see and understand youth from cultures that differ from their own as well as doors that encourage them to enter and experience those other cultures for ultimate understanding. Those who make such statements are as convinced that they are true as Lepman herself believed, but when we, as scholars, are challenged to back these statements up with empirical evidence, we find that there is little or no systematic research upon which these assertions can be based. We just 'know' it is true.

This research study, in the preliminary and early results stage, is designed to help fill this evidence gap with systematically gathered concrete evidence about the results of reading high quality, culturally

specific globally-oriented literature for children 9 and 10 years of age. It focuses on a convenience sample of children from the 2500 in 45 schools who are participating in a Global Reading Challenge. It also seeks evidence of the impact of a shared reading experience for digital youth who are part of a world dominated by interactive social media.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1 What, if any effect, does the close reading of high quality, culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences have on children's information about the cultures about which they read?

RQ2 What, if any effect, does the close reading of high quality, culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences have on children's gaining active cultural competence in relation to the cultures about which they have read?

RQ3 What, if any effect, does the close reading of high quality, culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences as part of an interactive team experience have on children's information about the cultures about which they read?

RQ4 What, if any effect, does the close reading of high quality, culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences as part of an interactive team experience have on children's gaining active cultural competence in relation to the cultures about which they have read?

1.3 Context Setting and Background

The Global Reading Challenge (GRC) originated in the Kalamazoo, Michigan Public Library approximately two decades ago. Mary Palmer, a librarian, brought the program to the Seattle, Washington Public Library 18 years ago and has been the coordinator of it since. A few years into the program, the Vancouver, British Columbia Public Library and Public Schools joined the Challenge so at various times 3 public libraries and 3 public school systems have been involved nationally and internationally. The current research is situated in the Seattle Public Library and Public Schools. Participation in the teams is voluntary informal learning, administered by librarians and to some extent teachers. The challenges start with teams competing by responding to questions at the school level, then a regional level, and finally a citywide or in some cases international final level.

Two of the five Global Reading Challenge (GRC) goals related to this research are to

- Increase teamwork and cooperative thinking skills.
- Share quality children's literature that represents a diversity of experiences at a variety of reading levels. (Seattle Public Library Foundation, 2013)

Each year the Global Reading Challenge program coordinator selects ten high quality books that are designed to meet the goals of the program upon which the challenge will be based. These high quality books contain culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences. Books are provided for participating teams, who share among their members.

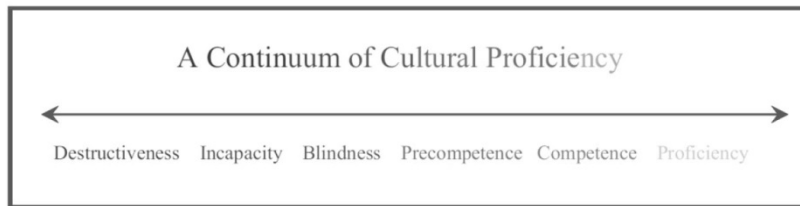
For the first time in 2012 – 13 an outside evaluator was hired to conduct a study about the extent to which the program was meeting its goals. The results were overwhelmingly positive (Seattle Public Library Foundation and Moreno 2013). Respondents agreed that participants' teamwork skills were significantly improved. However, impact of the one goal that was not addressed in this evaluation is the second one listed above. The children obviously did share this type of literature but no assessment was made of its impact and no attempt was made to answer the related research questions posed by this study.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The researchers employed three models or theoretical frameworks to develop the data collection instruments and later to analyze the results of the data collected and to reach some answers to RQ1 and RQ2. The first

of these is Critical Multicultural Theory, the application of which to children's literature is most thoroughly developed by Botelho and Rudman (2009). According to this theory, "children's literature is read against its sociopolitical context. Readers ascertain what cultural themes are imbedded in the work (5)." Children must read the ten books selected quite closely exposing them to sociopolitical context where it exists. The research will reveal whether the students understand the sociopolitical context.

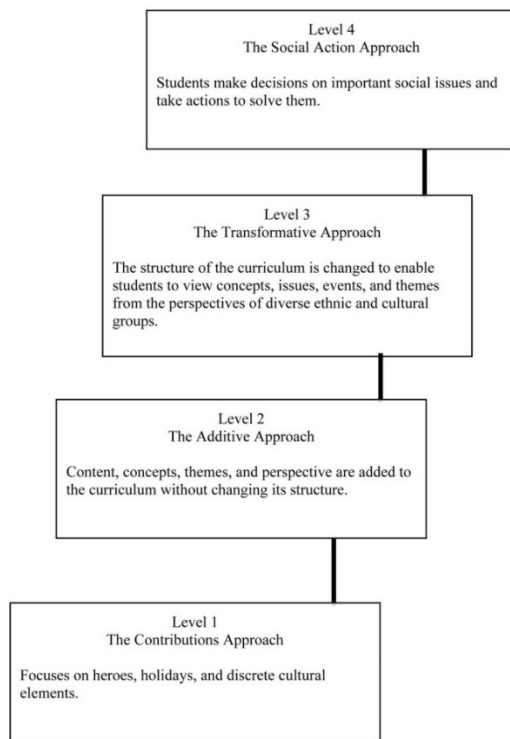
A second model the researchers employed is one that Deborah Abilock developed to measure where on a continuum her students are in achieving cultural competency. Her visual representation introduces the notion that students, teachers, and librarians can work to become more and more culturally competent along a scale that runs in six stages from Destructiveness to Cultural Proficiency.



Reprinted with permission of Deborah Abilock from Deborah Abilock, "Educating Students for Cross-Cultural Proficiency." *Knowledge Quest* 35 (Nov/Dec): 11.

Figure 1: A Continuum of Cultural Proficiency

The third model the researchers employed is a more impact-oriented model addressing changes in curricular content, in this case book content, that teachers can make to help students move toward becoming culturally competent. This model, by James Banks (2009), delineates four Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content to guide teachers who are striving to lead their students to cultural competency.



Source: Figure 1.6 Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content
 Copyright © 2004 by James A. Banks
 Reprinted with the permission of James A. Banks from James A. Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*. Boston: Pearson Allyn and Bacon, 2009, page 19.

Figure 3-1

Figure 2: Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content

The lowest level focuses on food, holidays, heroes and other discrete cultural elements while the final level presents the outcome of becoming culturally competent, i.e., students are involved in grappling with real social issues and in taking action to stop injustices. The final notes, if accepted, will give statistics for book content falling at each level.

Construction of instruments and analyses for RQ3 and RQ4 were based on models of connected learning with digital youth (What is Connected Learning? 2013), brought to the attention of many by the MacArthur and Mozilla Foundations digital media and learning cooperative initiatives. The idea of shared competence through the principles of equity and social connection upon which connected learning is based harkens back to Lepman's philosophy of children's literature as bridges to understanding.

1.5 Methodology

The researchers, including three faculty members, of whom one is the project statistician, are using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014) with a quantitative phase that informs a following-qualitative phase. The population consists of a sub-sample of the 4th and 5th grade students in 12 of the 45 schools participating in Global Reading Challenge Teams in the 2013 – 14 school year in Seattle. The schools were chosen to represent the variety of socioeconomic levels and reading scores achievements represented throughout the city. It is noteworthy that present among the ten finalists in the previous year, were both a school with the highest and another school with the lowest proportion of children on free and reduced lunch, a U.S. measure of poverty commonly used in schools.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the University of Washington as well as permission from the Seattle Public Library and Seattle Public Schools. Parents were asked for their permission for their children to participate in the study.

The initial instrument is a survey that the researchers developed and pretested with the assistance of the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington. It consists of a web-based test with first person statements to which students respond on a 5 point Likert scale. The questions focus on the readers' attitudes toward the cultures about which they read and their interest in active involvement with these cultures. (RQ1 and RQ2). For example, "I have read a book that makes me want to experience a culture other than my own."

This is a pre-post-test design to ascertain whether there is any significant change among the students collectively after they read the books. The results of this quantitative survey informs the interview questions, addressing all four research questions, that will be posed to a selected group of young readers, a purposeful sample consisting of approximately 20 children representing the spectrum of readers across socio-economic levels. These questions will probe more deeply into the information the young readers gained, their attitudes and possible actions as a result of reading, as well as into their connected learning experiences as team members and as part of a larger competition.

2 Culture

The term *culture* can have many different meanings. For this research, we define culture as "the behaviors and beliefs, and characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group" (dictionary.com 2013). Specifically we are referring to the culture of contemporary digital culture young people from various ethnicities.

Although it is unrealistic to propose that reading up to ten books about varying cultures will prompt a young person to become a viable part of any one of the second cultures portrayed, it is instructive to think of a long term goal of how that might look should the reader become interested enough to pursue more information and even engage in real life experience with the culture, i.e., what is the an 'ideal' approach to cultural competency or proficiency in a second culture? According to LaFromboise et al, there are many different aspects of cultural competency. We are focusing upon two of these in this study on "display sensitivity to the affective processes of the culture" and "perform socially sanctioned behavior" (396). Furthermore, Lafromboise et al. propose five methods that individuals can achieve this cultural competency:

- through assimilation (becoming part of a second culture, one of which is considered dominant or more desirable),
- acculturation (knowing about but not participating in a second culture, one of which is considered dominant),
- alternation (knowing about two different cultures, neither of which is considered dominant, and altering behavior to fit a particular social context within either culture)
- multicultural model (maintaining distinct identities while individuals from one culture work with those of other cultures to serve common. . . needs, neither considered dominant)
- fusion (melting pot where former cultures blend indistinguishably).

These authors propose that the alternation model in which a person becomes comfortable in one's own culture as well as a second culture, is ideal. For the youth involved in this study, thinking in terms of easily moving back and forth between two cultures, not assuming one or the other is dominant, is useful in questioning whether the reading experience will begin to lead to an initial level of cultural competency in two or more distinctly different cultures. This is an issue that has never, to the best knowledge of the current researchers, been investigated, even on a more or less superficial or beginning basis.

3 Technology

The third theme addressed by the conference, computers or in the broader sense technology, relates to this study in two ways. It is a vehicle for the connected learning that possibly reinforces the gaining of cultural competency. One of the most basic technologies, the printed book, is the principle instrument for connections

among these young readers; the books provide the basis for study and reflection as well as information. Other electronic or digital technologies have figured into the Global Reading Challenge over the years, including videoconferencing that connects the British Columbia and Seattle participants when both participate. Another type of facilitating technology is audiobooks, provided for youth whose print reading abilities or second language skills make reading print in English difficult.

4 Preliminary or Early Results

Despite the fact that the previous evaluation of this project did not consider cultural impact or impact of diversity of experience, some youth volunteered this information anyway. One student wrote “Thank you Ms. Sherman for showing me that I can change racism. And stand up to the people that are racist.” Many others mentioned being empowered to stand up to bullies. One of the classes involved in last year’s study, read a book about the shortage of water in Sudan and became involved in the Sudan Water Project. The current survey instrument has been constructed, pretested, and administered to the students in the 12 participating Seattle Schools and was administered before the current year’s reading list was distributed to students. As might be expected, young readers knew little about cultures other than their own at the beginning and had no plans for action. The results of this first administration of the instruments have been coded and stored for comparison with the post Global Reading Challenge survey and interview to be administered shortly before the conference in the spring. These results will be reported at the iConference.

5 Significance of Study

The results of this study will provide the first known research-based evidence about the impact on cultural competence of young people’s close reading of high quality, culturally specific, globally-oriented youth literature across a diversity of experiences. Jella Lepman and many others have held firm to the belief that this type of reading can ultimately lead to cultural competency and world peace. This first step determines what information at least one group of young readers gain about other cultures through reading in a connected learning situation and how their attitudes and actions are affected by such reading. It fills a gap in the research literature as well as aligning closely with the themes of the 2014 iConference. (2444 words)

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