**INCORPORATING INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE**

**IN THE ECE CURRICULUM**

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**Purpose and Rationale**

International literature is frequently used in schools. International books are published and made available by commonly known publishers such as Scholastic, Lee & Low, Candlewick, and many other publishing entities in the United States. Thus, international literature is often incorporated into curricula, either by design or without the realization a book is “international” literature.

Because international books may contain terms, customs, images, or other aspects of culture unfamiliar to some readers in the U.S., these books may require additional discussion for in-depth understanding. In her article “Exploring a Curriculum that is International*”* on the *Worlds of Words* website at <http://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/stories/storiesi2/5/>, Kathy Short suggests reading about the lives of others is not enough. She suggests that “focusing on ‘we-they’ dualisms or superficial features of cultural lifestyles that reinforce stereotypical perceptions,” can be disadvantageous, and that “reading more about the world can actually negatively influence the development of intercultural understanding.” For full appreciation of international literature, purposeful and substantive use of international books to explore cultural similarities and differences is necessary.

This module is designed to assist Early Childhood Education (ECE) teacher candidates in understanding their own culture/cultures to in turn understand cultures that may be different from theirs, and to help ECE teacher candidates learn to effectively mine cultural aspects of children’s literature and so they are prepared to incorporate international children literature into curricula in culturally-sensitive ways.

**Global Learning Outcomes**

**Knowledge:**

Understands his/her culture in global and comparative context (recognizes that his/her culture is one of many diverse cultures & that alternative perceptions & behaviors may be based in cultural differences).

Demonstrates knowledge of other cultures (beliefs, values, perspectives, practices, and products).

**Skill:**

Uses knowledge, diverse cultures frames of reference, and alternative perspectives to think critically and solve problems.

**Attitude:**

Demonstrates resistance to cultural stereotyping.

**Definitions: International and Global Literature**

The terms “international” and “global” literature for children and young adults are often used interchangeably. Some educational organizations offer a distinction between these terms.

The United States section of the International Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) defines an international book as “a book published or distributed in the United States that originated or was first published in a country other than the U.S.” (<http://www.usbby.org/list_oibl.html>).

Other organizations that promote global literature may include books written by U.S. authors and published in the U.S. along with international books. For example, the Children’s Literature & Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association (CL/R SIG, at <http://clrsig.org/nbgs.php>) annually selects and publishes a list of 25 “Notable Books for a Global Society” (NBGS). These lists contain some books originally published outside the U.S. as well as books written and published in the U.S.

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center School of Education (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison creates “Global Reading: Selected Literature for Children and Teens Set in Other Countries” bibliographies. According to the CCBC website at <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=280>, the bibliographies are “designed with U.S. readers in mind, so ‘other countries’ refers to countries other than the United States.”

Other resources and information about international literature can be found at the “International and Global Literature” link on the “Beware of Books” website at: <http://brendadales.wordpress.com/>.

**Goals of the Module**

This module is designed for Early Childhood Education candidates. However, it could be adapted for other licensure programs as well.

Goals include:

• Identifying aspects of one’s own culture/cultures and beliefs.

• Identifying ways certain cultural images and beliefs are portrayed in popular media such as fashion magazines.

• Applying cultural understandings to international children’s literature.

**Phase I**

**Defining one’s own culture/cultures and beliefs using Cultural X-Rays**

In order to understand the viewpoints of others in the world, understanding one’s own cultures and beliefs is essential. This part of the module can set the tone for examining all books throughout the semester.

**Part I:** **Cultural X-Rays**

At the beginning of the semester, students prepare Cultural X-Rays for themselves (revealing aspects they are willing to share). To create a cultural X-Ray, as described by Kathy Short (at <http://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/stories/storiesi2/5/>), students draw an outline of a body, with a large heart-shape in the middle. Students then add aspects of themselves that define who they are, both what can be seen (adding these aspects to the drawing in the area outside the heart), and their beliefs (adding these aspects inside the heart). According to Short, students provide “aspects of their culture that are evident to others, such as language, age, ethnicity, gender, and religion” in the areas outside the heart, and “inside with the values and beliefs that they hold in their hearts” (<http://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/stories/storiesi2/5/>). The professor provides a model, sharing his/her own Cultural X-Ray.

Students use these Cultural X-Rays to get to know others in their class. They can share and discuss the Cultural X-Rays in groups and report back to the large group about commonalities, uniqueness, and other aspects. While some students may outwardly appear similar, or different, certain other cultural aspects will emerge.

**Part II: Identifying “Normal” or “Average” Cultural Images**

After completing the Cultural X-Rays, student examine popular culture magazines, such as fashion magazines. Students may bring in magazines on their own, or magazines will be provided, such as *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *GQ*, and similar popular magazines. In small groups, students view images in the advertisements and articles and make lists of what is considered “normal” or “average” as portrayed by these magazines. Students may examine hair color/style, clothing, body shape, and other aspects of culture such as location and environment, or inferred socio-economic status. Groups report back as to what the media portrays as “average” or “normal.” Students may engage in further discussion of how media portrayal is/isn’t realistic.

**Phase II**

**Application to Children’s Literature**

Students each select a recently published “chapter book” from the contemporary realistic fiction genre. After reading the books, students complete a Cultural X-Ray of the main character in the book. References to specific pages or passages where clues to appearance, socio-economic status, beliefs, and values are suggested can be noted on the Cultural X-Rays. Some of the information for the Cultural X-Rays may also be appropriated from illustrations if illustrations are present.

*NOTE:* Some of the books students choose may be international literature. This portion of the module is not focused on international literature but is designed to examine cultural attributes presented in an array of current literature available. It is at the instructor’s discretion as to whether to point out any examples of international literature or not at this time (the actual books selected by students will help shape this decision).

**Phase III**

**Application to International Children’s Literature**

The instructor chooses an example of international children’s literature, and obtains multiple copies. One example is *Jack’s Kite*, written and illustrated by Yvonne Jagtenberg and published in the United States by Roaring Brook/Millbrook Press, 2003, and originally published in the Netherlands by Uigeverij Hillen. This book was selected because it is a picture storybook, and can be shared with the entire class in a short amount of time. Thus, all students can experience the same book. Also, both text and illustration can be included in the discussion of international literature, as illustrations can contain much of the cultural information in children’s books.

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Read *Jack’s Kite* to the class, making sure all students are able to view the illustrations as the story is read. Begin by showing the cover, and naming the author/illustrator (Yvonne Jagtenberg). Show the endpapers and point out the barn and recreational vehicle. Ask students if they can identify the type of environment. Ensure all students are able to view the illustrations during the reading.

Re-read the story, stopping frequently to allow students to comment or ask questions during this second reading. Permit students to come up with their own conclusions about the story and pictures.

Divide the class into small groups of 3-4 students. Distribute copies of the book so each group has access to a book. Ask each group to create a Cultural X-Ray for Jack.

Have groups report back about their Cultural X-Rays.

**Class Discussion**

Ask students about their reactions to *Jack’s Kite*. Common reactions may include questions about the attire of people at the campground, why Jack’s father is wearing a suit, why there are smokestacks in the background, why there is a cow at the campground, and why a man has a saw, among other questions and reactions.

Ask each group to share their Cultural X-Rays of Jack. Some of the information on the Cultural X-Rays might include that Jack misses his father, he has a positive outlook, he is able to seek assistance, he shares, he is curious, and he is not easily discouraged, for example.

Explain that *Jack’s Kite* is international literature, and this book was originally written and published in the Netherlands. Ask students what they know about the Netherlands. Guide the discussion to the size of the country and why smokestacks might be seen from a campground, and explain that farm campgrounds are common in the Netherlands (can be confirmed with Internet research).

Discuss the aspects of the story and illustration that are uniquely indicative of the Netherlands, and the aspects that could be from many countries or cultures.

**Extensions**

Explain to students how to identify international literature. Typically on the copyright page of the book, the original publisher will be named. This page may also contain phrases such as “First American edition.” In the case of *Jack’s Kite*, the copyright page states: “First published in the Netherlands by Uigeverij Hillen, Amsterdam, as *De vlieger,”* and “First American edition 2004,” in addition to the U.S. publisher’s information. Encourage students to frequently check copyright pages for publication information, especially if they sense a book has a different tone or “flavor” than other books they are familiar with.

Encourage students to seek out international (as well as global) literature. Consult lists and websites discussing international literature mentioned at the beginning of this document, including USBBY, the Children’s Literature & Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association (CLR SIG), and The Cooperative Children’s Book Center School of Education (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on a regular basis. The URLs for these sources are listed at the end of this document, and are all linked at: <http://brendadales.wordpress.com/>.

**Comments**

Below are two professional reviews of Jack’s Kite. The first review from *School Library Journal* is negative, while the second review from *Horn Book* is positive.

I have shared *Jack’s Kite* in many children’s literature classes, with both undergraduate and graduate students. Before implementing this module and with no preparation for the book, students overwhelmingly reacted negatively to the text and especially images in the book, similar to the negative *School Library Journal* review. Feedback often included that the book is “inappropriate” because of body shape of the woman at the campground (broad stomach exposed), man with a saw, concern about Jack’s father carrying a briefcase and wearing a suit, and general dislike of illustrative style.

After this module, comments about the book were supportive, similar to the *Horn Book* review. This module was implemented in two sophomore level children’s literature classes, and reactions were consistent across the two classes.

**From *School Library Journal***

Kindergarten-Grade 2 - Call this "The Curious Incident of the Kite in the Campground" or, perhaps, "Lost in Translation." Jagtenberg is at it again in this third adventure with an oddly appealing boy and, this time round, a rather motley crew of ragtag campground residents. Jack doesn't know how to fly his kite; perhaps with input from this odd assortment of people, he will have it aloft in time for his father's return from work. While the flap copy asserts that this is "a beguiling story about working with others," dense crayon coloring; a disengaged mother; blank-faced figures (one with a saw tucked under his arm); an almost-always unhappy Jack; and a pervasive, heavy dark presence (roads and rooflines, big black birds, bizarre Chernobyl-ish trees, and ominous spewing smokestacks) convey a very different feeling. And although the final spread shows a satisfied Jack, dad at his back, with his raptor-motif kite in the air, the bleak, black setting that resembles a walled institutional exercise yard is more creepy than comforting. *- Kathy Krasniewicz, Perrot Library, Old Greenwich, CT*

**From *The Horn Book Magazine***

What's the use of a kite if you can't make it fly? Jack, the tense-faced little boy from Jack the Wolf (rev. 9/02) and Jack's Rabbit, knows that his father will arrive that evening at the campground where he and his mother are staying and will teach him how to fly the thing. Still, the wait is a long, lonely one, and Dutch artist Jagtenberg mirrors Jack's dejection in her angular crayon-and-ink illustrations, with their ocean of dirty green lawn punctuated by blobby trees and adjacent smokestacks and street lamps. Other people at the campground offer advice and assistance. The family who run the place take turns with the kite and manage to keep it aloft several times. When the boy in the family accidentally lets the kite go and it flies away, all seems lost until a man appears carrying a briefcase in one hand and the wayward kite in the other. "But it wasn't just a man. It was Jack's father!" In this keen reflection of a young child's perspective, Jagtenberg reveals that Dad's presence is all Jack needs to pull his vacation out of its nosedive and send it soaring.

-Christine Heppermann

Of particular interest when implementing this module was the change in perspective of “average” or “normal” among students. In previous semesters, I commonly received written descriptions of main characters in contemporary realistic fiction chapter books explaining the character was “average” or lived in a “normal” neighborhood and went to a “normal” school or was part of an “average” classroom. After students created Cultural X-Rays for the main characters in contemporary realistic fiction chapter books, I specifically asked students if the main character was “average” or “normal.” In each class, someone quickly countered my question with “What is average?”

This was the first time I was able to implement Cultural X-Rays because I was able to develop a new ECE children’s literature course. At my university there was not a separate children’s literature course for ECE students previously

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Dr. Brenda Dales maintains a children’s and young adult literature blog/website, and includes links to lists of international and global literature.

Children’s Literature & Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association (n.d.). Retrieved November 10, 2012, from <http://clrsig.org/index.php>.

The mission of the CL/R SIG is, in part, to “promote the educational use of children’s books.” Each year the CL/R SIG identifies a list of Notable Books for a Global Society.

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The United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY) is the U. S. national section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). Each year a committee of USBBY members selects a lists of Outstanding International Books, which can be found on the website.