



Children's Literature as a Means to Global Cultural Connections

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Abstract

From a rural university in south Georgia (USA), a professor and five future teachers (FT) crossed the globe to participate in multicultural, immersive teaching experiences during a recent study abroad program. The author/program director provided semi-structured guided and independent opportunities for the FT to interact with students and teachers in elementary and secondary schools in Italy. The use of an American wordless children's picturebook was the impetus for the mini-lessons. Utilizing the social studies concept of geographic place provided a vehicle for Italian children to draw and then explain their drawings of the book's characters transported into their own local culture and geographic settings. The resulting observed interactions and FTs' reflective journal entries suggest that scaffolding on prior learning (courses in literacy, teacher education, and practicum experiences) led to successful interactions in the Italian classrooms and development of deeper multicultural understandings for all involved.

Keywords: diversity, geography, teacher education, study abroad, children's literature

1. Introduction

In a world that constantly projects people who are different from us may be dangerous – diversity is to be feared – how can future teachers (FT) construct ways for their students to learn about other cultures? This case study is based on the lived experiences of five FT and their university professor, as we attempted to expand cultural knowledge between and among students, teachers, and ourselves during a study abroad program from the US. Utilizing a wordless children's picturebook (*Where's Walrus?*) [1] the FT engaged over 200 Italian students (ages 7 to 16 years) in artistic and verbal expression about what they know best: where they live.

A wordless picturebook is defined as “a text where the visual image carries the weight of the meaning” [2] *Where's Walrus?* tells the story of a walrus and a zookeeper only through illustrations – there are no words in the story. A very bored Walrus escapes the zoo and cleverly blends into the surrounding environment, in plain sight. He continually eludes the zookeeper by participating in local culture – sitting at a lunch counter, painting at an easel in the park, wearing a hardhat at a construction site, etc. The book served as the stimulus for students to imagine where Walrus might hide in Italy, prompting expression of habitat, culture, and location.

1.1 Intercultural Experiences

Research suggests to facilitate and develop intercultural capabilities in study abroad programs participants should interact with locals [3] [4]. This educational study abroad program was designed to visit Italian classrooms to enhance the FT's observational and teaching skills, engage in discourse with Italian schoolchildren and their teachers, and to provide insight into diversity and similarities of our cultures. The FT had varying degrees of multicultural interactions and all had grown up in rural Georgia. The university was the most diverse aspect of their lived experiences.

The majority of the Italian classroom teachers and students had grown up in the town where they now lived. Although Italian students begin to study English in first grade, the opportunities to converse with native English speakers are rare. FT need to be aware of and address the influence of diversity in their classrooms, since students are affected by multicultural education, or the lack of it [5]. The majority of the participants of this case study had had limited multicultural experiences.

1.2 Using Children's Literature in the Content Area

Children's literature can be used as a springboard to enhance the development of critical thinking skills and inquiry [6] [1]. Further, research supports the blending of literacy and social studies [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]

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[12] [13]. Children's literature can also provide a natural impetus for discussions regarding diversity and other cultures [14]. Picturebooks lend themselves to multimodal expression of ideas, easily connected through the content areas [15], and wordless picturebooks help develop visual literacy [16] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22]. This case study also employed American national standards for the social studies and literacy [23] [24].

2. The Case Study

We visited schools in Valle D'Aosta and Reggio Emilia. Prior to this trip, the FT had completed two full semesters in teacher preparation (BSEd) with previous experience in two practicum classrooms (Pre-K/kindergarten and fourth grade). This provided introductory level background knowledge and pedagogical experiences. After sharing the book in small groups, we explored cultural similarities and differences resulting from our inquiries [4]. The FT solicited drawings and subsequent discussion of place/location based on where the Italian students lived: "Where might Walrus hide in your area?" The students included cultural and physical aspects of their Italian town in their drawings and explanations.

Due to the wordless nature of the book, language did not pose a barrier to exploration, but rather opened illustrations and actions of the book's characters to reflect what they knew about their locale. These Italian classroom activities interwove academic content standards of literacy (interpretation of illustrations in the storyline, use of content vocabulary, demonstration of oral competency, and artistic representation) and social studies (geography, mapping skills, natural resources, socioeconomics, occupations, recreational interests, history, and man-made landmarks) specific to our different regions.

The students' drawings very clearly demonstrated their understandings of "place". In Aosta, drawings presented interactions with the natural landscape (skiing in and hot-air ballooning over the Alps), historic landmarks (The Roman amphitheater, the Arch of Augustus), churches, and agricultural products typical to the area, (Fontina cheese and dairy farming). In the Murano sul Panaro school, fishing in the river, shopping at the local grocery store, eating gelato, playing soccer, and the fountain in the town square were represented. The drawings and subsequent conversations were reflective of social studies content and served to share their personalized experiences of their Italian culture.

3. Results

The utilization of this piece of children's literature advanced cross-cultural experiences through sharing a common topic: where we live. Used as a pedagogical tool, this wordless picturebook helped to focus interpretation of the concept of "place" by asking students to interpret the book characters' actions and transpose them into their own cultural surroundings. The students' representations reflected concepts of analyzing culture by exploring another's perspectives, expression of their own cultural traditions, and an opportunity to discuss similarities and diversity [25] [5]. The FT observed that students of all ages were able to identify cultural aspects of where they lived as important for them to share with us.

The experiential learning in the classrooms provided both guided and independent reflective observations of the critical and creative thinking processes of the students. The goals of this study abroad program included benefits to all participants. The Italian students were able to show important aspects of their culture, providing talking points in both the classrooms and later in the FT seminar, as we analyzed our observational data and the drawings. The pedagogical, cultural, and learning experiences of the FT strengthened their intercultural thinking and communication [3] through lived experiences, journaling, and subsequent final projects (presentations and contributions to professional journal articles and presentations). These experiences have influenced the teaching of two of the participants, in their current teaching positions. They have replicated this mini-lesson using *Where's Walrus?* in their fourth and fifth grade classrooms, with similar results.

3.1 Conclusions

As this study abroad program informs my own teaching, I realize one of the major problems was not addressing the concept of "culture" prior to the onset of the course. Although all of the FT were entering their senior year, they didn't seem to have a clear understanding of the concept. Wiest suggests that "culture is a blend of factors" [25] and that exploring cultural similarities and diversity also means becoming aware of the role of stereotypes and the potential development of or contributions to cultural misunderstandings.



During our discussions with the students, the FT suddenly realized that there is no *one* “American” culture. They struggled to answer basic questions from the Italian students, such as, “What do Americans like to eat? What do they do for fun? What do their houses look like?”, etc. This also became a solid learning experience for the FT to they could not make statements like: “All Italians...”. This was an important lesson on the path to understanding “other”. There is never one absolute description of any group of people.

Although this project was conducted in Italy, the mini-lesson can successfully be used almost anywhere in any level classroom, to expand critical and creative thinking. This approach of extending literature beyond basic comprehension skills demonstrates how a simple piece of children’s literature can serve as a means to develop global connections, critical and creative thinking skills, content knowledge, and reciprocal learning about one another’s cultures. We are not as sceptical of “others” when we get to know more about each other. I invite you to adapt our experiences to fit your teaching.

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