Read Them Together: Paired Book Reading for Global Literature

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Abstract

The need for global literature is growing as the society rapidly becomes more diverse. This study documented American children's responses to global literature when it was paired with a home country book. The data were collected in a third grade classroom in a midwestern state. The results showed that in paired book reading, the children naturally compared two books and analyzed the characters' problems by comparing them with their situations. The children did not discuss the foreign settings in global literature unless they were prompted to talk about them. They also did not treat the main character in global literature as a foreigner. The results suggested that pairing global literature with a home country book may be helpful for children to understand the global literature. However, the teacher needs to intentionally direct students' attention to global settings and the foreign character's experiences and culture, otherwise, children may miss an opportunity to discuss those topics emerging from the global literature.

"I was surprised cause I thought like only Americans would have that [reading] problem." This is what a third grade girl, Dani said after reading *Once Upon a Time* by Niki Daly and *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco. Dani was surprised to know that children in another country could have the same problem as children in the United States (U.S). She thought that children in other counties would be different and not have reading problems, and she was surprised to discover that they are just like children in the U.S.

Once Upon a Time is a story of a girl who is struggling with reading. Books like *Once Upon a Time* can be categorized as global literature. Lehman, Freeman, and Scharer (16) suggest one of the following conditions when identifying global literature: First, the story takes place outside the U.S., and second, the story is written by an author from a country other than the U.S. *Once Upon a Time* satisfies both conditions: It takes place in South Africa and the author is from that country.

Why Is Global Literature Important?

Children in the U.S. are living in a globalized society. Gollnick and Chinn (2) reported that by 2020, students of color will account for nearly one-half of elementary and secondary school populations. In this globalized society, the need for global perspectives is growing and it is closely related to children's lives (Lehman et al. 5). We believe that bringing global literature to classrooms may be an effective way of orienting children to the globalized world.

Bishop's (ix) mirrors and windows metaphor can be applied when talking about the importance of reading global literature. Because stories in global literature take place in many different places in the world, children can watch and learn about people's lives in other countries. Children can also find themselves in a story if the characters go through experiences relevant to their own lives even though the story happens in a different country. Moreover, children may make connections between their home culture and the foreign culture and consider themselves and others to be global citizens who live in this world together.

Global literature can be read alone, but we wanted to document what kind of things children notice and talk about when they read global literature with a home country book paired together. By doing so, we examined the power of paired book reading when introducing global literature to children.

Paired Book Reading Defined

In this article, we define paired book reading as reading two books together, which have a similar theme or other literary similarities. Some studies use the term, "paired reading" when a child reads a book with a partner (Griffin 767; MacGillivray and Hawes 212; Topping and Lindsay 199), but we do not mean paired book reading to be reading with a partner. Heine defined a textset as "two or more books that are related in some way" (75); thus a textset is a close concept to paired book reading in this study. Books that have the same theme or topic can make a textset, or books that are written by the same author also can make a textset. Ideas for textsets can be quite varied. In this study, we selected two books that have a similar theme to make a pair. According to Heine (76), textsets can be read in many different ways. For example, a teacher can assign children to read different books that have the same theme instead of having all of them read the same books. In this study, since we asked all children to read the two books with a similar theme together, we decided to call it paired book reading.

Why Paired Book Reading?

Rosenblatt's (Literature 35; Reader 25) reader response theory is widely used in literature discussion. Especially, aesthetic response in her theory has been emphasized in literature discussion to help children make meaningful connections between the text and their lives and extend their thinking beyond the text (Eeds and Well 27; Raphael and McMahon, 114; Short et al., 380; Silvers 558). Cai (219) argued that readers' aesthetic and efferent responses can be led to critical reading of other people's stories which are different from

readers' lives. We agree that aesthetic responses--including making personal connections--are important when reading global literature. We also think that making connections does not have to be limited to the text and to life, but extended to between texts. For example, children can make intertextual connections (Sipe 78) by comparing and contrasting between protagonists, themes, and the story elements in different books. Paired book reading can be used effectively to help children make these connections.

In addition to making intertextual connections, paired book reading can help children practice comparing and contrasting many aspects of stories. Lehman and Crook (70) noted that in paired book reading, different perspectives on themes, which could be overlooked when reading each title alone, were noticed, and they enriched and expanded readers' literary responses. The connections children make between the paired books and themselves cannot be overlooked as well. Heine (76) argued that searching for relationships that connect stories in textsets to readers' lives promotes children's critical thinking. Heine (76) also suggested "reading, discussing, and sharing insights" as three activities that can be done with textsets.

In discussions of paired book reading, comparing and contrasting are expected cognitive activities related to children's critical thinking. When children discuss why two characters are similar or different, first, they have to analyze the characters, second, they need to make criteria for comparison, and third, they need to come up with a reason why they think the characters are similar or different. Nystrand (41) introduced these kinds of cognitive activities--such as analyzing, generalizing, and hypothesizing--as high levels of thinking. We think that these high cognitive thinking skills can be developed in paired book reading.

Data Collection

This qualitative case study (Barone 9) was designed to document children's responses to global literature as part of a larger study. Specifically, we observed children in small group discussions where they shared their insights on books after reading global literature that was

paired with a book from the children's home country. One third grade teacher named Ms. Green (all names are pseudonyms in this article) and her 21 children participated in the larger study. Most of the children in Ms. Green's classroom were Caucasian, and two boys were American-born Indian Americans. The school was located in an affluent community in a suburb of a capital city in a midwestern state. Ms. Green was an experienced teacher who had taught many years in elementary schools and was passionate about bringing children's literature into her classroom. She regularly read aloud to the children and encouraged them to read by suggesting books and allowing them extended independent reading time.

In her class, language arts had a blocked schedule after lunch. During this time, the children met once a week with Ms. Green in small groups for literature discussions. Discussions usually started with Ms. Green's open-ended question or a child's sharing his/her response, and they lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. During discussions, Ms. Green did not lead the conversation unless children indicated difficulty with keeping the discussion going or nonconstructive conversations were developed. In this article, we share findings from three different small group discussions. These three groups were heterogeneous in terms of students' gender and reading levels, and they were formed by Ms. Green.

For this study, all three small group discussions were videotaped and transcribed. Informal interviews with the teacher and the children were conducted. For the further analysis of the children's responses, transcripts were read multiple times, and responses that reflected children's connections between two paired books were highlighted and revisited. Children's comments on South Africa or any responses related to the global settings in the book were also highlighted and revisited.

The children in all three groups were asked to read two paired books, *Once Upon a Time* and *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. We decided to ask them to read the same books to see if any pattern of the children's responses could be found among three different groups. *Once Upon*

a Time was first introduced to the first author by the second author who had researched South African children's literature, then, it was introduced to Ms. Green by the first author. When *Once Upon a Time* was suggested for a small group discussion, Ms. Green was excited to see how her children would respond to this South African children's book. She wanted to bring global literature into her class, and she was sure that *Once Upon a Time* would be the children's first experience with South African children's literature. She also thought that this book would be appropriate for the children' ages and interest. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* was selected by both authors and Ms. Green as a home country book to be paired with *Once Upon a Time* because of its similar theme.

The global book, *Once Upon a Time* is a story about a South African girl, Sarie, who cannot read. She often gets teased by her classmates because of her reading difficulty. The only place Sarie can forget her worries is at the broken down old car out in the field where her elderly neighbor Ou Missus reads with her. With Ou Missus's help, Sarie becomes a reader. The home country book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker,* depicts Trisha's struggle at school. For this American girl, reading is also hard; however, when Trisha meets Mr. Falker who helps Trisha in her new school, she begins to learn to read. Like Sarie in *Once Upon a Time,* Trisha becomes a reader in the end.

Findings

We found that children in all three groups easily made connections between two books by comparing the protagonists. In fact, the children spent most of the time talking about the main characters. They did not talk about the global setting in the South African text much unless they were prompted to do so. In this section, we will share several excerpts from the three different discussion groups and show how each group discussed the two main characters' problems and understood them.

Comparing two protagonists

Noticing the main problem of the story is nothing unusual in reading; however, in paired book reading, the children's understanding of the problem was not limited to just noticing. They made intertextual connections between the two books (Sipe 78) and interpreted the characters deeply by comparing and contrasting their situations. In the following excerpts, we show how the children compared the two protagonists and analyzed their differences. In each excerpt, words in brackets are the words we understood that a child meant to say.

Dani: …I would say her [Trisha] in *Dear Mr. Falker* [*Thank You, Mr. Falker*] that Trisha had a way bigger problem...
Sharon: (Interrupting Dani) Yeah.
Dani: ...than Sarie.
Ms. G: Why?
Dani: Because what you said about starting fifth grade, like, it should already be, like, you should be good at it. I think that since she is still like really bad at it that…
Matt: I'll be embarrassed...
Dani: (interrupting Matt) Yeah, I'll be very embarrassed.
Matt: ...if I couldn't read in fifth grade.

In this excerpt, Dani initiated the comparison between Sarie and Trisha. In her mind, Trisha's reading problem is a lot more serious than Sarie's. It seems that the other children in this group also had the same idea as Dani. Even before Dani finished the sentence, Sharon agreed with Dani. When Ms. Green asked Dani a reason for her opinion, Dani defended her idea with the fact of Trisha being in fifth grade. The protagonists' ages were an important factor for children in this group to determine whether their reading problems were serious or not. Along with age, the protagonists' feelings were also discussed. For example, Matt in this group made personal connections and extended his responses to the character's feelings. In the next excerpt, Zach in another group also agreed that Trisha's problem is more serious than Sarie's based on the personal emotions that Trisha likely would feel.

Adam: It took Sarie shorter to read to learn, how to read, than Trisha.
Zach: No that's not about it. But in *Mr., Thank You, Mr. Falker* (pause) it's like she…
Ms. G: Uh-huh.
Zach: Trisha's more like, um, more freaking out. She doesn't care, but she wants to learn how to read.

Ms. G: What do you mean by freaking out? Do[es] anybody else…
Zach: (Interrupting the teacher) Not freaking out. She's more…
Sarah: She's kind of like… (Putting her head on her hands)
Ms. G: Okay.
Zach: Yeah, she is.
Ms. G: What do you think Zach means, she is like freaking out?
Sarah: She is kind of unhappy, just kind of.
Ms. G: Okay.
Zach: Like frustrated.
Ms. G: Frustrated. That will be a good…

In this discussion, when Adam pointed out that Sarie learned to read faster than Trisha, Zach argued that the amount of time that Sarie or Trisha took was not the main factor that they needed to consider. In Zach's mind, the frustration that Trisha feels was more important factor to consider. In both books, the protagonists have reading problems. If the children had read only one book by itself, they would still understand the character's main problem, but they may not have noticed the seriousness of the problem, which was analyzed when they read it with a paired book (Heine 76).

Talking about another country

In this study, we found that the children in all three groups talked little about subjects related to South Africa in *Once Upon a Time*. They spent most of the time comparing the main characters in the two books. Still, in one group, the children compared the U.S. and South Africa and expressed their interest in learning about South Africa as shown in the next excerpt.

Dani: I was surprised cause I thought like only Americans would have that problem.
Matt: It wouldn't matter who had the problem.
(Dani, Matt are talking at the same time)
Dani: Yeah
Matt: It just matter…
Dani: (Interrupting Matt) It doesn't matter which culture has a problem, but I'm just surprised that somebody…
Ms. G: (Interrupting Dani) in another country
Sharon: … um like the books Sarie's, I wanna know like, I wanna know how she speaks and what her, their books look like. Because their books won't be American [English]. It will be different.
Matt: (Looking at Ms. G) They'll be American[English] in South Africa, right?

…
[the researcher]: Did you notice anything about South Africa from…
Matt: No, not really.
Dani: Yeah.
Sharon: Basically, it's just the same as our world.

In this excerpt the children briefly talked about their interest in South Africa and revealed their lack of knowledge of that country. We thought that this could be the moment when the teacher could share some information about South Africa with children and extend their interests to South African language and culture. When the first author asked the group if they noticed anything about South Africa, which implies whether they learned anything about South Africa, Matt said no, and both Dani and Sharon agreed with Matt. From Matt and other children's responses we guessed that the children may have discovered that South Africa is not such a strange country because they may have realized that Sarie's life in South Africa is the same in many respects as their experiences in the U.S.

After discussions, children in all three groups said that *Once Upon a Time* was their first book from South Africa and they liked it. They also expressed that they wanted to read more South African children's books. Even though the children did not talk about South Africa much during the discussion, they were fully aware that *Once Upon a Time* takes place in South Africa and remembered that it is written by a South African author.

Discussion

Comparing main characters

Children in all three groups described how both protagonists have reading problems as soon as the discussion started. We think that even if the children had read one book—*Once Upon a Time* or *Thank You, Mr. Falker* –they may easily have noticed the main problem as well; however, they may or may not have analyzed why the protagonist has a problem or how serious the problem is. When we asked the children to read paired books together, all three discussion groups took the opportunity to compare the two protagonists' problems. We think

that it was natural for children to compare two characters and make intertextual connections (Sipe 78) when they read two books together. Interestingly, one child even made his own Venn diagram voluntarily for an easy comparison of two characters. More importantly, when analyzing the characters' problems, the children considered different perspectives for looking at them (Lehman and Crook 70). For example, they looked at the characters' reading problems combined with other facts, such as ages, ability to read, and the amount of time spent on learning to read. The children also thought about the characters' feelings by putting themselves in the characters' situations and made personal connections (Cai 215).

Comparing two books was a natural yet important activity in small group discussions in Ms. Green's class. First of all, the children found many things to compare after reading two books, and these discoveries helped them bring many topics to discuss in groups. Ms. Green did not give the children a specific assignment with paired books. All she did was tell them that they could write their thoughts on sticky notes if they wanted. Some children used sticky notes and some did not, but we found that almost all children seemed to know what they wanted to talk about during discussion. As soon as the discussions started, the children were busy sharing what they found in the two books.

Second of all, the children developed their thoughts with the group members starting from the simple comparison. When we analyzed the three discussions for this article, we noticed that even though Ms. Green fully participated, she did not say much during the discussions. The children in all three groups led the discussion by themselves. In one group, discussion even started with a child's comment about the main characters from both books, such as "they both couldn't read." Comments like this may seem to be very simple; however, we found that the children started to add their opinions to that basic comment and extended the talk. They analyzed the text more in depth with evidence that they found from both books. The children also connected the characters' problems to personal emotions. There were

moments that Ms. Green initiated the conversation, but she did not seek a prescribed answer. She let the children talk freely by limiting her interruptions. In fact, most of the time, the children asked questions of each other, supported their opinions with reasons, and found evidence from the books. These behaviors in a discussion are evidence of critical thinking (Heine 76; Nystrand 41).

Seeding interest in another country

When the children were given the books, *Once Upon a Time* and *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, Ms. Green introduced the first title as a South African children's book. We were curious about what kind of things the children would notice regarding South Africa in *Once Upon a Time*; however, they did not mention South Africa much during discussion. The children talked extensively about Sarie in the global book and compared her to Trisha in the home country text, but they treated Sarie as if she was someone who lives next door.

During the discussion, Sharon shared that she also struggled with reading like both characters in the books. For Sharon, the global text, *Once Upon a Time,* and the home country book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker,* have a mirror effect (Bishop ix), which invited her to see herself in both Sarie and Trisha. We think that this kind of personal connections are important when reading global literature because children can identify themselves with foreign characters, which may contribute to their critical reading and responses to global literature (Cai 215; Heine 77).

As mentioned earlier, some children indicated that they did not find anything about South Africa in *Once Upon a Time*. In fact, we did not have any specific expectation when introducing *Once Upon a Time* to children other than we wanted to introduce global literature, specifically South African, to the children because we were sure that none of the children had read a book from South Africa before; however, the children did not mention much about South Africa during discussion unless they were prompted to do so. It is possible that the

children did not refer to South Africa, because they felt Sarie's life in South Africa is very similar to Trisha's life in the U.S. The children may view the world as undifferentiated or possibly even as a universal extension of their own lives. The children may not have considered Sarie as a foreigner who is different from Trisha, but as a counterpart who lives in this world together with them.

Nonetheless given our possible explanation of children's lack of responses to South Africa, we wondered, if the children did not talk about the settings in global literature, then what the purpose of reading global literature might be. In this study, Ms. Green did not direct the children to talk about unique living situations that Sarie has in South Africa or other foreign aspects that could be found in *Once Upon a Time*. Since one of Ms. Green's ground rules in literature discussion was not interrupting students' talk as long as they stayed focused, she may have unintentionally missed the chance to shift children's attention to the South African setting in *Once Upon a Time*. However, after analyzing the discussions, it appeared that children would not naturally develop their talk about global settings in global literature or the foreign characters' unique experiences and culture.

We are not trying to say children need to see the South African protagonist as a foreigner. In fact, it will be dangerous to simply identify the South African protagonist as a foreigner and distinguish South African culture as "other" culture, which is different from the majority of children's home culture in Ms. Green's class. We think that it could have been helpful for children to analyze the protagonist's situations along with learning about South Africa, if the teacher directed students to think more about settings that are unique in South Africa or South African culture that can be found in *Once Upon a Time*.

The discussion on *Once Upon a Time* may have not contributed a lot to learn about South Africa; however, we believe, by listening to the children's positive responses to *Once Upon a Time* and receiving their request to read more books from South Africa, that reading

South African children's literature may have seeded interest in South Africa in the children's minds.

Implications

We are fully aware of the danger of a single story when introducing someone else's culture to children (Adichie TED video clip). The discussions we shared in this article were the children's discussions with their first South African children's literature. There should be more discussions with other books from/about South Africa. From our study, we learned that when global literature is introduced to children, they may not talk about global settings in the story. We are not implying that children need to simply compare differences between another country and the home country. However, if one of the intentions of reading global literature is helping children see a world to which they have never been exposed, then the teacher needs to direct children's attention to the settings in global literature or foreign characters' experiences and culture as assets that they bring to the world. Without a teacher's intentional guidance, children may not see these topics emerging from global literature. Moreover, reading global literature would not be any different from reading a home country book without discussing these topics. With the teacher's purposeful guidance, children can think more deeply about human relations in the world and their own actions as globalized citizens beyond simple comparison between a foreign country and their home country.

In this study, our criteria to pair books were, first, having a similar theme, and second, one title being global literature and the other being a home country book. It would be interesting to see how children respond when one global text is paired with a title from a different international setting. We wonder if the children would pay more attention to the specific countries or global settings found in the books when they read two global books with a similar theme.

Conclusion

We learned that when global literature is paired with home country literature, children read both books critically by comparing the two protagonists and their experiences constantly. We think that paired book reading may help children understand global literature better because children apply the background knowledge that they learn from the home country book to the global literature. In other words, paired book reading can make less familiar elements in global literature more familiar to children and can help bridge the gap between something children have not experienced and something they have. However, teachers need to actively guide students to talk about topics related to global settings found in global literature, otherwise, children may not naturally discuss them.

We end this article by reiterating Sharon's quote that we cited before: "Basically, it's just the same as our world." We think that it is important for children to read global literature to gain broader perspectives about treating people with dignity and respect no matter where they are from or where they live. We also hope that reading global literature can help children grow up to be global citizens who care about other people who are living in different parts of the world.

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