

Thinking Globally in Literacy Instruction: Making a Difference in the World

James V. Hoffman, Misty Sailors, Sarah H. Aguirre

What can we do to make a difference in the lives of the children in our globalized society?

We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.—Nelson Mandela

The United Nations formally adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The declaration contains 54 principles. Article 13 states that “the child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” Article 30 states, “A child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.” Article 17 encourages the production and dissemination of children’s books. A version of this proclamation focusing on 14 of the principles was published as a children’s book, *For Every Child* by Caroline Castle, with contributions by famous children’s artists from around the world. The book begins with an introduction by Desmond Tutu asking readers to “make a difference.” Language and literacy are part of the rights of children. We are part of a global community. We write in this column for and with those who wish to make a difference in the lives of the children we serve everywhere.

Over the past 15 years, we have had the incredible privilege of working in many schools and with hundreds of teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa. Our work has focused on the support of teachers and schools working to implement quality literacy instruction (Hoffman, Beretvas, & Pearson, 2004; Sailors, Hoffman, & Matthee, 2007) and in the development of books for children authored by local educators and

published in multiple languages (Sailors, Hoffman, Pearson, et al., 2014). We have worked extensively with teachers in classrooms to support students’ literacy growth by using books that reflect students’ own lived experiences, making sure that we capitalize on their first language to help them learn a second (Shin et al., 2015). The communities served by the schools played a large part in the success of our work with those schools (Sailors et al., 2013; Sailors & Samati, 2014). We estimate, in counting days in country, that we have spent more than two years on the ground in the span of these 15 years. South Africa and Malawi are our second homes. We have met brilliant children with the energy to learn and the same levels of curiosity about their world that we have found in children in our home country. We have met children who speak multiple languages and who navigate multilingualism in ways that many of our children have not had the opportunity to do.

We have worked with teachers who engage 120 children (in one classroom) in literacy work in ways that we could never foresee as possible. We have worked with administrators who, when given space and support, can make a difference in the lives of

James V. Hoffman is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at The University of Texas at Austin, USA; e-mail jhoffman@mail.utexas.edu.

Misty Sailors is a professor and the assistant department chair in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA; e-mail misty.sailors@utsa.edu.

Sarah H. Aguirre is a Newcomer teacher at Colonies North Elementary School, San Antonio, TX, USA; e-mail sarah.aguirre@nisd.net.

teachers and students. We have worked alongside teacher educators who are as well versed in research around literacy development and pedagogy as any we have worked with in the United States. We have worked with and authored with researchers in prestigious universities and in organizations who helped us understand the conditions of teaching and learning in their countries. We have been blessed to have these collaborative experiences (Sailors, Chilora, Kaambankadzanja, & Hoffman, 2014) that helped us grow as academics, teacher educators, and people.

Throughout our experiences, we have been surrounded (in the United States) with discourse around literacy work in developing countries that is framed opposite the experiences we have had. This discourse assumes a deficit perspective and a crisis mentality along the following lines:

- Did you know that less than half of the children attending school in Kenya can read a single word at the end of third grade? Did you know that average class size in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is more than 100 students? Did you know that most of children in the primary grades in Sub-Saharan Africa are being taught in a language that they do not speak?
- Did you know that classroom teachers in Mozambique are absent from school more than 40% of the time? Did you know that most teachers are teaching in a language that they themselves do not speak fluently? Did you know that almost no classrooms in rural areas (and even urban areas) have running water or electricity? Did you know that most classrooms have no books for students to read and that writing materials are limited to a “copy book” and a pencil? Did you know that there are almost no school or classroom libraries?
- Did you know that, of the children who successfully complete the primary grades, less than 20% have the opportunity to continue in secondary school? Did you know that more than half of the population in many countries is under the age of 15—and school-eligible? Did you know that for many children in Sub-Saharan Africa, the only meal they may eat during a day comes from the school feeding scheme?

Why is this the kind of language that is used to frame the challenges for promoting language and literacy (a right of all children) in developing countries? What does framing challenges in these terms do to the ways in which we interpret or act on the call to

“make a difference”? How is it that neocolonial views dominate our discourse (Hoffman, Rogers, Sailors, & Tierney, 2011)? We are not setting aside the need for support and change in schools serving learners in Sub-Saharan Africa. We are not, in the least, setting aside our motivation to continue to work in Sub-Saharan Africa to support change. We are learning to question the need to frame the conditions that exist in deficit and crisis terms. We are learning to understand the power of true collaboration around educational change that seeks out and draws on local resources and frames work around an iterative problem-posing to problem-solving cycle of growth.

We actually see more similarities than differences in the challenges being faced in Sub-Saharan Africa and those faced in the United States (Hoffman, Sailors, Makalela, & Matthee, 2009). In the United States, we face the de-professionalization of teaching. We face the devaluing of learners who come to schools from conditions of poverty. We face attacks on autonomy and responsive teaching, which are the core of teaching. We face the constraints of narrow curriculum and high-stakes assessment, which are destroying schools. We see the creation of a class system of schooling. The more time we spend working in Sub-Saharan Africa, the sharper our lenses have become in seeing the ways in which education in Texas continues to replicate the status quo.

We have been asked to address in this column how literacy educators who have a sense of global responsibility and the desire to make a difference can take action. What can we do, individually and collectively? We would wish that every person reading this column would have an opportunity to spend significant time working in Africa or other regions of the world. There is space waiting for you in the Peace Corps (www.peacecorps.gov), in VSO (www.vsointernational.org), in teacher exchange programs (www.fulbrightteacherexchange.org), or in countless other organizations that can connect you with firsthand opportunities to become involved internationally. We can assure you that, through these kinds of experiences, you will learn much more than you teach and you will return to your current space and find it different and transformed. You will return a better teacher, a better citizen of the world, and a better person.

If these options seem a bit out of range right now in your life trajectory, then we would offer a few other suggestions, organized into three areas: connecting with the local, developing and sharing understanding through literature study, and taking a political stance.

Connecting With the Local

You do not need to go to Africa to work with African children, or to Syria to work with Syrian children, or to Burma to work with Karen children. Refugee children are present in almost all parts of the United States and the Western/Northern world. The Pew Research Center (2015) predicted that by 2050, more than one-third of U.S. schoolchildren younger than 17 will be either immigrants themselves or the children of at least one parent who immigrated to the United States.

Sarah (third author), who worked with us for three years in Malawi, is now teaching in a school that serves refugee children in the San Antonio area. Coming out of our shared experiences in Malawi she sought out her current school community as the focus for her work. In this section, she offers insight for other teachers who want to get involved as a citizen of our globalized community.

Sarah

My first international experience was during graduate school, when I completed my student teaching in Germany. Later, I taught fifth- and sixth-grade ESL classes for six years (my students were Spanish speakers) in a school district in central Texas. After relocating to San Antonio, I worked with Misty (second author) and Jim (first author) on the Read Malawi project; this was my first opportunity to interact with children and teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa. When the project was complete, I actively sought out a classroom where I could continue to work with children like the ones who taught me so much in Malawi. I found my dream job as a classroom teacher for students with refugee status. Many of my students arrive with an incredible desire to learn and succeed but with little or no formal education. What makes this situation more amazing is that my campus is located in the same neighborhood in which I live. My own children attend the same school, and we are able to walk to work/school every morning.

An Awe-Inspiring Teaching Position

Colonies North Elementary is one of two designated campuses for children with refugee status in my school district. The students at this campus come from more than 35 countries and speak more than 32 languages. Every child in my classroom has refugee status and has experienced interrupted formal education due to war, violence, or other atrocities in his or her home country. Some students lived in refugee camps before coming to the United States. My current

classroom has students who speak Malay, Rohingya, Burmese, Urdu, Arabic, Swahili, Pashtu, and Dari. Most of my students speak multiple languages.

The students in my class are motivated to do their best each day. They have seen “scary bad guys” and bombs, and they know what it is like to want to go to school but not be able to because it isn’t safe. They have left everything they have ever known and most of their family members to chase the dream of a better life. I get to have the honor of helping those dreams come true. I get to teach these students to read, to write, and to solve complex math problems. I get to teach them about U.S. customs like pumpkin carving on Halloween. I get to be the one who provides them with first opportunities, and I am grateful to be in this position. Whether it is students’ first complete sentence spoken in English or their first taste of pumpkin pie, the growth I see in all of my students makes me proud. I see their confidence grow along with their academic abilities.

Preparing and Supporting Students

When students first enter my classroom, the top priority is safety and acclimation to their new environment. Even students who did attend school in their home countries did not have the luxuries found in classrooms like mine: I have four desktop computers, an interactive whiteboard, a cart for notepads, and a listening center with iPad minis. The technology is both overwhelming and exciting at first, but soon students know how to work each device with ease.

I also make sure that each child has school supplies. I hit all the summer sales so I have a closet full of items ready for students’ arrival. Many of the new children are so excited about having their own supplies that they carry them back and forth to school each day. I have to remind them that their supplies can stay in their desk and will be there the next day.

I do not begin assessing new students until they have been with me for a few days. By that time, they have realized that our classroom is a family. It is OK to try new things and make mistakes because everyone is new to this school and learning English.

The language acquisition seen in my Newcomer classroom is nothing short of amazing. We have been able to drastically shorten and, many times, completely eliminate the silent phase. Students are sheltered in a classroom that not only immerses them in English but also scaffolds instruction to their level. To achieve such results, most instruction happens in guided groups. Although I have become accustomed to the instant gratification I am allowed as a teacher, I don’t take it for granted: It is common

for my students to make two or three years' gain in reading in one school year. That is a great feeling for all of us!

Academic Needs Versus Human Needs

As a teacher of students with refugee status, I also make sure I am meeting their emotional needs. There have been days when those needs take precedence over the academic lessons I planned. Once, I read *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story From Iraq* by Jeanette Winter. I consciously use children's literature with characters from the home countries of my students. In this particular book, a librarian decides to move books to a safe place during the war. There are images on the page that show soldiers holding guns—those are images to which every child in my class can relate. As I read, they all began to talk. They all had a story to tell. “My uncle lived in Basra.” “My mom was shot in the leg on the way back from the market.” “My cousin was kidnapped and never seen again.” “There was a big boom at the playground. What is that called, Mrs. Aguirre?” And I reply, “It was a bomb, sweetheart.” When they start to tell the stories, I listen. We all listen, as a class and as a family. I am no longer interested in drawing conclusions with them or thinking about the theme of the story—none of that matters in those moments. What matters is that the students in our classroom family are ready to tell their own stories.

Meeting Parents More Than Halfway Through Home Visits

Because the parents of the children we serve want to participate in their child's education, the team of Newcomer teachers makes a point to reach out to parents. We serve a wide range of cultures and families. Some families are considered traditionally illiterate because of the many years they spent in refugee camps. In contrast, we have Arabic-speaking families who helped the U.S. military and hold college degrees from their own countries. The one thing that all of our families have in common is that they gave up everything they knew for a better life for their children. Therefore, their child's education is their top priority.

Our school arranges for translators at parent-teacher conference day, which often takes place at the apartment complexes where many of our families live. Because many of our families do not have transportation, we host our Math and Reading nights at the apartments, too. We also do home visits when needed. Often, families invite us to their

home for a traditional dinner. These are my favorite times because the food is delicious! I often bring my own children to the dinners.

School Support: Celebrating Our Diversity and the Parade of Nations

Colonies North Elementary is proudly considered the most diverse elementary school in San Antonio. I have a unique perspective as both a parent and a teacher at the school. The entire faculty at Colonies North embraces diversity, and many teachers have stated that this is a major reason they sought a position on our campus. As a parent, I am overjoyed that my sons do not think twice when they see a woman in a hijab. Although our student body is diverse, only a small percentage of the student population holds refugee status. Therefore, not only is my class growing in learning about the many cultures that make up the United States, but children throughout the school (e.g., those in traditional classrooms) are also learning about cultures outside of their own.

Every year, we celebrate the diversity of our student population with what we call the Parade of Nations. Our students dress in their culture's traditional attire and walk through the school with the flag of their home country. We play the country's anthem and read facts about the country as students walk. We end the parade with the United States, and the entire student body sings “Together We Can Change the World.” It brings tears to my eyes every year.

Drawing on Local Resources: Seeking Support From Others

Catholic Charities is the local resettlement agency in San Antonio. The support that our school receives from the organization is invaluable. As a part of the Refugee Services division, Catholic Charities has a school impact grant through which it provides after-school tutoring at the apartment complexes, provides translators and transportation for parent meetings, and works as a liaison when students need glasses or have other issues that could affect their education. I personally serve on the Refugee Services board at Catholic Charities, and an agency staff member serves on our School Improvement Plan Committee.

Although I receive a lot of support from my principal, the Newcomer program does not have a special budget. I receive the same materials any typical fourth- or

fifth-grade classroom teacher receives. However, I do not serve typical fourth and fifth graders. To purchase manipulatives, quality centers, and technology that meets the needs of my students, I write grants, and so far I have been awarded more than \$25,000 for classroom supplies, technology, and field trips.

Developing and Sharing Understanding Through Literature Study

Just as in Sarah's classroom, high-quality children's literature can become a driving force in sharing globalized experiences in your classroom. This path is a relatively easy one into making a difference.

Focus on a country or a region that interests you. Read the novels and stories that have been written from and about these areas. Powerful literature exists and is waiting for you and your friends (and fellow teachers) to engage with it, including *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The Life and Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee, and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Use the conversations you have with your friends and colleagues to humanize others and their experiences.

Additionally, you can bring the world into your classroom with children's literature set in regions around the world. We have recently enjoyed *The Lion Who Stole My Arm* by Nicola Davies, and from our time in South Africa, we have become huge fans of the work of Niki Daly (e.g., *Jamela's Dress*, *Not So Fast*, *Songololo*, and *The Little Girl Who Lived Down the Road*). There are many outstanding books to read with your students, including the titles given in Figure 1 that Sarah reads with her class.

Start with these, perhaps, and move into other books that help you and your readers expand your worlds and understand the experience of others.

Taking a Political Stance

The U.S. government, through its Agency for International Development (USAID), along with the World Bank and private foundations such as the Hewlett Foundation, has directed enormous resources toward teaching children in developing countries to read using an approach called the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). EGRA was originally developed based on DIBELS, from the United States, and has been applied to many languages and contexts in the developing world. What counts in EGRA instruction is teaching students to read words accurately and rapidly through explicit, systematic, and

Figure 1
Books to Read With Your Class

- *My Name Is Sangoel* by Karen Williams and Khadra Mohammed
- *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story From Iraq* by Jeanette Winter
- *My Name Is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits
- *Big Red Lollipop* by Rukhsana Khan
- *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story From Afghanistan* by Jeanette Winter
- *It Takes a Village* by Jane Cowen-Fletcher
- *Sitti's Secrets* by Naomi Shihab Nye
- *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi
- *The Sandwich Swap* by Queen Rania Al Abdullah and Kelly DiPucchio
- *One Green Apple* by Eve Bunting

sequential phonics (Goodman, 2014; Hoffman, 2012). What counts in EGRA for assessment is the charting of rate and accuracy.

If international support for reading instruction is requested, then that support will come in the form of EGRA. As with DIBELS, there is no evidence that these kinds of interventions have had any positive impact outside of the specific tests of learning that have been taught—and even then, results have been mixed. At a recent international conference, even the proponents of EGRA acknowledged that, by their own measures, the initiative has fallen short of its stated goals, evoking calls for even greater levels of investment in this effort.

As we have worked in Sub-Saharan Africa, we have become more and more aware and critical of U.S. aid that comes from an end-of-World War II mentality. We are not shipping wheat or building factories; we are engaging with children's lives. The international community is quick to throw solutions at the context in which it is working with little consideration of local conditions or expertise. Postcolonial aid mirrors the colonial exploitation that contributed to the current, difficult situations faced by many countries around the world.

We encourage you to read some of the critical accounts of aid to Africa, such as *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* by Dambisa Moyo and *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* by William Easterly. Easterly distinguishes the world of aid as divided between "planners" (those who have answers to bring forward to questions that might not be relevant, that can be applied the same across all contexts, and that are fixed regardless of

success or failure) and “searchers” (those who come to work with locals and draw on local expertise to both frame the problems that are important and should be addressed as well as devise plans for moving forward that are constantly being reshaped).

Planners want big results, and they want them now. Searchers are more patient and see change unfolding over time. Easterly claims that most of the aid flowing into developing countries around literacy follows the planner model and has failed. Furthermore, Easterly points out that the aid agenda is not independent of the political and strategic interests of donor countries. USAID dollars in Africa, for example, are directed to particular countries based on the strategic interests of the United States and are not entirely altruistic.

Perhaps we are naïve to think that educators who ask questions could reshape the billion-dollar aid industry, but maybe it’s true that we can. We have to ask questions and be prepared to offer alternatives that don’t begin with a crisis and deficit frame, but rather begin with a valuing and trust for humans to care for each other and work collectively on complicated challenges.

Conclusion

We are hopeful that the ideas we present and the actions we suggest lead you to expand your engagement in humanizing pedagogy as part of our global responsibility to all children. Find a school in your area that, like Sarah’s, serves children who are refugees and recent immigrants. Seek out opportunities to get involved with your students. You might consider posting the Rights of Children (available in child-friendly language at www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf) on your classroom wall. Share the fact that 196 countries have ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, leaving the United States as the only internationally recognized government that has not, even though the United States signed the document in 1995. Write with your students to senators and congressional representatives to ratify the proclamation and ask that our policies then be reexamined to consider the ways in which our efforts to become involved might grow to be more respectful and valuing of others. Make a difference. The time is always ripe to do right!

REFERENCES

- Goodman, K.S. (2014). Whose knowledge counts? The pedagogy of the absurd. In K.S. Goodman, R.C. Calfee, & Y.M. Goodman (Eds.), *Whose knowledge counts in government literacy policies? Why expertise matters* (pp. 21–36). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hoffman, J.V. (2012). Standpoints: Why EGRA—a clone of DIBELS—will fail to improve literacy in Africa. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 46(4), 340–357.
- Hoffman, J.V., Beretvas, N., & Pearson, P.D. (2004). Improving literacy instruction in South African schools: The Business Trust’s Learning for Living project. *Thinking Classrooms*, 5, 26–33.
- Hoffman, J.V., Rogers, T., Sailors, M., & Tierney, R. (2011). Multilingual practices, critical literacies, and visual culture: A focus on African contexts. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(4), 394–403.
- Hoffman, J.V., Sailors, M., Makalela, L., & Matthee, B. (2009). Language policy and literacy instruction: The view from South Africa to South Texas. In J.V. Hoffman & Y.M. Goodman (Eds.), *Changing literacies for changing times: An historical perspective on the future of reading research, public policy, and classroom practices* (pp. 233–248). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *Modern immigration wave brings 59 million to U.S., driving population growth and change through 2065: Views of immigration’s impact on U.S. society mixed*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Sailors, M., Chilora, H., Kaambankadzanja, D., & Hoffman, J.V. (2014). Promoting reading achievement in Malawian primary schools: Collaboration matters. In C. Leung, J. Richards, & C. Lassonde (Eds.), *International collaborations in literacy research and practice* (pp. 179–197). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Sailors, M., Hoffman, J.V., & Matthee, B. (2007). South African schools that promote literacy learning with students from low-income communities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42(3), 364–387. doi:10.1598/RRQ.42.3.2
- Sailors, M., Hoffman, J.V., Pearson, P.D., McClung, N., Shin, J., Phiri, L., & Saka, T. (2014). Supporting change in literacy instruction in Malawi. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 49(2), 209–231.
- Sailors, M., Hoffman, J.V., Wilson, T., Villarreal, L., Peterson, K., Chilora, H., ... Saka, T. (2013). Implementing a school-wide reading program in Malawi: A case study of change. In P.J. Dunston, S.K. Fullerton, C.C. Bates, P.M. Stecker, M.W. Cole, A.H. Hall, ... K.N. Headley (Eds.), *62nd yearbook of the Literacy Research Association* (pp. 220–232). Altamonte Springs, FL: Literacy Research Association.
- Sailors, M., & Samati, M. (2014). Community mobilization: Going beyond to support the implementation of a complementary reading program in Malawi. In P.J. Dunston, S.K. Fullerton, M.W. Cole, D. Herro, J.A. Malloy, P.M. Wilder, & K.N. Headley (Eds.), *63rd yearbook of the Literacy Research Association* (pp. 158–171). Altamonte Springs, FL: Literacy Research Association.
- Shin, J., Sailors, M., McClung, N., Pearson, P.D., Hoffman, J., & Chilimanjira, M. (2015). The case of Chichewa and English in Malawi: The impact of first language reading and writing on learning English as a second language. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 38(3), 255–274. doi:10.1080/15235882.2015.1091050
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. New York, NY: Author.

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.