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## Launching Youth Activism with Award-Winning International Literature

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### Abstract

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Using qualitative content analysis, the authors explored depictions of activism in 35 international, translated titles receiving Mildred L. Batchelder Award and Honor commendations. Findings included identification of three social justice issues appearing in the texts: characters were challenged by poor living conditions or homelessness, labor exploitation, and lack of freedom. Further, the authors found a continuum of activism depictions ranging from selfless, collaborative activism to emerging activism. These findings suggest Batchelder books are useful sources for teachers and teacher educators interested in raising awareness of global social justice issues and engaging students in activism. Further, the study calls attention to a set of books little known to educators and includes recommendations for their use as launching points for activism.

Keywords: Mildred L. Batchelder Award, translated literature, activism

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A plucky chicken leads a revolt against poor living and working conditions in the hen house. A bear cub joins the British army in the care of young men resisting the invaders of their home country. A wealthy boy offers homeless children shelter in an abandoned movie theater in Venice. A young immigrant rails against long hours, low wages, and child labor. A dragon and an elf lead a band of impoverished and exploited people to freedom and a new land of promise and hope.

These are just some of the memorable characters, settings, and social issues depicted in recent recipients of the Mildred L. Batchelder Award and Honor, a commendation given to outstanding translated books for children. These international stories have captivated us as readers, motivated us as educators and activists, and engaged us as researchers. Short (2012) has noted the powerful nature of stories, describing them as “a way of knowing the world” (p. 11). They can spark conversations about social justice and inspire us with depictions of agency and praxis (George, 2002; Kieff, 2003; Simon & Norton, 2011). Stories also help us imagine a different, more equitable world (Kohl, 2007). In this paper, we contend that stories with international origins can prompt youth to explore social justice issues at both global and local levels and inspire them toward activist work.

While carrying out an exploratory study of cultural representations in award-winning translated books for youth (Kimmel, Garrison, & Forest, 2012), we observed that characters were often challenged by social injustices like homelessness and discrimination. We realized the potential these titles hold for showing children how agency can be exercised in the face of injustice. This realization prompted the present work, an analysis of activism in recent titles named Batchelder Award and Honor books. In sharing this work, we hope to spark readers’ interest in these titles and in activism.

Though today’s educators face many demands on their classroom time, we believe they are in a strong position to work towards fostering activism through the use of literature for young people. In this article, we discuss a set of 35 award-winning translated books for young readers and their potential for: 1) provoking dialogue about social justice issues with youth; and 2) inspiring children and young adults to take on activist efforts. However, Paris (2012) suggests that it is not enough to simply include books about social struggles in the curriculum: educators must “connect the struggles in literature and other classroom content to continuing struggles” (p. 9). Similarly, Picower (2012) emphasizes that educators must move beyond raising awareness of social injustices and to engaging children in activist efforts.

In light of these contentions, we connect activism depicted in the stories to activist efforts that educators can undertake with students at local and global levels. We begin by providing some background about children and activism as well as the set of books discussed in this study, Mildred L. Batchelder Award and Honor books published since 2000. Following this, we identify theoretical perspectives that have informed this work and we discuss the methods used to analyze portrayals of activism in the Batchelder books. We conclude by presenting and discussing our findings and considering how educators can move toward launching students into activism.

## Background

To contextualize this study, we briefly discuss perspectives of children as activists. An historical overview of children and their engagement in activism follows this discussion. Then we supply background information about the Mildred L. Batchelder Award, an accolade conferred by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association.

### Children and Activism

Simon and Norton (2011) define an activist as “a person who works to bring about intentional change to transform inequitable political, environmental, social and/or economic states” (p. 294). Children’s activism efforts have sometimes been dismissed because of their age, and the work they do is not always recognized as activism (Bosco, 2010). Simon (2010) contends children are not recognized as activists because they are seen as naïve and likely to change their views as they become adolescents; further, their activism and resistance efforts are interpreted by adults as misbehavior. Not only does child activism often go unacknowledged, but at times, schools do not adequately teach children how to exercise agency. Though proponents of multicultural education (e.g., Gay, 2007) believe issues of justice and equity, the catalysts for activism, should be addressed in school, Bassey (2010) critiques multicultural education for its failure to give students strategies and models for enacting social change. In other words, activism is left out of the school day, even in classrooms where teachers are committed to social justice. Given the pressure today’s educators face in “teaching to the test” and producing student achievement, this is unsurprising.

Though young people are not always recognized as activists, they have a long and notable history of activism. For instance, children worked for racial equality in the American Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. Sheyann Webb and Rachel West were eight and nine years old, respectively, when they marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama in 1965 (Webb & Nelson, 1997), while hundreds of young people participated in earlier demonstrations in Birmingham (Mayer, 2008). Claudette Colvin was a teenager when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus months before Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Hoose, 2009). Well-known educator and writer Hebert Kohl (2007) recalls his high school peers standing up for teachers facing accusations of Communism during the McCarthy era. More recently, Paris (2012) describes the participation of high school students in protests against Arizona’s controversial SB1070, the law permitting police to request documentation from suspected illegal immigrants. These examples illustrate the serious roles children have assumed as activists, and recent scholarship includes several discussions of activist work initiated in a classroom setting. We refer interested readers to Harman and Varga-Dobai (2012) and Mitra and Serriere (2012) for further reading on this topic.

### The Mildred L. Batchelder Award

Children’s librarians have long been engaged in the process of identifying high-quality literature through awards such as the Newbery and Caldecott. In 1966, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) initiated an award for translated literature named after librarian Mildred L.

Batchelder, a tireless crusader for the promotion of international literature. The Batchelder Award and Honor is given to American publishers for publishing English translations of books originally produced in another country and language (ALSC, 2012). In an increasingly connected and global world, translated books represent an important bridge to world literature for readers. The Batchelder, first conferred in 1968, was an early marker of international border crossings in youth literacies.

Titles eligible for the Batchelder Award are intended for children 14 years old and younger, though in our reading, we have found some are likely to appeal to older teens (e.g., *Ultimate Game*, Lehmann, 2000). The books are predominantly in novel format. Only three picture books published since 2000 have been selected as Batchelder titles: *Big Wolf and Little Wolf* (Brun-Cosme, 2009); *Garmann's Summer* (Hole, 2008); and *Henrietta and the Golden Eggs* (Johansen, 2002). All of these are Honor books; no picture book has won the Award in recent years. We judge that most Batchelder titles will appeal to children between 10 and 14 years old.

The Award is given annually to a book published in the previous year unless the Batchelder committee, which consists of a chairperson and four members appointed by the ALSC president, deems that no title meets the criteria (ALSC, 2007). Since 1994, one or more Honor books have been selected, along with the Award winner. Criteria for the Batchelder include the literary qualities of the book such as "interpretation of the theme or content" and "appropriateness of style" (ALSC, 2007, p. 10), though it is unclear how those criteria are defined by the committee. Related to the original work, the criteria also state the translation should not be "unduly Americanized" and the "readers should be able to sense that the book came from another country" (ALSC, 1987, para. 4). However, as stated in the Award's terms and criteria, committee members may not be able to read in a book's original language and must use their judgment to determine whether it is "true to the substance. . . and flavor of the original work" (ALSC, 1987, para. 4).

The work of translation is fraught with cultural challenges (Metcalf, 2003; Yamazaki, 2002) and a limitation of this set of books is the ability of the award judges to determine cultural inaccuracies, omissions, or substitutions resulting from the translation process. Yet without these translations, the texts would be entirely inaccessible to readers who lacked proficiency in the original language. Books in translation allow us to cross international and cultural boundaries (however imperfectly) and to engage in a different mode of literacy that extends our language borders. Translated books promote the connectivity or radical change that Dresang (1999) said encourages a "sense of community . . . because of the new perspectives and vistas with which young readers connect" (p. 12).

Though ALSC gives the Batchelder Award to outstanding titles (ALSC, 2012), scholars suggest educators are often not familiar with the award or with translated books in general (Joels, 1999; Lo & Leahy, 1997; Louie & Louie, 1999). We hope our discussion of Batchelder titles and their utility for inspiring youth activism will encourage teachers and teacher educators to consider these books in their practice. Young readers should not miss out on the "rich treasure in foreign books" (Louie & Louie, 1999, p. 34).

## Theoretical Framework

Simon and Norton (2011) developed a working definition of activism applied to their identification of a set of books demonstrating activism and spirituality (p. 299), and this definition is used as the framework for the present study. First and foremost to this description is the idea that an activist is a person who works in collaboration with others to enact change. Without this emphasis, Simon and Norton argue that children may receive the wrong idea about activism: major social changes are rarely made by a single person. Seeing collective action in literature is important: while not all children will grow up to become heroes or leaders, all children have the potential to participate in community activism (Kohl, 1991). Unfortunately, books for children, at least those originating from the United States, tend to focus on the actions of individuals rather than on collective struggles (Kohl, 2007).

Simon and Norton (2011) next describe activists as “working for the greater good of the community” rather than their own self-interests (p. 299). Given that popular children’s books often depict characters acting out of self-interest (Shannon, 1986), representations of activist characters with a collective orientation seem especially important. A third criterion identified by Simon and Norton applies to activism as portrayed in books: praxis, or actions to effect social change, must be visible to the reader. Youth should have the opportunity to see the choices and actions characters make in their activist efforts.

Simon and Norton (2011) are not the first to identify what activism should look like when selecting titles for young people. Kohl (2007) has outlined similar ideas in his description of “radical stories.” Like Simon and Norton, Kohl believes radical stories should include collective and collaborative (rather than individual) actions. His definition is extended by the following criteria: an equitable community results from collective action, the “bad guy” should be dynamically characterized, and unity and collegiality should mark characters’ collaborative activist efforts. Further, Kohl does not believe a “happy ending” is necessary in radical stories. Although we are informed by Kohl’s work, we found Simon and Norton’s definition provided a clear and workable framework for our analysis.

In addition, we borrow an idea from Bassey (2010), who advocates for a “critical social foundations of education approach” that helps students recognize and critique social issues and gives them the tools to initiate and enact change in their communities (p. 251). Like Bassey, we believe education should raise awareness *and* empower and enable young people to take on activist roles. A central assumption of our work is the power of literature to inspire youth towards activism in their schools and communities. We believe translated literature is especially suited to this goal as it represents social issues and activism on a global scale. Further, our previous research suggested this particular set of translated books as a rich source for inquiry into social justice and equity issues (Kimmel, Garrison & Forest, 2012).

## Methods and Data Set

Our study of Batchelder titles began in an earlier paper investigating portrayals of culture within the set (Kimmel, Garrison, & Forest, 2012). This initial study was a qualitative inductive content analysis (Berg, 2001) of the 12 Award books published between 2000 and 2011 (award years

2001-2012). Each member of the research team read through the titles individually and used the definition of critical incidents from Flanagan (1954) to code significant mentions of seven cultural markers: gender, religion, disability, social class, immigration status, nationality, and race/ethnicity. These codes were developed from a framework described and used by Rawson (2011) in an analysis of culture in award-winning titles for young adults. Following the individual coding, we met to discuss the books and come to consensus about our final codes.

Later, this process was repeated with the 20 Batchelder Honor books from 2001-2012 and the three newest Batchelder titles announced in January 2013. (See Appendix A for the full references of all 35 titles.) After realizing that these titles could be used to promote the idea of activism for young readers, we reviewed the books and our data to pull more specific examples to support the use of these books as catalysts for youth activism. We created a spreadsheet using Simon and Norton's (2011) framework defining activism and began to fill it in with Batchelder titles containing characters and topics related to activism. An example is shown in Table 1 to illustrate this process.

In our overall analysis of activism in the 35 Batchelder titles published since 2000, we found 16 books to have rich portrayals of activism and emerging activist themes, as defined by Simon and Norton (2011). These titles are described in Table 2. They represent a wide range of genres, settings, and topics. The discussion following Table 2 reveals the unique instances of activism found in the titles and how they may relate to activist efforts involving both elementary and secondary students.

### **Findings: Activism in Batchelder Titles**

Our examination of activism in the Batchelder titles uncovered two themes related to our analysis. First, we found three different social issues that characters worked toward changing. These issues included characters' efforts to: 1) improve the living conditions of other characters; 2) prevent the exploitation of other characters; and 3) promote political, religious, and social freedoms. The second theme to emerge from our analysis involved our identification of a continuum of activist efforts; Batchelder characters varied in their level of engagement with activism per the definition by Simon and Norton (2011). These levels of engagement included: 1) instances of true activism according to Simon and Norton's definition; 2) emerging, but not fully altruistic, activist efforts made by characters; and 3) unrealized opportunities for characters to be activists. Using passages from the Batchelder books, the following discussion begins with the three social issues that spurred characters' activism and then gives support for the continuum of activism identified.

**Table 1:** Example of Activism Analysis using Simon and Norton's (2011) Framework

Title	Activist Character	Does the character collaborate with others?	Does the character work for collective interests?	Is activism visible in the story?	What are the activist efforts?	Illustrative Passage
<i>The Last Dragon</i>	Yorsh and the dragon	Yes, they work together and with Robi, an orphan.	Yes, they are not motivated out of pure self-interest.	The activist efforts are described at length.	Yorsh and the dragon rescue a group of oppressed people and institute a new, free society. The dragon sacrifices his life for this.	When the rain had stopped and the smell of their roasting meat had spread around the area, settling on poor villages and farms where the rabbits were better fed than the humans, all the starving people had joined up with them. The ones who had nothing. The ones who had nobody. They had gathered up all the uprooted and the poverty-stricken, the ones who had lost their land and had dreamed of finding new land – and there were plenty of them. (p. 321)
<i>Tiger Moon</i>	Woman with hooked nose	No, she acts alone.	While she does not act out of self-interest to save individual children, she also does not work toward countering structural inequities.	Yes, they are shown in her actions.	She helps homeless children by providing them with food and water. She nurses protagonist Farhad and Nitish back to health.	"Sometimes he came to see us," the woman went on. "When my husband wasn't at home. I used to give him something to eat." "Why?" asked Farhad. The woman shrugged her shoulders and glanced at the two boys who looked even smaller and dirtier than the dead child. "I feed them all." She picked up her sewing things again and went on threading her needle through the fabric, as if her conversation with Farhad came second to her work. "I don't understand," said Farhad. "You don't look as if you have much money. Why do you feed the children?" (pp. 278-9)

**Table 2:** Batchelder Titles Depicting Activism

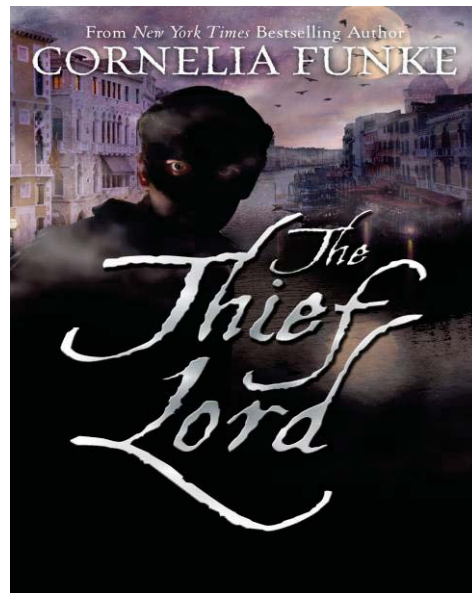
Award Year	Title	Language & Country of Origin	Genre	Setting	Basic Plot
2013 Winner	<i>My Family for the War</i>	German; Germany	Historical Fiction	WWII; Germany & England	A young German girl with Jewish roots must leave her family to seek refuge in England where she is welcomed into a new orthodox Jewish family.
2013 Honor	<i>Son of a Gun</i>	Dutch; Netherlands	Contemporary Realism	Late 1990s; Liberia during the civil war	A young brother and sister are forced to become child soldiers in Liberia's civil war.
2012 Winner	<i>Soldier Bear</i>	Dutch; Netherlands	Historical Fiction	WWII; Poland, Iran, Italy, Egypt, & Russia	Based on true events, a group of Polish soldiers adopt a bear cub that grows up with them during their WWII army migration across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.
2011 Winner	<i>A Time of Miracles</i>	French; France	Contemporary Realism	1990s to 2000s; Georgia to France	Georgian refugees Blaise Fortune and his mother flee their war-torn homeland in Eastern Europe, struggling to survive as they make their way across the continent towards France, where Blaise believes he is a citizen.
2010 Honor	<i>Big Wolf and Little Wolf</i>	French; France	Fantasy	Woods	Big Wolf gives Little Wolf food and shelter and finds unexpected companionship in this picture book.
2010 Honor	<i>Eidi</i>	Danish; Denmark	Historical Fiction	Approximately 19 <sup>th</sup> century; Denmark	Eidi seeks independence after the birth of her baby brother and finds it along with a child who needs her help.
2009 Winner	<i>Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit</i>	Japanese; Japan	Fantasy	Medieval; Japan-like fantasy setting	Balsa, a female spear-wielding bodyguard, transcends traditional gender roles as she protects the prince of the kingdom from his superstitious father.
2009 Honor	<i>Tiger Moon</i>	German; Germany	Fantasy	19 <sup>th</sup> century; British colonial India	A new bride fears her wedding night and distracts herself and a kind servant with an exciting and romantic story of a hero who sets off to rescue a princess in a similar situation.



2007 Honor	<i>The Last Dragon</i>	Italian; Italy	Fantasy	Fantasy setting	The last elf and the last dragon work together to save marginalized children and others and fulfill an ancient prophecy.
2006 Winner	<i>The Pull of the Ocean</i>	French; France	Contemporary Realism	Modern; France	Under the direction of the youngest and smallest, Yann, a band of seven brothers run away from their poor farm home, fleeing their cruel father and indifferent mother.
2006 Honor	<i>When I Was a Soldier</i>	French; France	Contemporary Realism	1980s; Israel	An 18 year-old girl documents her two years of compulsory service in the Israeli army.
2005 Winner	<i>The Shadow of Ghadames</i>	French; France	Historical Fiction	19th century; Libya	Twelve year-old Malika struggles with growing up and her society's traditional gender roles, but finds freedom in learning to read and the realization that these societal borders also limit males like her brother.
2004 Honor	<i>The Crow Girl</i>	Danish; Denmark	Historical Fiction	Approximately 19 <sup>th</sup> century; Denmark	After the death of her only family member, Myna seeks and finds love and companionship from others who have felt loss and pain.
2003 Winner	<i>The Thief Lord</i>	German; Germany	Fantasy	Modern; Frankfurt to Venice	After their mother dies in Frankfurt, Germany, two brothers run away to Venice where they join a group of homeless, pick-pocketing orphans living in an abandoned movie theater and become tasked with finding a magical carousel.
2003 Honor	<i>Henrietta and the Golden Eggs</i>	German; Germany	Fantasy- Animal	Modern; Farm	Henrietta's optimism and spirit results in better living conditions for the entire hen house in this picture book.
2002 Winner	<i>How I Became an American</i>	German; Germany	Historical Fiction	Early 1900s ; Germany to U.S.	Based on letters of American immigrants from the early 20th century, Johann's family leaves their native home in Germany, seeking out a better life in Youngstown, OH.

### Three Social Issues and Activist Efforts

Using Simon and Norton's (2011) framework as a guide, our analysis of activism in the Batchelder titles revealed three social issues triggering activism. Characters were often faced with unfair or unacceptable living conditions, and some were even homeless. Exploitation was evident in the books when characters, usually children, were being taken advantage of by others. The quest for freedom was another social issue that prompted characters to take action.



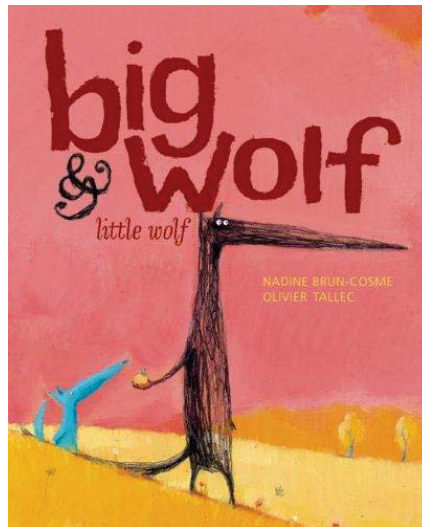
Cover for the book *The Thief Lord*.

**Living conditions and homelessness.** Characters carried out activism efforts in order to help others and improve their living conditions. Sometimes the activist characters were in a better social position to make such efforts. For example, in *The Thief Lord* by Cornelia Funke (2002), one of the main protagonists, Scipio, is from a rich Venetian family, but he poses as a pick-pocketing orphan and leads a group of actual homeless orphans. He sets them up in an abandoned movie theater owned by his father and gets them money by pawning valuables he steals from his parents. When Scipio's deception is revealed, he loses the trust of his friends, but they lose their home.

“And if the children don't have a home, why shouldn't they live in your movie theater? It's empty anyway,” said Scipio.

“My word, children sometimes say the oddest things. So it's empty. Do you think that's reason enough to let all the tramps in the city squat there?” [Scipio's father speaking]

“But what's going to happen to them now?” Scipio felt himself getting hot. Then cold. Terribly cold. “You saw the girl. Can't you take pity on her?” (Funke, 2002, loc 3181-3189)



Cover for the book *Big Wolf, Little Wolf*.

*Big Wolf, Little Wolf* (Brun-Cosme, 2009), one of the few picture books honored with the Batchelder, gives a similar example of a character helping a homeless individual. In this story, loner Big Wolf shares food and shelter with Little Wolf when they meet in the woods. “When Big Wolf saw that Little Wolf was shivering at the tip of his nose he pushed a teeny tiny corner of his leaf blanket closer to him. ‘That is certainly enough for such a little wolf,’ he thought” (Brun-Cosme, 2009, p. 7). While Big Wolf is usually a loner, he finds kinship and comfort in Little Wolf’s presence and also in the fact that he can help Little Wolf.

In *Henrietta and the Golden Eggs* (Johansen, 2002), Henrietta dreams of a better life for herself outside of the crowded, dirty hen house where she lives with thousands of other chickens. These poor living conditions are described by the author:

The air stank of chicken droppings and fortified chicken feed. There was a lot of pushing and shoving on the ground, because each chicken had just enough room for its feet, but no more. Things were not going well for the three thousand three hundred and thirty-three chickens. Many of them had a cough and almost all of them were losing feathers because they pecked at one another whenever they stepped on each other’s feet. (Johansen, 2002, pp. 3-5)

In order to improve her situation, Henrietta escapes again and again from the hen house, eventually leading the farmer to build an outdoor pen for the chickens that is a much cleaner and happier place.

All of these activists, Henrietta, Big Wolf, and Scipio, sought to improve the living conditions of their fellow characters, whether friends or strangers. Their activist efforts were not completely selfless, as they did earn improvements in their own lives socially or physically. The next theme included more altruistic examples of activism in the Batchelder titles as activist characters stood up for or even saved the lives of other characters being exploited.

**Exploitation.** The issue of exploitation most often dealt with problems related to labor. *How I Became an American* (Gündisch, 2001) clearly referenced the historical exploitation of immigrants and the practice of child labor. Johann and his family have immigrated to America for better jobs and soon learn (as one minister reminds them), “‘Many of you are employed in work that no American wants to do,’ said the pastor and I had to think about my brother Peter, who had said the same thing” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 100). Johann’s older brother becomes an activist, suggesting at one point, “‘Actually to get better working conditions, you have to strike’” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 67). The brother is also angered when one of Johann’s classmates drops out of school to go to work in the mines: “‘Almost three hundred thousand children under fourteen are working in factories, in mines, in slaughterhouses in Chicago, or in the cotton fields of the South. They’re working ten hours a day for starvation wages’” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 71).

A much more contemporary example of child exploitation is the subject of a recent Batchelder Honor book, *Son of a Gun* (de Graaf, 2012), set in Liberia in the 1990s where an eight-year-old boy is forced to become a child soldier. Harrowing details include the use of pills that children were told protected them from death and the straightforward way the protagonist’s ten-year-old sister describes becoming the “wife” of one of the rebels. *Son of a Gun* provides a stark reminder that children continue to be exploited around the world.

In *A Time of Miracles* (Bondoux, 2010), Blaise and other children work in the ruins of a light bulb factory to recover nickel in exchange for a meager wage to purchase food. They fish in a nearby lake. The site is toxic and dangerous.

Winter returns to Souma-Soula, and a rumor circulates from shed to shed that a curse has fallen over the dwellers of the lake area. It seems that several women have given birth to monstrous children. “The first one didn’t have a head!” Suki tells me. “The second one had two of them!” Maya says with a grimace. (Bondoux, 2010, loc. 794)

Men in armored cars, coveralls, and masks come to investigate and determine the lake has been poisoned by waste from the light bulb factory.

In *When I Was a Soldier* (Zenatti, 2005), Valerie imagines herself as an activist. As she is about to leave her job to become a soldier, she rails against the meager wage she has been paid to work in a local pharmacy, Extrapharm, and she pictures herself as a future activist:

When I think about it, I’m convinced that later in life I’ll be a trade unionist. Or perhaps a revolutionary. And the day I am, they’ll be adding two noughts on all the pay slips or, even better, there won’t be any pay slips at all, and money won’t be this weird thing I’m prepared to act the fool for (with some talent apparently) in those aisles which smell of a mixture of soap, washing powder and expensive perfume. The day I am, no one will feel humiliated any longer just for being poor, and no organization will be run like a mini dictatorship. (Zenatti, 2005, p. 22)

Her actions are on a much smaller scale, as she elects instead to write on the restroom wall:

“And God said: ‘let there be rampant capitalism,’ and there was Extrapharm. And I cited the reference: Genesis of exploited employees, chapter 1, verse 7” (Zenatti, 2005, p. 43).

Another form of child exploitation relates to the abuse of children by parents. In *The Pull of the Ocean* (Mourlevat, 2006), the mother describes her youngest child, a dwarf: “We kept him anyway. We thought his size might come in handy for certain chores” (p.14). Each chapter of this book is written in a different voice as Yann leads his brothers to run away from their abusive home, convincing them that their father plans to kill his children since he cannot afford to feed them.

Running away is a form of agency that is also featured in *The Thief Lord* (Funke, 2002,) where two brothers flee from an aunt who really only wants to adopt one of them. A detective hired to locate the boys has this encounter with them:

“Are you really going to catch us and take us back to Esther? We don’t belong to her, you know.” Embarrassed, Victor stared at his shoes.

“Well, children all have to belong to somebody,” he muttered.

“Do you belong to someone?”

“That’s different.”

“Because you’re a grown-up?” (Funke, 2002, loc. 1864)

This passage captures the sense that children belong to adults who can then choose to exploit or use them for their own purposes.

In many of these cases, the books serve to create an awareness of issues of exploitation but provided few concrete examples of activism as defined by Simon and Norton (2011). Characters run away but they often take siblings or others with them. Officials discover the toxicity of the lake in *A Time of Miracles* (Bondoux, 2010) and forbid access to it, but take no actions to care for those affected by the poison. Blaise and his mother move on to look for work, food, and shelter elsewhere. Valerie imagines being a revolutionary, but takes the surreptitious action of writing on a restroom wall. Johann’s brother is a labor activist, but it is his words rather than his actions that are visible in the story.

The only true example of activism is in *The Last Dragon* (De Mari, 2006), where children who have been abandoned or orphaned are expected to work picking grapes or participate in other kinds of forced labor in exchange for protection, shelter, and very little food. Order is maintained through fear and abuse. When an elf and a dragon appear, one of the children, Robi, is singled out as a witch and sent to prison. But her fate is tied to that of the dragon and elf through prophecy, and together they lead the children and others oppressed by the Daligar government into a fierce battle for freedom. Finally reaching a land where they are free and food is plentiful, the people create a list of proclamations including, “That which a person works from the land is his own, and no one can take it from him” and “No little child must work” (De Mari, 2006, p. 358-9).

**Freedom.** Another social justice issue emerging from the books was freedom. Several characters sought political liberty for large groups, while others pursued individual freedom from

oppressive, marginalizing conditions. Gloria in *A Time of Miracles* (Bondoux, 2010) is one example of an activist pursuing political liberty. In her story, set in the 1980s and 1990s in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia, Gloria, her husband, and a group of their friends attempt a revolution to overthrow what they perceive as a hostile Soviet government. ““We wanted to start a revolution. We wanted people to live freely, on their own land. We wanted people to speak their ancestral language, to practice their own religion, their own culture,”” as Gloria explains it to the narrator, Blaise (Bondoux, 2010, loc. 2032-33). Gloria and her group pursue their goals through violent means, planting bombs to throw off government plans and eventually, blowing up a train and killing dozens of innocent people on board. Though she believes in freedom for the people of Georgia, Gloria soon rejects the violent actions of the others and runs away. She and Blaise travel throughout Eurasia to seek their own freedom in France. Although Gloria’s violent actions serve more as a non-example of what activist work should be, she does acknowledge the wrong she has done. Readers come away from the title with the understanding that political freedom is an important cause, but peaceful actions are a far more humane and are worthy means of achieving it.

Valerie from *When I was a Soldier* (Zanetti, 2005) and the Polish soldiers from *Soldier Bear* (Tak, 2011) are two additional examples of activists working toward political freedom. Though Valerie joins the Israeli military for compulsory service, she comes to view her role not as a job she has to do, but one she wants to do for the sake of Israel’s freedom and sustainability. The following passage, where Valerie is thinking about a Holocaust survivor she meets by chance, illustrates her perspective:

I heave a very deep sigh. In few minutes, I'll have to get off, I have a mission to accomplish. A new blood is flowing in my veins, as if I were going to fight for this old woman with her gentle eyes, this woman whose hand shook as it held my arm. (Zanetti, 2005, p.225)

Though we see Valerie’s activist leanings early in the book when she considers workers’ rights, this passage reflects her newfound maturity. Unlike Valerie, who has to become a soldier, Peter, Stanislav, and their friends in *Soldier Bear* (Tak, 2011) choose to join the British army in reaction to the German invasion of Poland, their homeland. They could have remained in Poland, but they decide to go to war for the sake of taking back their country’s freedom. Peter and the other soldiers are activists in an additional way: they rescue a sickly, orphaned bear cub they call Voytek and raise him, despite the mischief he causes. Interestingly, *Soldier Bear* is based on a true story.

Other characters in Batchelder titles work for freedom from oppressive conditions or circumstances. Balsa in *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* (Uehashi, 2008) is one example. In this story, Balsa, a female bodyguard, rescues and protects Chagum, a prince set to be murdered by his father to protect the royal family’s honor and authority. Though Balsa is coerced into helping Chagum and is paid for her work, she risks her life to accomplish this and comes to genuinely care for the boy. Readers also learn Balsa has a history of protecting others, as this story from an orphaned child she has helped reveals:

“But then suddenly the feet stopped, I opened my eyes, and there was Balsa. I couldn’t believe it – it was five against one, right? And she just looks like an ordinary woman, while those big thugs were used to fighting. But that spear! Like lightning! And like that, all five of them were on the ground, and not one of them was even groaning. They were knocked out. It was incredible! And you know what was the nicest thing about it? Balsa helped us. Us! And she wouldn’t even accept anything in repayment.” (Uehashi, 2008, p. 53)

Though Balsa is a reluctant activist, she often puts herself at risk to protect those in need, using her skill in combat for the good of other people. She preserves their freedom as well as their lives by offering her protection.

Myna and Eidi from *The Children of Crow Cove* series (Bredsdorff, 2004; 2009) undertake activist efforts to free others from oppressive conditions as well. Myna brings food and kindness to an elderly man whose caretakers have neglected him, and later, she offers a safe haven to Foula and her daughter Eidi. Foula has been the victim of an abusive, unstable husband, and Myna’s efforts free her from her fears and her husband’s violence. In the second book in the series, Eidi becomes an activist herself when she saves an overworked young boy, Tink, whose mother has died and whose guardian blames him for his mother’s death. Eidi gives Tink freedom from his tyrannical employer, Bandon.

In the latest Batchelder Award title, *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012), Amanda Shepard is an activist in several ways. Amanda, herself a Jewish convert, goes to great lengths to help the Jewish refugees pouring into England after escaping Nazi persecution. First, she becomes a foster mother to Ziska, a German girl whose parents send her away to England in the hope that she might be safer there as World War II escalates. Later on, Amanda works furiously to help Ziska’s friend Walter, a German teen living in England, who is placed in a British internment camp. This passage illustrates Amanda’s activism on Walter’s behalf:

In the following weeks, my foster mother discovered a new activity: protest. She wrote to the government and to individual officials, wrote letters to the editors of every newspaper and radio station – and through her efforts learned that she wasn’t the only one fighting against the internment of foreigners. Various groups and individuals had dedicated themselves to the same goal. They even banded together for a demonstration. (Voorhoeve, 2012, pp. 251-252)

Further, Malika and Abdelkarim from *The Shadows of Ghadames* (Stolz, 2004) work as activists to help each other. In this story set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Libya, Malika and her stepmother free Abdelkarim, who is a wanted man, by harboring him in their home and later helping him escape from the village. Meanwhile, Abdelkarim gives Malika freedom in a very different way: he teaches her how to read. In Malika’s world, where women are confined to the home and do not attend school, literacy is a precious and rare sort of freedom.

**Continuum of Activism: Create and Transform, Engage, Inspire**

A main piece of the definition of activism is that activists work for the collective, greater good, not just self-interest (Simon & Norton, 2011). However, instances of activism identified in the Batchelder titles rarely fit this definition completely. In recognizing these instances, we noted a continuum ranging from true activism as described by Simon and Norton (2011) to emerging activism, where positive efforts were not fully selfless or intentional, to a call for action, where the characters and plots present ripe opportunities for educators to engage young activists.

**Create and transform: True activism.** We found it striking that the most developed and visible model of activism was found in fantasy. A young girl is aided by an elf and a dragon in *The Last Dragon* (De Mari, 2006) to fulfill a prophecy and liberate a people from an oppressive regime. Balsa in the *Moribito* series (Uehashi, 2008) helps characters in similar conditions. Historical examples of the revolutionary actions of young people in labor unions (e.g., *How I Became an American*, Gündisch, 2011) and youth taking up arms against Nazis or Soviet dictators were referenced in the historical fiction titles but not explicitly shown (e.g., *A Time of Miracles*, Bondoux, 2010). While fantasy titles included a stronger depiction of activism than realistic fiction titles set among actual events, imagination is a powerful tool for young readers: first to become aware of injustice and then to empathize with others is an important first step for promoting activism in youth. Literature is recognized by many as an important tool supporting this purpose (Simon & Norton, 2011).

**Engage: Recognizing emerging activism.** While reading these books and considering the definition of true activism by Simon and Norton (2011), a modified definition surfaced which we labeled as emerging activism. Children in many of the books acted out of concern for others, but their motives were not entirely selfless, or they operated from naïve perspectives of social justice. For example, while Big Wolf did give Little Wolf food and shelter, Little Wolf gave Big Wolf friendship and companionship (Brun-Cosme, 2009). In *The Crow Girl: The Children of Crow Cove* (Bredsdorff, 2004), the main character Myna provides a similar case of working to help others but also getting something in return. After the death of her grandmother and only companion, young Myna, sad and alone, searches the countryside for a new family. She finds others who, like herself, have been displaced physically or emotionally by death or domestic abuse. Myna decides that they can start a new family and takes everyone back to the home where she grew up with her grandmother. In *The Thief Lord* (Funke, 2002), Scipio was out for the adventure and romance of living on his own, away from the strict rules and regulations of his father and family's social position. As the leader of the homeless orphans, he had power and the admiration of his friends. While the activist efforts of these characters should not be ignored, they do not quite fit Simon and Norton's (2011) definition.

Another component of emerging activism was comprised of instances in which activists felt they were saving other characters from their own cultural identities (i.e. religion, customs). Eleanor is an English character in *Tiger Moon* (Michaelis, 2008), a 2009 Batchelder Honor set in India during British colonial times. She helps Indian orphans by giving them clothing, food, and shelter, but her efforts also have strong undertones of forced acculturation as illustrated by this passage:

After that, Eleanor walked in the garden with him and told him about her orphans. "I'm making them into brand-new people," she explained, her eyes shining. "You should just



see how keen they are to read and write! And I give them history and geography lessons, too. Once, before I came to India with Papa, I was going to be a history and geography teacher. Here, I don't even need a college training to teach people. Isn't that wonderful? Only last week we were studying the course of the Thames . . ." (Michaelis, 2008, p. 131-132)

While Eleanor is no doubt engaging in activism by improving the orphans' living conditions, her efforts to educate them on British geography seem self-serving and insensitive. In each of these cases, young people act out of good intentions but do not fully grasp the underlying causes of homelessness, exploitation, or other social injustices.

**Inspire: A call for activism.** Each of the Batchelder titles described in this paper includes some aspect of activism. At the very least, these international titles call attention to social injustices throughout history. Literature allows the reader to understand the humanity of others (however different they may seem from us) and the pain caused by injustice. The Batchelder titles present a call for activism and provide an opportunity for educators to lead discussions with students about the causes of social injustices. For example, the issue of homelessness is evident in the books, including war refugees such as Blaise and Gloria in *A Time of Miracles* (Bondoux, 2010). Reading these titles and discussing these issues helps to create awareness of the exploitation of children that is largely invisible to many of us in the United States. Reading books such as *Son of A Gun* (de Graaf, 2012) or *The Last Dragon* (De Mari, 2006) offers the opportunity to talk about child soldiers or child labor. Many of the books, including *The Thief Lord* (Funke, 2002) and *The Pull of the Ocean* (Mourlevat, 2006), feature child runaways, an issue that young readers might relate to but may not think about in terms of a call for activism.

## Discussion

The Batchelder books described here can be a launching point for promoting children's interest in and engagement with activism. As we have noted, many of these titles call attention to issues related to ongoing social injustices, like unfair living conditions or homelessness, exploitation, and oppression. For instance, educators might use *The Thief Lord* (Funke, 2002) to initiate a discussion about homelessness, an issue of particular salience given the number of home foreclosures that have occurred alongside the current economic recession. The discrimination and oppression faced by characters in books like *The Last Dragon* (De Mari, 2006) could prompt conversation about inequities like the challenges faced by undocumented immigrant students wanting to attend state universities. In many cases, these titles go beyond calling attention to injustice but depict characters taking stands as activists, such as Amanda Shepherd campaigning against the internment of foreigners in England (*My Family for the War*, Voorhoeve, 2012) or Henrietta agitating against the illness-inducing conditions of the hen house where she is confined (*Henrietta and the Golden Eggs*, Johansen, 2002). Batchelder titles provide opportunities for educators to raise awareness about injustices, and they can serve as models of agency for young readers.

While teachers face many demands during their instructional time, we offer several ways that activism can be encouraged in classrooms. Though we advise using students' interests and concerns as a starting point for identifying activism opportunities, students, teachers, and teacher

educators can also turn to organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Amnesty International, and Free the Children to work on existing activist projects. As described above, students and teachers can also consider how social issues like those depicted in the Batchelder books connect to similar issues within their own communities. Since many of the titles are imperfect or incomplete in their depictions of activism, they remain at the level of emerging activism or creating awareness of activism, rather than models of full activism. Nonetheless, these are appropriate for engaging and inspiring children. Next, we share some recommendations for ways educators can use these books in classrooms

### **Recommendations for Educators**

Picower (2012) suggests educators can help raise students' awareness of injustices by using a technique she calls "camouflaging" (p. 5), which involves substituting the regular curriculum with social justice content. For example, in a reading class, a teacher might replace a text from a basal anthology with a Batchelder title depicting injustice and activism and discuss these issues while working on other literacy skills. Smolen and Martin (2011) describe how text sets with similar themes have potential for raising students' awareness of social issues, while Stover and Bach (2012) note that pairing fiction with non-fiction can give students a "richer perspective" on issues of interest (p. 217). Educators interested in promoting students' understandings of discrimination, for instance, might pair *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012) or *A Time of Miracles* (Bondoux, 2010) with books like *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (Hoose, 2009) or Toni Morrison's *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2005). All of these titles portray characters or real individuals who experienced discrimination based on ethnicity or race. The three social issues appearing in Batchelder titles that we identify here (living conditions, exploitation, and freedom) can assist teachers in developing their own text sets appropriate for their students' interests and reading levels.

Batchelder titles and other texts incorporating social justice themes can be integrated with a number of skills taught in school, including literacy skills. Stover and Bach (2012) describe how students' awareness and knowledge of social justice issues can be disseminated through creating pamphlets, developing blogs and wikis, or writing and performing scripts. As an example, students interested in understanding more about homelessness after reading *The Thief Lord* (Funke, 2002) might research homelessness statistics in their own community, investigate the causes of homelessness (Picower, 2012), or lobby in a public forum for a higher minimum wage or expansion of housing assistance programs. While not an exhaustive list of teaching strategies, these ideas are included here to help readers connect our discussion with their practices.

### **Conclusions**

Literature, particularly fiction, is a powerful artistic medium. Reading is a kind of literacy that allows us to both find ourselves and to encounter and explore the lives of others in different places, different times and facing different realities. Such encounters expand our worlds and allow us to empathize with the very personal and human struggles of others from Nazi Germany to the more contemporary Liberian conflict. Tales of fantasy allow us to imagine ourselves on the back of a dragon leading the exploited and imprisoned to freedom, or imagining ourselves providing food and comfort to a lonely wolf. Awareness, imagination, and empathy with others

who face injustice, exploitation, and conflict are necessary steps toward becoming activists who are committed to taking action to create a better world. Translated books provide access to rich literary worlds beyond our national and linguistic boundaries. As Bassey (2010) notes, educators have a key role to play in raising awareness and empowering young people to take activist roles. Translated children's books may provide the imaginative hook and models of action needed to do just that.

Though awareness and empowerment are important, Paris (2012) contends that it is critical to connect social struggles in books or in the school curriculum with ongoing activist efforts, in order to achieve social justice. We agree that youth activism should extend beyond classroom discussions and outside the walls of the schools. Future research should explore how educators have facilitated activist work with their students using international titles like the *Batchelders* as a launching point. Future work might also investigate how global literature provokes students' interests in social and political issues. Yet the importance of stories and imagination in inspiring and engaging in activism should not be understated. As Herbert Kohl (2007) once wrote, "If we were not able to imagine the world as other than it is, then taking an active role in change would be unthinkable" (p. 42).

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**Appendix:** Translated Children's Books Analyzed for Activism

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