

# Developing Literacy Skills for Global Citizenship:

## Exploring Personal Culture and Mining Cultural Gems From Classroom Experts

by Amie Sarker & Ragina Shearer



### Abstract

In our quest to help students develop global competence, starting with awareness of and empathy toward perceived “others” across the globe, the authors of this article guided students in navigating particular authentic literacy activities that cultivated such dispositions. A focus on international contexts and social conditions opened both windows and mirrors for students, taking digital and print forms as students responded to international children’s literature selections and utilized the Internet in their inquiry. Adolescent students in a diverse U.S. classroom and young students in Bangladesh engaged in a pen pal

exchange that fostered intercultural communication skills and understanding. Students demonstrated heightened interest and concern for global issues, and U.S. classroom “experts” who were recent immigrants from Bangladesh themselves provided valuable cultural insights that supported the competency development of their classmates. Culturally and linguistically diverse students were not only empowered while sharing their expertise regarding their home country and culture, but a “global community” of respect developed within the diverse classroom itself. Through activities focusing on the development of global citizenship competencies, educators have the opportunity to transform their classrooms into learning communities that prepare students for an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world, developing citizens that can produce compassionate, positive impact.

*Keywords:* global citizenship, culturally relevant, international literature, globalization, diversity

---

**Amie Sarker** is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Dallas Baptist University where she also serves as the Program Administrator for the M.Ed. in Reading and ESL Program. She spent several years teaching ESL and serving as a literacy strategist in Texas public schools and has taught English as a foreign language in South Korea and Taiwan. Amie is passionate about affirming and developing the competencies of English language learners and their teachers, both in the U.S. and abroad. Amie Sarker can be reached at [amie@dbu.edu](mailto:amie@dbu.edu).

---

**Ragina Shearer** is a classroom teacher in Texas public schools where she has taught diverse groups of K-12 students, including English language learners and foreign language learners. She is a reading specialist and a member of the National Writing Project. Her passions in teaching include guiding all students in acquiring a love for reading and writing while recognizing and appreciating the importance of all cultures and languages in our global society. Ragina Shearer can be reached at [ragina.s@gmail.com](mailto:ragina.s@gmail.com).

---

**Developing Literacy Skills for Global Citizenship:  
Exploring Personal Culture and Mining Cultural Gems  
From Classroom Experts**

Globalization has brought intensified interactions and integration among diverse people from around the globe, posing significant challenges and opportunities for K-12 teachers in the United States. If today's youth are to be able to compete globally with success, they will require not only rigorous content knowledge, but also "global competence with diversity" and capacity for "global citizenship" (Herrera, 2012). Luke (2003) contends that "the imperative of learning to live together ethically and justly has been put back on the table. Our students need a literacy education that provides critical engagements with globalized flows of information, image, text, and discourse" (p. 20).

Heilman (2008) suggests seven competencies critical to students' (and teachers') development in this area of global citizenship that relate to language and literacy education:

1. Curiosity (including openness to new perspectives)
2. Compassion (sympathy and concern for the conditions of the marginalized)
3. Criticality (critical literacy and capacity building for making ethical judgments)
4. Collaboration (skills for working well with others toward a common goal)
5. Creativity (utilizing one's own schema, skills, and values to contribute positively to society)
6. Courage (persevering to implement universal human rights amidst difficult or even dangerous situations)
7. Commitment (sustained efforts to monitor and maintain social justice).

Darling-Hammond's (2010) analysis of educational equity and achievement gaps in the United States compared to other industrialized nations raises important concerns for K-12 educators as well. The high school graduation rates in the U.S., stuck at around 70%, have dropped from first in the world to where they now hover among the bottom half of industrialized nations. Additionally, most of those not completing a high school education in this nation are from ethnic/racial minority groups. Even more alarming, the U.S. holds 25% of the entire world's prison inmates (in comparison to U.S. populace making up only 5% of the global population). Most of these incarcerated individuals in the U.S. are functionally illiterate with learning disabilities, and a highly disproportionate percentage of these inmates come from minority groups. Texas, now a state with a minority-majority in its schools (Texas Education Agency, 2011),

A focus on international contexts and social conditions opened both windows and mirrors for students, taking digital and print forms as students responded to international children's literature selections and utilized the Internet to aid their inquiry.

is poised with opportunities to change this trajectory through effective literacy teachers with moral courage and agency. As Darling-Hammond (2010) insists, we can and must "teach our way out" (p. 3) of this current crisis.

In our quest to help all students develop global citizenship competencies, starting with awareness of and empathy toward perceived "others" across the globe, the authors of this article guided students through various multimodal sociocultural semiotic literacy experiences across cultures. These experiences included reading and writing across genres, interpreting illustrations, and producing artistic responses in order to deepen students' understanding of the world and to foster students' self-reflection. Students expressed their interpretation of literacy and culture through the use of media, Internet, songs, and storytelling. The culminating project, a pen pal exchange across continents, involved students' artistic drawings as a means of sharing understanding by children in both countries as they made their own and interpreted the artwork of their peers across the ocean.

A focus on international contexts and social conditions opened both windows and mirrors for students, taking digital and print forms as students responded to international children's literature selections and utilized the Internet to aid their inquiry. Through the pen pal project discussed in this article, U.S. students' eyes were opened to how children live in different parts of the world. Both U.S. and Bangladeshi students engaging in the pen pal experience felt connected with new "friends" on opposite sides of the globe, progressively developing several of the seven aforementioned global citizenship competencies (Heilman, 2008).

We discovered resident classroom experts among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, some of whom were recent immigrants from Bangladesh themselves. The Bangladeshi and other CLD students' contributions to class discussions broadened mainstream classmates' perspectives and deepened the affirmation that mainstream students felt for their now seemingly less marginalized CLD classmates in this multicultural, multilingual classroom setting. The benefits from this project were at least two-fold: (1) CLD students became more openly proud of and confident in expressing their own heritage in an environment of true interest and true concern, and (2) the mainstream students who never appeared to notice or acknowledge that there was a "difference" now suddenly held a genuine and friendly curiosity

and interest in the cultures and lives of their diverse classmates. Overall, most students increased in empathy and concern for the children of Bangladesh, and a classroom culture developed where once “silent” voices were now engaged and valued.

### Building Background for Global Citizenry

Ragina, a middle school classroom teacher, taught using authentic and accurate international literature as an everyday procedure. Ragina introduced her middle school students to the project by first reading *If the World Were a Village* (Smith, 2002), which looks at the demographics of the globe if we imagined the earth’s population as a village of only 100 people. Students discussed diversity of languages, religions, and cultures, as well as disparities in access to such things as electricity, clean water, and education along with the introduction of books from several countries from around the world. This reading was followed by literature response activities in relation to the focal text *Yasmin’s Hammer* (Malaspina, 2010), set in Bangladesh, which spurred further investigation into that particular South Asian culture and prepared students for the pen pal exchanges. Bangladesh was selected for the pen pal exchange because of Amie’s association with and access to a non-governmental organization in that country. This Bangladeshi-based organization operates several rural primer schools among families in poverty, and she and other short-term volunteer teams from the U.S. travel to Bangladesh multiple times a year to help with the schools and various other humanitarian aid projects managed by the organization.

Our goals for nurturing global citizens within a diverse classroom community centered around the following:

- Fostering multicultural awareness and understanding of global contexts (Freeman & Lehman, 2001; Freeman, Lehman, & Scharer 2010; Lepman, 2002)
- Meeting the learning needs of CLD students (Gay, 2000)
- Strengthening critical literacy skills (Harste, Leland, & Lewison, 2008)
- Developing democratic relationships and a commitment to addressing social justice issues (Heilman, 2008)
- Creating multimodal literature responses and lifelong learning (Flor Ada & Campoy, 2004; Lepman, 2002).

### Exploring the Bangladeshi Context

Ragina read aloud *Yasmin’s Hammer* (Malaspina, 2010) first for students’ enjoyment, including a few pauses and discussions about the genre features of realistic fiction and the culture being represented. This picture book narrative tells the story of a young girl in modern day Bangladesh whose dream is to be able to go to school someday and learn how to read. The story chronicles her experience

By utilizing global literature as a catalyst for understanding and appreciating diversity, the literacy curriculum is enhanced. Through reflective, responsive writing and other sociosemiotic means of communicating comprehension, student learning grows in both depth and complexity.

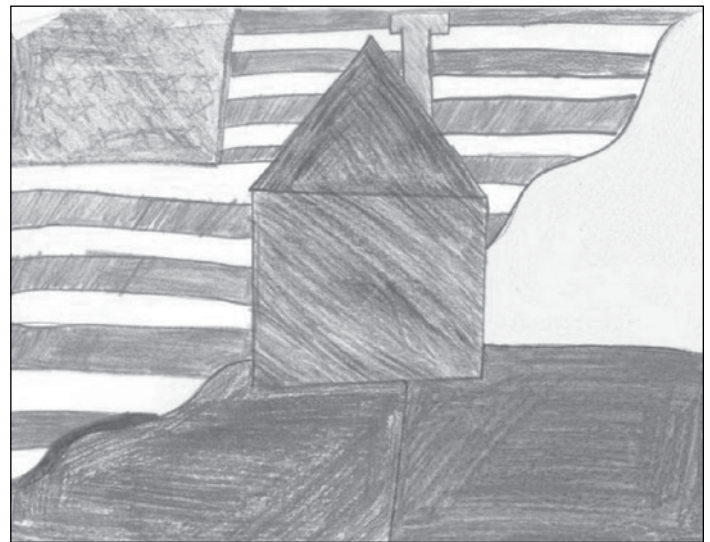


Figure 1. CLD student from Africa shares her bicultural identity.

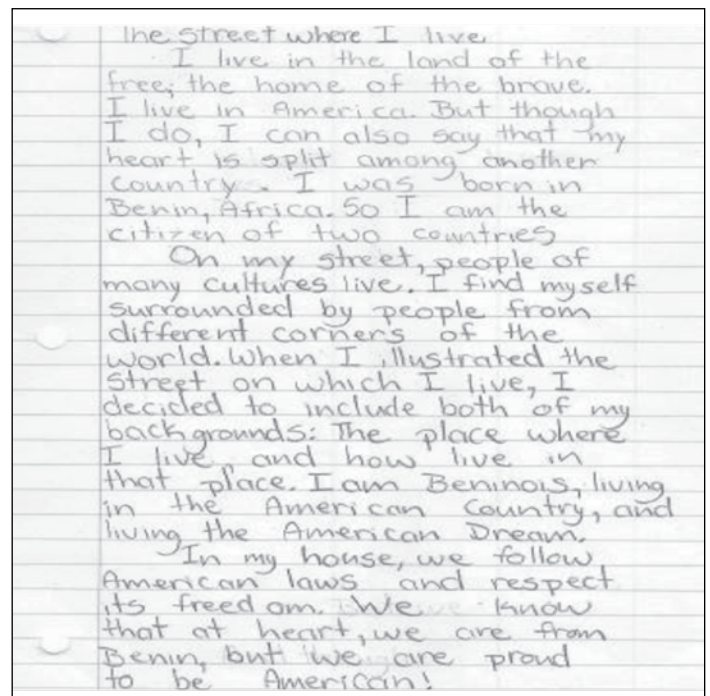


Figure 1B. CLD student from Africa shares her bicultural identity.





Figure 2. Multimodal response from a CLD student from Mexico.

The street where I lived... 01-13-12

I used to live in Mexico, by a "hang-out" place, sort of like the square, but it was called "La Plaza". It had pretty much everything to do there! They would have places to eat where you could play games, buy chips and sodas, and to just hang out. It was actually really fun. There was a fountain that we would always go to and throw coins in, because we always believed that everytime that we threw a coin into it, we could make a wish. I loved to walk around there, because the sun would warm my skin up, and the nice breeze would keep me cool. It makes me happy because it brings back a whole lot of memories that once made me smile and laugh a lot. I hope I get to go back soon.

Figure 2B. Multimodal response from a CLD student from Mexico.

in a village community before a monsoon destroys her home and forces her family to move to the city to find work. Following her family's transplant to the crowded city, both parents work hard, and Yasmin and her younger sister also work a job of breaking bricks to support the family's meager income, as they can't afford to send either daughter to school. However, after Yasmin works especially diligently, she saves up a small sum of money in order to acquire her first book. The family members sit around candlelight that night and look at the pictures and text, none of them able to read the words but delighted to own a book nonetheless. As her parents witness Yasmin's passion for learning, they decide to take on additional jobs so that their daughter can achieve her dream of attending school. In the final scene, her father, a rickshaw driver, surprises Yasmin when he doesn't stop at their usual brickyard work site, but instead takes her directly to school for her first day of class.



Figure 3. Multimodal response from a student who spent significant time in a different region of the U.S.

The street where I lived... 01-13-12

I used to live in Mexico, by a "hang-out" place, sort of like the square, but it was called "La Plaza". It had pretty much everything to do there! They would have places to eat where you could play games, buy chips and sodas, and to just hang out. It was actually really fun. There was a fountain that we would always go to and throw coins in, because we always believed that everytime that we threw a coin into it, we could make a wish. I loved to walk around there, because the sun would warm my skin up, and the nice breeze would keep me cool. It makes me happy because it brings back a whole lot of memories that once made me smile and laugh a lot. I hope I get to go back soon.

Figure 3B. Multimodal response from a student who spent significant time in a different region of the U.S.

### Multimodal Responses to International Literature

After the initial read-aloud of *Yasmin's Hammer*, Ragina revisited a particular portion of the text showing a city street, a part of the main characters' daily experience. The class discussed in greater detail what that street would have looked, smelled, and sounded like, sharing clues about cultural aspects represented there. Students were asked to visualize the street where they lived. They illustrated that street and wrote a description or narrative related to that setting, emphasizing important aspects of that location that had personal/cultural significance. This activity brought the realization that each person has a unique culture. Figures 1 through 3 show a few multimodal student responses, which highlight the negotiation of bicultural identity many CLD students navigate at times in a multicultural setting.

By utilizing global literature as a catalyst for understanding and appreciating diversity, the literacy curriculum is enhanced. Through reflective, responsive writing and other sociosemiotic means of communicating comprehension, student learning grows in both depth and complexity. Sign systems “help us mediate our world” (Albers, Holbrook, & Harste, 2010, p. 167), and U.S. and Bangladeshi pen pal students used reading, writing, and drawing as a means of communicating with one another. Albers, Holbrook, and Harste (2010) insist that meaning making is a dynamic process, “a way to reposition ourselves as new in the world that allows us to think metaphorically and symbolically and to try on new perspectives” (p. 167).

### Pen Pal Project with a Bangladeshi School

When the students returned to class the next day to continue their compositions and illustrations, Ragina presented the Bangladeshi pen pal project plans. Sharing a Prezi (an interactive cloud-based presentation) about the Bangladeshi school system heightened students’ awareness of the educational and social context of the pen pals they would be exchanging letters with. Students were engaged, making connections to both their personal experiences (e.g., pictures of a rural farm setting) and intertextual connections with *Yasmin’s Hammer*. They were especially excited to see the faces of the students they would be writing to. Several students engaged in further independent study about Bangladesh through Internet searches. This awareness-building process influenced the content of the letters they later wrote to the Bangladeshi school children, enabling them to ask more informed questions regarding the childrens’ family and educational experiences.

The Bangladeshi schoolchildren came from families similar to Yasmin’s in the sense that this was their family’s first formal education experience, and the children were emergent readers and writers in both Bengali and English. Prior to the pen pal exchange, the Bangladeshi students were exposed to a couple of texts about life in the U.S., including an informational selection and a realistic fiction text. The first pen pal exchange took about a month because the letters were carried back and forth through a volunteer trip to the region organized by Amie. The Bangladeshi student letters consisted primarily of illustrations and emergent literacy text. See samples in Figures 4 and 5.

### The Untapped Treasure of Classroom Experts’ Capital

When Ragina began this project, she did not know how her two Bangladeshi English learners that year would respond, whether they would find the activities culturally relevant and enjoy sharing their insights with their classmates, or whether they would pull back and prefer to identify more with being “American” now. She hoped these students would be affirmed and go deeper in their learning while those not of Bangladeshi heritage would learn more about life in that part of the world. She was careful not to push the text to “speak for” anyone’s culture (Dudley-Marling, 2003), allowing students to make connections as they felt comfortable.



Figure 4. Multimodal response from a student who spent significant time in a different region of the U.S.

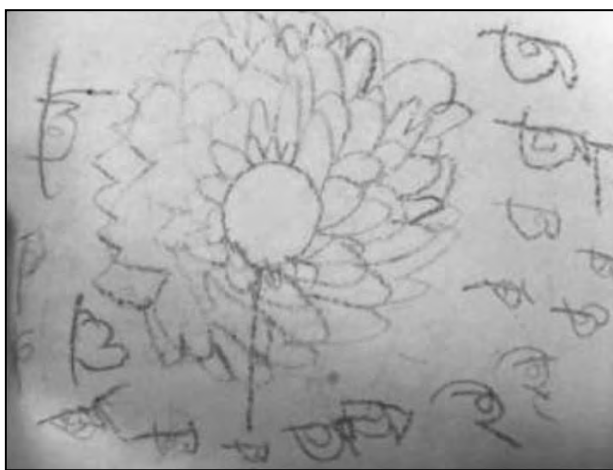


Figure 5. Examples of emerging literacy skills in Bangladeshi childrens’ pen pal letters.

To Ragina’s delight, during the read-aloud of *Yasmin’s Hammer*, the two Bangladeshi students in the class eagerly shared many personal connections to and elaborations on the text, acting as a cultural resource for the teacher and other students in the class. The Bangladeshi female student would explain how particular foods smelled and tasted, and the Bangladeshi male student enjoyed pointing out familiar types of scenery in the book and explained favorite games he played there. Both of the students had ridden water buffalo before, as seen in *Yasmin’s Hammer*, and they each acted like it was such a common thing, wondering why anyone should be surprised. After realizing it was “safe” and even welcomed for her to share her background knowledge with classmates, the female student would share Internet sites with the class to show what Bangladeshi clothes looked like, discussing which of them were most similar to what she wore there.



Ragina asked these two students if they missed living in Bangladesh. The male student said he did not, responding, “It was nice there, but it is also nice here.” However, the female student confided in this way:

We live in a big house here, and it’s empty. There’s no one there except mom, dad, and brother; it’s sad, quiet, and lonely. In Bangladesh there was grandma, aunts, uncles, and cousins, all there to talk and play with, sharing everything, cooking together, sleeping together on the floor (now I sleep in a room by myself, and it’s lonely). Here we live in a big, empty house. Back in Bangladesh we lived in a full house.

This student’s actual home in the U.S. was a modest apartment near the school, but in her eyes, it was large and lonely.

The pen pal letter shown in Figure 6 is one that the female Bangladeshi student in the U.S. classroom struggled to compose. Prior to this experience, she had claimed she could not remember how to write in her native Bengali language (this was the beginning of her second year in the U.S.). Ragina assured her it was fine to write in English or Bengali. Other ELLs were writing in Spanish and French, their native languages, and on her own she slowly succeeded in writing this letter in Bengali. When she finished the letter, she was so proud that she was still able to write in her native language, and she asked permission to take the letter home to show her father. At the end of the school year, this same student chose *Yasmin’s Hammer* as one of her favorite texts that year. She chose to create a diorama depicting a significant scene from the book as her end of course project. (See Figure 7.)

### Nurturing Global Citizenship Dispositions

As we enter into an increasingly interconnected global society, an urgency for multicultural and international understanding has emerged on many fronts. The interconnected and interdependent nature of globalization will continue to influence this upcoming generation in even more significant ways, and teachers need to explore research-based best practices that better prepare students for the competitive challenges and new opportunities ahead. Global citizenship competencies (Heilman, 2008; Herrera, 2012) develop as students learn more about their global peers and are scaffolded to develop empathy and increasingly effective intercultural communication skills that, in all hopes, lead to a global service commitment. These dispositions can be cultivated through international literature analysis and response, inquiry via technological tools, and authentic cross-cultural literacy activities such as an intercontinental pen pal exchange. In this project, for example, the diverse group of students in the U.S. developed an apparent empathy for the Bangladeshi children they were writing to, as evidenced in the content of their letters (e.g., expressing concern about the children’s limited educational opportunities) and through the extra time and care they took in developing their written and artistic work sent to Bangladesh.

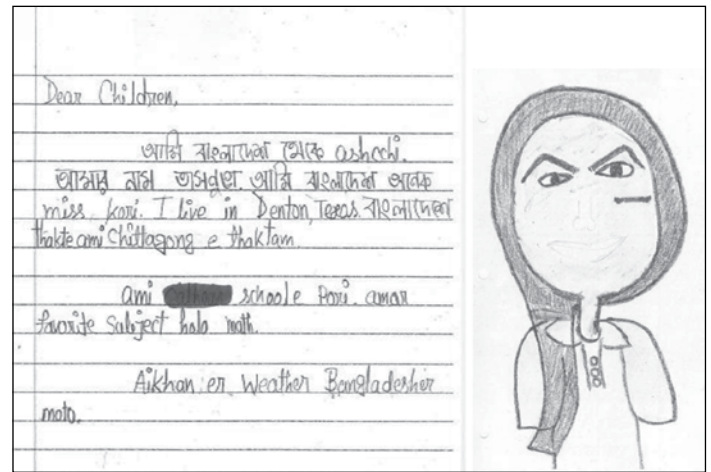


Figure 6. Pen pal letter composed by a Bangladeshi student in the U.S. classroom.



Figure 7. Bangladeshi student in a U.S. classroom proudly displays her end of year literature response, a diorama, connecting her learning with this culturally relevant text she selected.

The U.S. students were from a multitude of cultures, including CLD students living in a new culture themselves (effects of globalization in the classroom). The student discourse about cultural topics surrounding the read-aloud of *Yasmin’s Hammer* and exploration of technological resources reflected comparisons to their U.S. homes and heritage cultures on numerous occasions. Through such activities, students gain opportunities to recognize both their own and others’ cultural heritages that reveal values, beliefs, and traditions of individuals and communities at home and abroad (Freeman & Lehman, 2001; Freeman, Lehman, & Scharer 2010). It was our hope that as students read and learn about their peers across the globe, they will develop respectful relationships that will in turn enhance worldwide peace and understanding (Lepman, 2002).

Students and teachers immersed in international literature are presented with opportunities to actively develop their natural curiosity as they explore opportunities to strengthen their critical literacy skills needed to conduct research and inquiry in learning (Harste, Leland, & Lewison, 2008). International literature unlocks the mystery and intrigue of cultures that students may not have the ability to engage in otherwise, and extension responses can allow students to communicate through writing,

---

artistic forms, and actions which can lead to the building of both lifelong learners and lasting relationships (Flor Ada & Campoy, 2004; Lepman, 2002). McGinnis (2006) discusses the significance of using multicultural and international literature to transform practice, which can inspire students “to actions that will create and maintain social justice” (p. 25).

This project explored ways to nurture global citizenship competencies among all students, with additional positive outcomes for CLD students that “came out of silence” through the use of culturally relevant international literature. Such students were not only empowered to share their expertise regarding their home country and culture, but a “global community” of respect developed within the diverse classroom itself as mainstream and CLD students grew in their appreciation for one another and in their awareness of and empathy for those in different sociocultural contexts across the globe. Several of Heilman’s (2008) seven global citizenship competencies became visible through students’ interactions and artifacts during this project. Through activities that develop global citizenship competencies, educators have the opportunity to transform their classrooms into learning communities that not only close achievement gaps, but prepare citizens that can positively impact their world.

## References

- Albers, P., Holbrook, T., & Harste, J. C. (2010). Talking trade: Literacy researchers as practicing artists. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(3), 164-171.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat word and education: How America’s commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2003). “I’m not from Pakistan”: Multicultural literature and the problem of representation. In D. Fox & K. Short, (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children’s literature* (pp. 304-318). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Flor Ada, A., & Campoy, F. I. (2004). *Authors in the classroom: A transformative education process*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Freeman, E., & Lehman, B. (2001). *Global perspectives in children’s literature*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Freeman, E., Lehman, B., & Scharer, P. L. (2010). *Reading globally, K-8: Connecting students to the world through literature*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Harste, J., Leland, C., & Lewison, M. (2008). *Creating critical classrooms: K-8 reading and writing with an edge*. New York, NY: Erlbaum.
- Heilman, E. E. (2008). Including voices from the world through global citizenship education. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 20(4), 30-32.
- Herrera, S. (2012). Globalization: Current constraints and promising perspectives. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 6(1), 1-10.
- Lepman, J. (2002). *A bridge of children’s books: The inspiring autobiography of a remarkable woman*. Ireland: The O’Brien Press.
- Luke, A. (2003). Literacy education for a new ethics of global community. *Language Arts*, 81(1), 20.
- Malaspina, A. (2010). *Yasmin’s hammer*. New York, NY: Lee & Low.
- McGinnis, T. (2006). Considering the possibilities: Using multicultural literature to transform practice. *Voices From the Middle*, 13, 23-26.
- Smith, D. (2002). *If the world were a village: A book about the world’s people*. Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press.
- Texas Education Agency. (2011). *Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2010-2011 (Document Number GE12 601 01)*. Retrieved from [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/enroll\\_index.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/enroll_index.html)