

Crossing borders, bridges and worlds through global children's literature

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Laura Davies shows how to cross a variety of bridges, using children's literature across the world, to achieve the four E's – Empowerment, Empathy, Enquiry and Enjoyment and so meet the needs of the growing diversity in, and out, of our classrooms.

The first book I remember really having an impact as a child, the one that I couldn't put down and created the 'lightbulb' moment as a reader, was *The Secret Garden*. Here was a young girl that I could identify with. Though she was older than I was at the time, many of the feelings she described and the emotions she felt resonated with me. I had empathy for her plight, and was captivated by the adventures she created for herself in the world which was her secret garden. What was particularly magical was that amongst all this familiarity was also a chasm between our experiences. I was born in 1982 and had lived in the same part of England my whole life. She was living at the turn of the 20th century and lived in India until she was 10 years old. Suddenly the unfamiliar felt familiar and I realised that despite these differences we had more in common than that which divided us. I realised, with excitement, that through reading I could live in different worlds and bear witness to lives playing out in different times and spaces.

Reflecting on my reading from that point to adulthood, I realise now that though I was eager to cross bridges, hear new voices and live in foreign lands, I was not readily exposed to books that provided the opportunity to do this. Studying to be a primary teacher reignited my love of reading and kindled my enthusiasm to introduce children to a wide range of exciting and adventurous books. What I have found from my experiences working in schools, however, is that the challenges of depleted funding, time constraints on staff and the lack of profile of global children's literature (access to and availability in the broader social sphere) mean that despite the fact that one in six children in UK primary schools have English as an additional language, diversity of voices is scarce in the literature they are exposed to in the classroom. What is positive, however, is that there are many organisations and individuals in schools who are working hard to change this. As the political climate seems to get ever more divisive, there is a great surge within the educational community to amplify the voices of those unheard and to promote themes of understanding, respect, tolerance and liberty. A wonderfully enjoyable and practical way to do this in the classroom and across the curriculum is by raising the profile of global literature, and using it to help embed global citizenship across the learning environment.

'Tolerance is the starting line, to truly win the race we must aspire towards mutual respect' - Farrah Serroukh.

The CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) recently ran a conference entitled *Reflecting Realities* which aimed to explore the key question: what is the role that children's literature has to play in helping us to make sense of the world around us and our place in it? It celebrated the power of books to create empathy, understanding and respect, all themes which help empower children and give them a sense of individual and collective belonging. The use of global literature (particularly translated books) can support educators to embed Ofsted's 'British Values' into the curriculum, aligned with the duty to promote spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. In Wales, this is recognised under the 'ESDGC' umbrella which incorporates the themes of environmental sustainability and development of global citizenship. The theme of empathy is also increasingly recognised as a vital skill to develop in children as they face challenging times ahead, and books which showcase a range of voices and experiences are perfectly placed to nurture this quality in all of us.

'Perhaps it is the power literature has to help us empathise that is its greatest gift to us in a world where empathy is so badly needed, and seemingly in such short supply.' - Michael Morpurgo.

In practical terms, how can we continue to promote the use of translated and global children's literature in the classroom? One of the organisations I work closely with is 'Outside in World', dedicated to promoting and exploring world literature and children's books in translation. Founded in 2007, they aim to find the most exciting books from all over the world and introduce them to a UK audience, enabling them to broaden their reading experience and explore different cultures through books. Their recent project 'Reading the Way 2' takes this one step further and aims to work with schools to promote the value of translated books which are also paving the way for more inclusivity and accessibility, particularly with regards to the representation of disability in children's books. The idea here is that by sharing the very best examples from across the globe, we can improve inclusion and accessibility within the UK children's publishing market. The outcomes of this project so far have been incredibly positive, and have further bolstered Outside in World's

commitment to the use of books in this way. It exposes the children involved to more diverse reading material and an author/illustrator visit, but it also includes them directly in shaping the future of these books and asking them for their views on how accessibility and inclusivity can be improved. Research has shown that 2 – 3 children in every UK classroom have significant communication difficulties and in areas of poverty, over 50% of children are starting school with delayed communication skills (The Communication Trust). Introducing the concept of language equality in schools by providing access to books which offer a range of communication styles can greatly improve accessibility for everyone. In mainstream primary schools, as many as 60% of children have chosen to use symbol-supported materials when made available, and in schools with high proportions of EAL pupils, symbols have been shown to elicit a number of benefits including language comprehension, expressive language and improved attention (Childhood Research Unit, Warwick University). The feedback from children involved in 'Reading the Way 2' so far have identified that being involved in consultation was the 'most amazing thing' and 'an incredible idea' and following their experience with these new books one child concluded that 'difference is good'. Where some books included symbols but weren't translated into English, one teacher noticed the added benefit that these books could also be used as a 'dual-language tool' helping children to learn words in a new language. One child in particular commented that they enjoyed being able to 'read' the Italian original.

'There are many ways to communicate, let's find them together' – Nadine Kaadan.

Another interesting project worth mentioning is 'O Mundo – The World in a Library', which ran in Belgium between 2013 – 2015 and was an initiative of Iedereen Leest and the Flemish branch of the International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY), Belgium. This project aimed to select excellent books from all over the world and publish two editions which reflected the language predominantly spoken in the school as well as one other language native to a cross-section of the pupils. The aim was that it would enable children for whom the primary school language was not their mother language to share something about themselves and their background and to open up the eyes of all children in the class to the value of a multicultural society. Introducing picture books in the language of non-native pupils had numerous outcomes which included boosted self-esteem and confidence, which in turn had a positive effect on willingness to learn and participate at school. This project let children be the experts, usual roles were reversed, and their knowledge of their maternal language suddenly became an asset instead of a problem. It created the opportunity to reinforce the place of maternal languages at school (something research has pointed out to have a positive effect in many ways) and stimulated language and cultural awareness, curiosity for and opening up to other cultures across the school. Finally, it proved a great tool to stimulate parental involvement in the school life by offering an opportunity to foster an additional relationship between teacher and parent.

'It's not merely the ability to read that matters. It's how and what and why we read. Literature allows us to lock minds with other people from every age, and background, helping us understand not just what they think, but how they feel'. – Sue Palmer.

There are a growing number of independent publishers in the UK who focus on translated or global children's books and who often provide accompanying resources for educators to access for free – examples include Book Island Books, Lantana Publishing, Neem Tree Press, Pushkin Press and Tiny Owl Books to name a few. Each of these publishers have books that aren't afraid to deal with challenging themes yet invariably do so in beautiful and age-appropriate ways; what might be considered 'taboo' themes by UK publishers can be embraced in another cultural setting. The book *Maia and What Matters* is a story which tackles the difficult subject of ageing, illness and dementia whilst also exploring friendship across the generations; *The Little Black Fish* is a delightful stimulus for philosophical discussions around the nature of acceptance, exploration and migration (Book Island and Tiny Owl Books respectively). The recent novel *Code Name: Butterfly* by Neem Tree Press looks at life in occupied Palestine through the eyes of a young teenage girl. It urges the reader to accompany Butterfly as she questions the many impossible situations that surround her, but also the simpler daily concerns of many 14 – 15 year olds. Each of these books celebrates the sheer act of reading for pleasure which is so fundamentally valuable to children, but also offer opportunities for many additional cross-curricular studies.

I am particularly interested in the use of picture books across the age phases, and for the purposes of this article translated or global picture books. This interest developed from my time studying for a Primary PGCE at Cardiff Metropolitan University. My tutor for primary English at the time, Jo Bowers, showed us how picture books could be used across the age phases to develop a love of reading as well as used as valuable resources across the curriculum. She also offered an introduction to Philosophy for Children, a teaching methodology which encourages children to think critically, creatively, collaboratively and caringly by developing enquiry skills. The combination of these two areas was a complete turning point for me and I sought out opportunities to use board books as stimulus in the classroom wherever possible. These books provided wonderful stimulus for sessions on Human Rights and the Rights of the Child, as well as on bullying, friendship and other themes appropriate to the development of personal, social and emotional skills. The use of global or translated picture books as a stimulus has the added advantage of highlighting a range of illustration styles from across countries and cultures. They can be used to positively foster children's well-being whilst developing their ability to empathise and identify with the experiences of others. Such books are also often more inclusive as they allow for differentiation in both learning styles and ability, with contextual clues to the text given in the accompanying illustrations. One of the teachers feeding back to the Reading the Way 2 project, for example, specifically highlighted that

'children need to see a wide variety of illustrative styles in order to stimulate their own artistic skills', so there are added benefits here too. Teaching 'reading' in this way can serve as a reminder that some stories can be read anew on each sitting and for each individual can be interpreted differently – such is the power of picture books.

The use of translated and global literature in the classroom can help educators foster what I call the four 'E's: Empowerment, Empathy, Enquiry and Enjoyment. They can empower young readers by offering more accurately inclusive reflections of a diverse society; they offer the opportunity to develop empathy skills by giving readers access to a range of life experiences; they provide wonderful stimulus for philosophical enquiry or classroom discussions which deliver a platform for dialogue that deals with provocative and important cultural expectations and environmental themes, and they give the reader a key to access a vast network of countries, cultures, ages and voices which enrich our lives by providing a shared space in which we can enjoy stories that unite us across borders, bridges and worlds.

'We must foster global citizenship. Education is about more than literacy and numeracy. It is about citizenry. Education must fully assume its essential role in helping people to forge more just, peaceful and tolerant societies.' - Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, 2012.