

Exploring “What’s Work?” through a Transcultural Reading of *My Grandfather is a Magician: Work and Wisdom in a Nigerian Village*

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“Teacher!”

“Gymnastics instructor!”

“Farmer!”

“Electrician!”

In a rural Midwest community, second graders were participating in an integrated language arts-social studies unit in which they explored the question, “What’s work?” They were excited to share reports they had written about the types of jobs they hoped to have as adults. When I asked students how they chose their future professions, they enthusiastically told me about the adults whom they admired in their community who held those jobs. One student explained that he wanted to be an electrician just like his dad, so that he could contribute to the community by fixing and maintaining the generators that warm livestock shelters in the winter. He described how his father’s services were in high demand and that he often visited his father’s shop and was learning how to fix things. As the students shared their writing with each other, they learned more about work in their community and what it was like to perform each job. With the guidance of their teacher, Kim, the students also considered the nature of work more abstractly. For example, when one student brought up the fact that her mother worked as a volunteer for her church, the class debated whether all work was paid and, if not, what the difference between work and other activities might be. The exchange was a powerful reminder to me of how students might tap into their own experience to explore a significant cultural universal: work. It also made me curious about how using an example of work from another country might deepen the students’ understanding, both of work and the world around them.

Exploring “Work” as a Cultural Universal

“Work” was treated as a cultural universal in this classroom, as all of the children had “some continuing personal experience with [the concept]” and work represents a “dimension of daily life that [exists] in all cultures.”¹ The students’ learning was enhanced when their discussion of their own ideas about work led them to think more abstractly about the concept of



work. Studies suggest that teaching about cultural universals allows students to explore their own experiences, learn from their peers, and develop an understanding of abstract social studies concepts and their application in other cultures, all of which leads students to “fundamental understandings of the human condition.”² In the context of the classroom I visited, examining the extent to which work is compensated led students to a more nuanced view of this cultural universal.

One challenge in teaching through cultural universals is finding ways for students to move “beyond their immediate experiences” to consider what a cultural universal, such as work, looks like in communities different from their own.³ The goal of incorporating multiple representations of work in the curriculum is to provide opportunities to recognize both the similarities in how people define work and the variations that reflect different historical, geographic, economic, or cultural conditions in which people live.⁴ (See Table 1.)

One strategy for introducing students to varied examples of a cultural universal is to engage students in transcultural readings, in which students encounter “children’s books that portray peoples, cultures, and geographic regions of the world that exist outside of the reader’s own country.”⁵

Work and Wisdom in a Nigerian Village

I was curious to see how students in the second grade class might respond to a transcultural example of work and was delighted when the teacher of the class agreed to have me visit to read *My Grandfather is a Magician: Work and Wisdom in an Africa Village*, by Ifeoma Onyefulu.⁶

I selected this particular book because it includes multiple representations of work in a specific community in Nigeria, and because I hoped to share some of my experiences living and traveling in the region with the class. My plan was to share the book through an interactive read aloud, in which we would discuss both the specific setting of the book and the larger concept of work. In addition, I hoped to have students explore a particular profession (with which they were familiar in the United States), then compare and contrast it with a similar profession as practiced in a rural village in a different part of the world.

The book *My Grandfather is a Magician* begins with a young boy who proudly introduces the reader to his grandfather, who is respected in his community as a traditional healer or “magician.” The young boy explains, “My grandfather is a magician. He uses leaves, roots and bark from trees and plants to help people who are ill or need help. Anyone with a problem can go to him for advice.” Through photographs and descriptions of the grandfather at work, we learn that he uses his knowledge of plants to reduce infection, prevent malaria, bring down fevers, and treat pain. The overall message of the text is that the boy’s grandfather is respected, his treatments are effective, and, to be a healer, one must spend years learning how to identify, prepare, and administer medicine created from local plants. This message is further reinforced through the Author’s Note and Afterword that address the need to preserve traditional knowledge of the “healing powers of plants” and the intersection of science and traditional knowledge in the discipline of ethnobotany.

Although the focus of the text is on the grandfather’s work as a healer, the book also includes a broader representation of what work looks like in the community, and it reinforces the concept that both traditional and more modern occupations have value and serve the community. The narrator explains, “[My grandfather’s] work is different from everyone else’s in my family. And we’re a big family. Let me tell you about some of them.” In the pages that follow, the reader is introduced to his grandmother, a seamstress; his father, a teacher educator; his mother, owner and manager of a bakery; an uncle, a wood-carver; another uncle, a lawyer; an aunt, a potter; his “favorite uncle,” a blacksmith; and an aunt, a doctor. Each introduction is accompanied by several photos of the family member at work, followed by a phrase that acknowledges the significance of his grandfather. For example, after introducing his father, who “teaches grown-ups in a big school,” the boy shares, “Here is my father at work. He is very clever—but Grandfather can still teach him a lot.” The message is that, although everyone’s work is important, his grandfather’s work holds a special significance within the community.

Planning the Interactive read aloud

Although I anticipated that *My Grandfather is a Magician* would be a powerful resource to support students in deepening their understandings of work, I kept in mind that, unless teachers focus students’ attention on social studies content, the “students just enjoy the story and miss the... point.”⁷ I also anticipated that the class might need support in understanding the setting of the story, particularly since many young children in the United States have limited and stereotypical understandings of Africa.⁸ Therefore, I prepared a set of questions that I hoped would focus their attention on the similarities and difference between work as they have observed it and as represented in the story, as well as develop respectful and

Table 1: Exploring Work through the C3 Framework

| <i>The “College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework” suggests that developing “deep understanding of the sociocultural world... depends heavily on inviting children and adolescents to investigate, inquire into, and build knowledge about that world.”² Although it is unlikely that one text or example would lead to all of these insights, the framework provides examples of disciplinary-based concepts that students might discover through a broader inquiry experience.</i> | | |
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| Discipline | Inquiry questions | C3 Concepts |
| Economics | Why do people work? What types of work do people do? What are working conditions like for different people? | Explain how people earn income (D2.Eco.6.K-2) |
| Civics | How does work benefit our community? What do we <i>want</i> work to look like in our community? | Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in a community (D2.Civ.K-2) |
| Geography | How does (when and) where you live affect the type of work you do? | Describe the connections between the physical environment of a place and the economic activities found there (D2.Geo.9.K-2) |
| History | How does when (and where) you live impact the type of work you do? | Compare life in the past to life today (D2.His.2.K-2) |

non-stereotypical understandings of the rural Nigerian setting. (See Table 2.) Additionally, I created two charts to keep track of our learning: a Venn Diagram comparing work in “our community” and “a Nigerian village” and a version of a KWL chart on which we recorded what we knew and questions we had about the concept of work and about Nigeria.

Comparing and Contrasting the Work of Healers

The most powerful connections and conceptual learning that came out of the reading and discussion of the book centered on how students understood the role and practice of healers in different communities. Initially, students focused on what they perceived to be differences among the work of healers in the two communities. One student said, “I thought the magician would do tricks. I didn’t think he would help people. [The grandfather] uses twigs and sticks to help or heal people. The grandfather uses plants. Here we use special medicines like Band-Aids... when I had strep throat, I took antibiotics, not plants.”

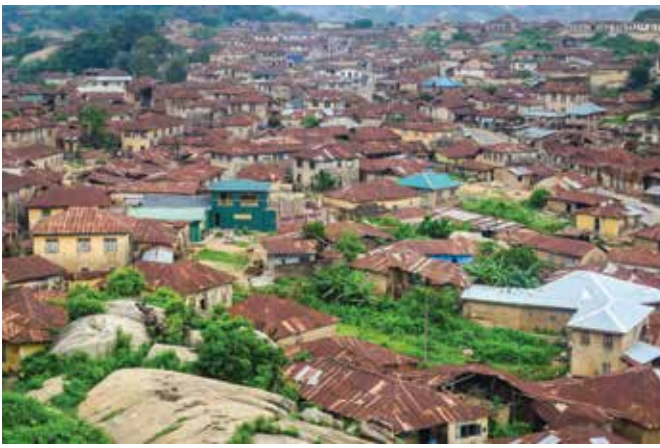
Eventually, however, the conversation began to focus on similarities among healers and healing practices. For example, one student told a story of how she was treated with plants: “One time while we were camping I fell into a patch of nettles. My mom found milkweed and put it on the rash. That seems similar [to what the grandfather does].” Students agreed that we should put “heals with plants” in the middle of the Venn diagram to acknowledge that plants are used in both communi-

ties. They also noted that you need to know which plants to use and that “not just anyone” can give you plants as medicine. I took this as a sign that they were developing respect for the grandfather’s work in the story.

The second connection the students made was when we reached the pages in the book that introduced Auntie Ngo, a doctor who is pictured with a white coat and stethoscope. Previously, students had suggested that “doctor” belonged on the side of “our community,” since people in Africa probably didn’t use doctors. However, the text prompted them to comment excitedly that “doctor” should be moved to the middle of the Venn diagram, as both communities had doctors as healers. At this point, the student whose family had worked as missionaries shared that, although there are hospitals “in Africa,” there are places where there aren’t enough doctors and hospitals. Although I was leery of reinforcing a stereotype that had been raised early in the discussion that “all Africans are poor,” I did agree that access to different types of medical care is sometimes a choice and sometimes based on what is available or what people can afford. After all, there are rural areas of America that are underserved by medical professionals, as well. We ended with a discussion of how, although healers sometimes look different and use different methods, they all contribute to the health of the community. Finally, when we read the Author’s Note and Afterword (at the back of the book) which discuss the value of plants in the region, students made the connection that

Table 2: **Goals and Questions to Guide Discussion of a Transcultural Text**

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| <i>The following questions are examples of how teachers might scaffold students’ reading experiences to focus on the concept of “work” and promote positive, transcultural understandings of life in Nigeria.</i> | | |
| <p>Before-reading Goals: Activate prior knowledge and make predictions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This story takes place in Nigeria, a country in Africa. What do you think you know about Nigeria? Do you have any predictions about what type of work people do in rural Nigeria? Do you think it will be similar or different than work in our community? Why? Is our community rural, suburban, or urban? • The title is “My Grandfather is a Magician.” In your experience, what does a “magician” do? From the photograph on the cover, what do you think “magician” might mean in this community? | <p>During-reading Goals: Encourage connections and comparisons.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the boy mean when he says his grandfather is a magician? How did he learn to become a magician/healer? What’s special about this work? • The people in the boy’s family do many kinds of work. How are these jobs similar to or different from the ones in our community? What questions do you have about their work or community? • The boy in the story is proud of his grandfather and wants to follow in his footsteps. What would you like to do when you grow up? Why? | <p>After-reading Goals: Develop concepts and pose new questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think that some of the work in the story is similar to work in our community while some of the work is different? How do these ideas help us answer our inquiry questions? What questions do you still have? How might we research them? • This story takes place in a village in Nigeria. Let’s look at some photographs of two of Nigeria’s larger cities, Lagos and Abuja. What differences do you notice between these photos and those in the book? What type of work do you think people who live in these communities do? Why? |



how one heals might also have to do with geography.

A Deeper Understanding

There was one challenge that I anticipated and, in fact, encountered throughout the lesson. Although students were curious and open to learning, they held a number of fairly persistent stereotypes about Africa. As we talked, one of my goals was to give students opportunities to share what they (thought they) knew about Nigeria (or Africa) and ask questions. To begin, we looked at several political and geographic maps of Africa and located Nigeria on the map, as well as Mali, where I lived and taught for several years. During our discussion, most students' responses reflected a fairly limited knowledge of Africa: over half of the class talked about jungle animals, several commented that Africa is hot, and, when one student said, "Africa is a poor country," most of the class nodded. Only one student (whose family members had traveled to Togo as missionaries) had what I would characterize as specific and less stereotypic knowledge of the region.

One of my concerns in reading the book to the class is that the village setting would reinforce or contribute to the stereotype that all Africans live in rural villages. To counter that representation, I showed students photographs of Lagos, Nigeria, and explained that approximately 21 million people live there. Students were shocked to discover that Lagos is about five times larger than the nearest large city with which they were familiar. As we looked at an image of the Lagos city skyline, I asked students what type of work they thought people did in that place. One student's response was typical of the group's responses: "Jobs would be different because there are a lot of big buildings. Maybe lawyers or banks [sic] because banks are big and big cities have banks." Unfortunately, our whole group discussion was interrupted at this point. However, in follow-up conversations with individual students, several commented on the differences between the types of work that people did "in the country" and the types of work that people did "in cities."

Final Thoughts

Reading and discussing *My Grandfather is a Magician* allowed students to build on their direct experiences, compare examples

of work in an unfamiliar community to their own, and develop insights about work as a cultural universal. However, given the lack of knowledge (or stereotypes that many students in the United States hold) about countries in Africa, these students needed a guided reading of the book in order to develop a more accurate, complex, and positive understanding of what work and life might be like for a young boy living in rural Nigeria. It is unlikely that any one book will be sufficient to build the types of enduring conceptual and cultural understandings we hope for our students; all the more reason to engage students with multiple representations of the world of work across the social studies curriculum. 🌍

Notes

1. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, "Learning and Teaching about Cultural Universals in Primary-Grade Social Studies," *The Elementary School Journal* 103, no. 2 (2002): 100.
2. Brophy and Alleman., 106.
3. Brophy and Alleman., 106.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for the Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD, NCSS, 2013), xxi.
5. Linda Pratt and Janice Beaty, *Transcultural Children's Literature* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), pp. 2, 13–15. These authors provide a framework for using and evaluating transcultural literature, which includes educating oneself on the context of the story, questioning accuracy and authenticity texts, and anticipating misconceptions students might infer from the text.
6. Ifeoma Onyefulu, *My Grandfather is a Magician: Work and Wisdom in an African Village* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2000), np.
7. Yana V. Rodgers, Shelby Hawthorne, and Ronald C. Wheeler, "Teaching Economics Through Children's Literature in the Primary Grades," *The Reading Teacher* 61, no. 1 (2007): 46–55.
8. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, *Representing Africa in Children's Literature: Old and New Ways of Seeing* (New York: Routledge, 2008). This author identifies a number of stereotypes prevalent in the cultural imagination of many Americans and in children's literature which depicts Africa including the continent as "mythical home," "a place where people share space with animals," "prone to foreign invasion," and "diseased".

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