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Living Globally—Teaching Responsively: Stories from a Literacy Educator in China

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Living Globally—Teaching Responsively: Stories from a Literacy Educator in China

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Abstract—This research explores how one White Canadian elementary educator in an international school grapples cultural considerations in her multi-lingual, multinational classroom. Culturally responsive educators strive to incorporate student’s home literacies and funds of knowledge into classroom practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Complexities of reflecting on cultural bias and constructions are spotlighted within international teaching communities, where students and teachers are often from diverse backgrounds while living a third culture. Through narrative inquiry, we examine Leila’s shared personal stories and teaching experiences. We contextualize her stories, tensions and insights at an international school with ethnographic research methods. Results identify a unique lens as Leila becomes a “cultural broker” to be culturally responsive in her first grade classroom.

The hardest thing for me is that I will never fit in. You are in a culture that you love, living in a place that you want to live and you are married to someone from there, so you are part of the family, but you will always stick out like a sore thumb, because the population all looks alike. All the black hair, brown eyes. And here’s this tall pale red head, living here. So I have assimilated, I guess. I don’t have a problem living in the culture. The culture itself will never accept me. I will never be accepted 100%, only because I look like a foreigner, you know? Leila, Transcript

Leila is a Canadian woman living in China. Her husband is Chinese and she works at an international school in China with an American curriculum. As a woman in Asia, the fixed identities of being White, tall, and red-headed follow Leila in every setting: school, grocery store, family gathering. This is not her first teaching job. Leila was an early childhood educator in Canada for 8 years when she decided to get a degree in East Asian studies. She initially came to China as a student at a major university studying the language and culture. Leila then completed her East Asian degree in Canada, and returned to China as an intern at a Canadian consulate. Her job included representing Canada at social events, translating and transcribing documents as well as assisting Canadian citizens with their needs working in China. In 2001, she began working at the International American School in China.

International American School of China (IASC), the context for this study, is a non-profit, private school with an American based curriculum. This Pre-K -12 school has over 2,600 students from almost 40 different countries. Families or the parents’ employers pay tuition for students to attend the school. There are about 370 teachers at the school with a majority of the teachers from the United States or Canada. The school is located in the outskirts of a major Chinese city with a population of over 15 million people.

With over 10 years living and working in China, for Leila, China is home. During this study, her daily life included working out at the gym (Curves), going to book club meetings with friends, and watching movies with her husband. Leila has many stories of her life in China and she is in a unique position as an international teacher. She has strong personal ties to the host country. Her prior experiences and knowledge lead her to deconstruct cultural misunderstandings that occur at the individual level. She articulates how she experiences tensions based on the broader scope of different cultural approaches. It is this complexity that interested Leslie and Anne as educational teacher researchers to delve more deeply with Leila, her stories and her teaching.

Leslie was an international teacher for ten years and Anne, a fellow researcher and former elementary teacher in the US, were interested in studying how the cultural tension Leila experiences in her daily life, translates into her literacy practices as a first grade teacher. Leila was a participant in Leslie’s research study at IASC for 5 weeks, conducting interviews and observing her teach. We wondered what cultural responsive literacy teaching looks like for Leila, and how literacy practices in her classroom might be shaped by a commitment to culturally relevant practices. Is it the books she uses in her teaching, her curriculum, and her daily classroom activities? Is it how she incorporates literacy rich research experiences reflecting students’ queries? How does a teacher incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy when she is from one county, her students from many others, while they are all living in a third? These are the questions that guided this research.
study and our investigation of Leila’s culturally relevant literacy pedagogy.

In this article we share stories Leila told about cultural tensions and queries she has had through her teaching at an international school with an American based curriculum located in China. Whether Leila was talking about Thanksgiving class celebrations or a food inquiry unit, she straddled multiple cultural worlds much like she does walking down the street in China in the introductory vignette. Through Leila’s stories and from fieldwork in her classroom at IASC, we get a glimpse of a unique perspective and approach to being culturally responsive in her pedagogy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The stories international educators share about their cross cultural experiences can inform research about international teacher identity and how it impacts the role culture plays in their teaching practices. Identity is a complex framework, for we are never speaking from one stagnant perspective of who we are. While using narratives as a vehicle, Alsup (2006) explored the role narratives have in identity development for pre-service secondary teachers in teacher education experiences. She found the borderland discourses as integrative discourse that examined the combination of the personal and professional selves. We examine the discourse of the international teachers “of various subjectivities or understandings of self as expressed through genres of discourse and influenced by life experiences” (Alsup, 2006, p.42).

International teachers, like Leila, have identities that include expatriates, teachers, members of the international community, and world travelers. Identities in the borderland are neither binary nor separate. The complexities of differing identities we have integrate and may become the site of a struggle. It is this place of struggle we explore- the tension international teachers experience by having one notion of culture, exploring their understanding of their own cultural view point, and their approach to developing a way of life in a different cultural setting. At the same time, the teachers are attempting to understand and connect to their students who have a multitude of cultural backgrounds.

Similarly, Orellana (2007) encourages educators to challenge conceptions of home and school as separate spaces, instead emphasizing the transactions across and between the two. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) state “culture and subject positions are important components of the working of identity, but cultural production and heuristic development are the keys to its analysis” (p.46). Culturally responsive teachers understand the values constructed within their classroom’s “figured world” and seek insights into students’ home lives and communities (Holland et al, 1998).

They do not separate home and school lives, but build opportunities to incorporate connections across and between different social and cultural contexts. Likewise, teachers bring cross cultural experiences into the classroom as well. Here the focus is on Leila’s cross cultural experiences and the impact they may have on her understanding of and responses to her students from different national and cultural backgrounds. In particular we focus on Leila’s literacy pedagogy and in what ways her cross cultural experiences influence her practices as a cultural agent.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Through using narrative inquiry in a larger study, Leslie interviewed 4 participants to share their autobiographical stories and teaching experience, conducting fieldwork in China and Malaysia. Working alongside the international teachers in their daily lives, Leslie contextualized their stories, tensions and insights. This article centers on one elementary teacher living and working in a major city in China. We can learn much from this teacher’s stories and how she addresses the complexities of differing cultures interacting in her daily life and classroom curriculum. Narrative inquiry is a particular conceptual framework that explores a “way of knowing” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Narratives are a vehicle for educators to reflect on their teaching practices and explore queries they have about their professional decisions. Through narratives we see and understand the world (Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coles, 1989; Wortham, 2001). Which narratives we decide to tell and retell and the dynamics of the actual telling of stories plays a role in constructing identity and the framework of identity. The act of describing oneself allows for agency, the key to self-construction. The narratives shared by Leila open opportunities to understand how her personal and professional experiences impact her attention to classroom curriculum towards cultural reflections, insights and queries.

Based on the stance that through our stories we construct our identities and “ways of knowing”, Leslie interviewed Leila seeking stories of her personal and professional self, while concurrently spending time in her classroom applying ethnographic methods over a 5-week period. Data collected include: classroom observations, field notes, data from class websites, and school communications.

Interviews and Ethnographic Methods

Interviews and discussions centered on the teachers’ autobiographical narratives, the stories of living overseas, and the stories of teaching in international schools. Within these three categories, interviews focused on their experiences and perspectives relating to straddling different cultural worlds (home country, host country, international school, international traveling
Narratives take shape in different forms, from the self-contained stories to the narratives that expanded across meetings and topics. What intrigued us was not necessarily the form of the narratives but how telling the stories helped participants express themselves. Leila told narratives for three purposes: 1) when asked for stories 2) as a way to give an example of a point she was trying to make and/or 3) when describing her experiences living and teaching abroad. Interviews were transcribed using a clean transcript (Elliot, 2005). This form of transcript eliminates the pauses, intonations, false starts, and utterances common in everyday speech allowing the focus to be on the content of what is said and the material easy to read. Once transcription was completed, coding of data began using the constant-comparative method. Initial coding centered on defining what was happening in the data. With grounded theory coding, Leslie avoided preconceived ideas of categories to the data by creating a code based on what the data showed. Leslie followed recommendations from Charmez (2006), coding lines using gerunds and describing the data by action. Using Atlas TI computer program during the initial coding, a section of data could be coded in multiple categories. Additionally the program allowed for sifting through initial codes by document. After compiling a listing of over 350 initial codes, categories formed based on patterns that emerged. In another reading through the data, the focus was on solely identifying stories told by participants in interviews, coding larger segments or incidents. In a third reading, the content of the stories was categorized. Leila told a total of 35 discreet narratives, stories that had a clear beginning and ending in a set of turns. Seventeen were personal stories, thirteen were professional stories and five included both professional and personal stories. Through Leila’s stories and fieldwork in her classroom, she shows us how her experiences and understanding of cultural perspectives impacts her approach to cultural responsiveness in her first grade classroom.

**FINDINGS**

In this section we share three of Leila’s narratives that illustrate Leila’s experiences as a cultural broker, “bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds to reduce conflict or effect change” (Jezewski, 1990). In the first narrative, Leila describes her experiences straddling multiple cultures. The second narrative details Leila’s cultural responsive teaching in an inquiry unit about food, and the final narrative highlights Leila’s work as a translator and negotiator of language, behaviors, and customs.

**Leila as Cultural Advocate**

*One of the things that I have learned about myself, the more that I teach and I watch my students, is that I have a lot of the same issues that my students have.* Leila, Transcript

Leila sees the parallels between the negotiations her students make straddling different cultural worlds and her own experiences. Leila’s desire to make China her home does not negate the tensions she can experience about feeling like an outsider. She has negotiated this for herself for many years. In the stories she told, Leila’s background knowledge from her Chinese studies program as well as her personal life led her to seek and understand perspectives between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Leila and Leslie discussed the tensions she has as a Canadian teacher working at an American school with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As an example, Leila talked about the upcoming American Thanksgiving holiday celebrations for her first graders. Leila is one of six first grade classroom teachers. The teaching team planned the grade level holiday celebrations together. It is important to note that in the school year Leslie visited, the school was closed half a day on the final Thursday in November (American Thanksgiving Day) and on the following Friday. It is also perhaps helpful to know Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving the second Monday of October.

*Thanksgiving is, Thanksgiving used to be, a huge big snack in the hallway, you know where my classroom is. The whole hallway is a long sheet of butcher paper and all of the kids come in pilgrim and Native American costumes. And they etc.*
have placemats that they have all made and popcorn they have all made and we have a big snack. I don’t mind that. I really like that. It’s community. For me that’s the thing. The parents love it too. They come, and we videotape and we put it on our blogs and we have a great time.

But I didn’t like the whole pilgrim/Native American costume thing. Part of it was because, well, it’s not my Thanksgiving, it’s not how we do Thanksgiving. I just like to, obviously you want to give them the background of Thanksgiving. But Thanksgiving is celebrated in different places [and is] not just an American holiday. And I think it is important for them to understand that we celebrate it in different ways and for different reasons in different countries. Not just for that reason and not just that history of it. So I think that the important thing about Thanksgiving is not the costumes but the idea that you are thankful for what you have.

So last year I convinced the team that people who wanted to make the costumes could, but people who didn’t could make headbands on which their children would write, I am thankful for _____ and then they would fill. write their headband, finish that sentence, and then when you would look around you would see headbands, oh I am thankful for my mom and dad, I am thankful for IASC, as opposed to feathers sticking out of costumes made by the teachers, because the kids can’t make the costumes and so the teachers made the fancy hats made for the pilgrims and stuff. I didn’t see the point. But I love the community part of it, and I love the thankful part of it, but I didn’t like the whole costume part of it, so I convinced them to do one way or the other. Leila, Transcript

Leila started off describing the scene of the celebration from previous years at IASC. She recalled 90 six-year olds sitting in a hallway with an imagined table made out of a large sheet of butcher paper. The energy of the scene was set. Students were excited, food was laid out for all to enjoy, parents came to school to participate, and all joined in on the community atmosphere. However, she also negotiated several tensions she had with hosting what Americans may imagine as a “traditional American school Thanksgiving” scene. Her personal experience growing up and teaching in Canada did not relate to what was happening at the school. She connected this to her students’ perspective, noting that for both her and her students the meaning behind the holiday wasn’t about marking an American historical event. Thanksgiving, from Leila’s point of view, was more of a broad human experience, reflecting on what you appreciate about your life. She added the amount of work that went into making “costumes” for the kids to wear didn’t support the purpose behind the holiday celebration as she viewed it.

As Leila told the story, she described actions as an advocate for change, talking to her colleagues, offering up options and ideas to shift the grade level celebration to a broader cultural experience for all. Photos and a video on her classroom website the first week of December were evidence of kids wearing “I am thankful for ___” headbands. Parents smiled broadly in the background. Plates with popcorn sat in front of students and teachers led everyone in songs. No feathers. No pilgrim hats. She negotiated change that fit for both her and her students.

**Leila as Culturally Responsive Teacher**

A string of Canadian flags hung over the double doors that opened into Leila’s first grade classroom. On the doors, two laminated posters that welcomed the students celebrated the diversity of the classroom. One stated, “The greatest natural resource that any country can have is its children” and the other used the word diversity as an acronym: “Different Individuals Valuing Each other Regardless of Skin color, Intellect, Talent or Years.” A children’s picture book, Peaceful Piggy Meditation by Kerry Lee MacLean sat on the whiteboard marker tray at the front of the classroom. A set of Tibetan cymbals were also in the front of the room, ready to be used as signal to the first graders that they needed to stop whatever they were doing and look to Leila for directions. She brought in these pieces of herself. Her Buddhist philosophy and Asian artifacts were not just for display but Leila integrated them into the daily classroom rhythm.

Leila’s cultural responsiveness included inviting students to bring their funds of knowledge from home into the room, usually under the umbrella of class inquiry units. Leila described her method as a project approach, integrating purposeful and authentic literacy engagements. She explained that she doesn’t map out the unit, but instead she plans the first third. For example, during a food unit, Leila started with activating the students’ prior knowledge by asking students what they already knew about food (KWL) and built webs of their knowledge. She helped them make categories of their known knowledge (ie: carrots are from the ground, apples are from trees were in the category ‘where food comes from’). She had students discuss and write about memories of foods, flavors and family events that included food. Then she initiated the wonder aspect, collecting students’ questions about food, what they really wondered about. Then students chose which question they wanted to research, with Leila helping students to organize into groups. When Leslie was there the children chose to research: Where does sugar come from? Where did the first seeds come from? Does meat make us healthy? Leila explained the next step, “From there the groups are responsible for planning their research, and how they are going to find out the information, and who they need to talk to and what I can do to help them.” She asked the computer teacher and librarian to assist her students in their research. Students would gather and read informational texts from the library. Students may develop surveys and interview members of the community. Students might research further through previewed websites.
Leila also invited parents to come in and share their family’s favorite recipes. Parents are an integral part of Leila’s classroom programs. They came in regularly not just for school holiday celebrations, but also to read books aloud and share their home traditions and family life. Leila explained that through her project approach, students can investigate queries that matter most to them. Leila gave an example of a student’s inquiry from a previous school year:

One year I had a vegetarian, and she wanted to know, why are people vegetarians? Why are people omnivores instead of vegetarians? So she ran around the school and polled people, “What are you? An omnivore or a vegetarian? Why?” She got a whole list of answers. Leila, Transcript

After they had enough information, the students needed to decide how they wanted to present what they learned. Choices varied including posters, power point, slide shows, puppet shows, mobile, etc. In her food unit, Leila valued students’ prior knowledge and home experiences, then supported them to investigate queries that they were most passionate about.

Each year for Chinese New Year, Leila challenges herself to continually make adjustments that can further integrate the students’ experiences across their home lives and the local holiday celebration. She is also conscious that many of the activities that occur in the school come from Western teaching sources. She explained in an interview that she had already contacted the Chinese teachers in the school to integrate the subjects a bit more for the holiday celebrations. For example, getting copies of the poems the students were learning in Chinese and translating them into English. She recalled how she had done this for the Moon Festival earlier in the fall. Leila also made efforts to integrate students’ family dumpling recipes in an attempt to integrate more Chinese traditional customs into her classroom by hosting a dumpling party. She explained, “The families all come in and have enough wrappers for 4 or 5 kids and enough fillings for 4 or 5 kids. And so everyone brings in their own family recipe for dumplings, so everyone gets to try different things.”

Leila as Translator and Negotiator

As a Canadian woman who made China her home, Leila became a “cultural broker” for her students and interested colleagues for the host country. She straddles multiple cultures and can bridge among different cultures, communicating the nuances and values across cultures. Leila is able to act as an agent, or broker, for those navigating and negotiating between cultures. In the stories she authored she was conscious and explicit about the duality of her perspective. Two metaphorical roles of translator and negotiator emerged for Leila as a cultural agent in her personal and professional stories. She consciously attends to the ways cultures intersect in her own, her colleagues and students’ lives. Field notes and informal discussions confirmed Leila fulfilled these roles for her students, families, colleagues and friends in multiple settings. She translated between two languages, English and Chinese, and actively translated culturally based actions by reflecting on behaviors that confused her and deconstructed them through a cultural lens. Leila also negotiated between different cultural perspectives. Parents, administration and students not only understood the translations but Leila negotiated changes that considered different cultural perspectives for her students and others at IASC.

Leila’s ability to read and write Chinese has enabled her to evaluate a few of her students over the years to determine if academic concerns or issues are based on language or on their thinking. For example, Leila had a child who seemingly struggled to write and tell a story with a sequence of events. She asked him to tell a story in his home language, Mandarin Chinese, and he seemed to struggle there as well. This allowed her to eliminate his developing English as attributing to her concerns.

Leila not only “translates” by negotiating on behalf of the teachers, students and their families within the school, but she is also active in promoting opportunities to learn about the local community outside the gated walls of IASC. Early in the fall, the first grade teachers took their students on a field trip into the local neighborhood park. When Leslie visited this park, the walking paths were busy with older Chinese adults, jogging, walking, or stretching. Like almost every local neighborhood across the country, there were also groups of people doing tai-chi. Many of the children who attend this school live in gated expatriate communities. Leila wanted to expand their view of community beyond the compound living, beyond IASC’s walls and into the local Chinese neighborhood that the school is located.

This example of local community connections and outreach may initially seem to not be responsive to the cultures of the students in the classroom. After all, these are children who are not necessarily from China, but from a variety of countries and cultures, including being ethnically Chinese. To these 6 and 7 year old third culture kids, this is their home. If you ask them where they are from, they may answer like Sandy, “I am from Seattle but now I live in China.” Leila promoted opportunities for her students to experience and draw new understandings about the community where they live through something as seemingly simple as a walk to the neighborhood park. Living in an apartment near the park with her husband, Leila extended her own personal experiences with China to her students.

Different cultural frameworks overlap in Leila’s classroom curriculum, pedagogy and resources. In our discussions and in her stories Leila explicitly and repeatedly addressed the different cultural considerations she balanced. Leila questioned what she observed (student behavior, curriculum projects) and created opportunities for her students and their families to bring in their
perspectives. For example, she had students incorporate lived experiences in classroom units of inquiry like about food. She did not ask them to represent a particular national dish, but the students discussed with their families what they felt they wanted to share. Additionally, she initiated cross-cultural experiences for her students to interact within the local community and the local Chinese people’s daily routines.

As a cultural code switcher, Leila constantly shifted her viewpoint, from her own North American lens to the lens of the local community and then to the lens of the families at the school. She translated not only language but behaviors that could be misunderstood. Experiences when Leila was a cultural code-switcher overlapped for Leila in her personal and professional life. This is true for her students as well. When Leslie and Leila talked about how living overseas has changed her teaching approach Leila explained, “I think it has broadened my, kind of broadened what I see as potential teaching topics or teaching moments… I draw on what’s around me more, because I have so much more that I can kind of incorporate into what I do”. Leila’s awareness of the different cultural frameworks within her classroom drew her to make changes to respond to the needs of her students, curriculum and the families she serves.

DISCUSSION

Following the lead of prominent researchers such as Gay (2000), Villegas and Lucas (2002), Ladson-Billings (1995) and González, Moll & Amanti (2005) in the field of culturally responsive teaching, we reexamine what cultural diversity looks like in Leila’s international school classroom. Cultural diversity in this study shifted from focusing on students’ home cultural practices to the interaction of different cultural worlds at play at any given time. For Leila, we can’t define being culturally relevant as mainly responding to the child’s home life and experiences. Instead, being culturally responsive is attending to the cultural worlds brought into the classroom through the students, school and teacher.

Holland et al. (1998) use the terms cultural world and figured world interchangeably. We differ here, adapting the term cultural world to identify cultures named through nationalities, ethnicities, and through constructed communities. These cultural worlds are identified from employing Sunstein and Chisleri-Strasser’s (2007) definition of culture as “an invisible web of behaviors, patterns, rules and rituals of a group of people who have contact with one another and share common languages” (p. 3).

Figure 1 illustrates the several cultural worlds of the student, teacher or the school interacting in the figured world of the classroom at any given time. As Luis Moll (2000) explained, “cultural life includes multiple voices” (p. 257). Here the cultural lives of the students, teachers and school include multiple voices from different cultural worlds. The cultural worlds are active and interactive, integrating in different ways within each teacher’s classroom. In essence this redefines cultural diversity as a term from ethnic and national groups to these cultural worlds. The cultural worlds inform and mediate the values and actions within the figured world of the elementary classrooms.

A figured world defined by Holland et al. (1998) is “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). The students, teachers and school are all particular characters; they informed what was valued within the classroom, a socially and culturally constructed group. Leila addressed the cultural worlds found within herself, the school and her students. Many cultural worlds compile the cultural diversity in these international classrooms. How Leila integrated and addressed them in their classroom and curriculum is an example for us to reassess our own practices with culturally responsive teaching (see Figure 1).

Students: The students brought their families’ home cultures to these international school classrooms. At IASC, the student body included over 40 different nationalities. This diversity of perspective and experience led to rich storytelling and sharing valued in these classrooms. Students’ lives included their families’ funds of knowledge, personal experiences, language, and stories. For example, Leila had students share family recipes and traditions in a curricular food unit and school celebrations. She invited everyone to bring their own dumpling recipes during Chinese New Year.

Another form of culture in the classrooms was the culture of students living as expatriates or third culture kids (Pollack & VanReken, 1999). These are children who have lived a significant portion of their childhood in a country and culture other than their...
own. They are most comfortable, not necessarily with kids from their own nationality, but with those who have lives similar to their own, such as other expatriates. Leila encouraged her students to grapple with what living as a third culture kid can mean for their developing identities. She is conscious of the expectation for students to be representatives of cultures and traditions that may not have necessarily personally experienced firsthand. A six-year-old Korean boy who lived 4 years in Singapore before moving to China with his family has his own cultural background far beyond the national label he carries in his passport. It includes where he has lived, global experiences, interactions with other third culture kids and where he lives today. Leila offered opportunities for the students to explore essential questions such as who they are and where they are from.

School: These teachers have to negotiate, like all teachers, the culture of their school. Cultural worlds can be imagined communities of nationality (Anderson, 2006). It may be a community the student has not personally experienced, like the U.S. For example, there is a cultural world of “American-ness” constructed at IASC. At IASC, there is a heavy emphasis on celebrating traditional American holidays. When Leslie arrived in October, outside the main office cardboard pumpkins hung from the hallway ceiling. When Leslie was leaving in December, a Christmas tree stood tall, with directions for donations. Alongside this “American-ness” was the host country, China. Colorful Chinese umbrellas hung in the hallways next to the bright orange pumpkins. Beside that Christmas tree, a large Chinese screen stood with a painting of the mountainside. Every day for lunch the school offered students a western style meal choice and an Asian style choice of food. For example, chicken nuggets or chicken fried rice? Like the décor and lunch, IASC was constantly striving to “serve” two national cultures or cultural worlds at the same time; the American and Chinese.

Both of these cultural threads ran through Leila’s classroom. She had a Christmas tree up in her classrooms in December and artifacts from China in her classroom as well. Just like in the school as a whole, inside the classroom she incorporated pieces of traditional American culture as well as traditions from China, the host country. During February, there was a school wide celebration for Chinese New Year. Similarly in October Leslie witnessed busy Halloween classroom parties.

Beyond holiday celebrations and school décor, the elementary school structured the curriculum to highlight these cultures running parallel to one another. Students attend Chinese language class daily in grades 2-5, and every other day in grade 1. However, if a child was in the need of additional support as an English language learner, they attended ESOL classes. In other words, for students’ “second language studies” there is a choice: Chinese or English.

Teacher: Leila’s home cultural background made a large impact in the classroom. As evidenced in the stories told, Leila’s personal experiences, how she viewed her role as cultural agents, her languages and traditions, impacted the daily life in her classroom. As a Canadian “outsider,” she is analytical and observational about the strong American cultural overtones throughout the school. When the first grade team decided to have a Thanksgiving celebration, she didn’t hesitate to explain that it wasn’t her Thanksgiving, so she negotiated change for her students. Her fluency in multiple languages (English, Chinese and French) brought access to students’ home lives and learning processes.

Leila is a member of the cultural world of international education. She told stories of traveling and of learning a new language to live in a new country. She told stories of being confident as a global citizen, successfully navigating a way of life in a country and culture that was not her own. Leila is knowledgeable about cultural, historical and political ideas and practices from throughout the world. Living overseas as global citizens, Leila understands social and cultural practices of people from many different backgrounds.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Well, I’m still, from Montreal. Because I was there until I was 28, 29. I didn’t pack up and move until I was 30. But when you ask me where is home, it’s [China]. I remember the first time I said it in front of my mother she almost lost her mind. I had already been here for two or three years. And I was already living with [Li Wei] and we had already bought an apartment. And [while I was visiting Canada] someone said to me, “When is your flight?”

And I said, “Well I am heading home…”

And my mother is like, “THIS is home! You are going back to [China]…

So this is home, and that’s where I’m from. I am what I am.
Leila, Transcript

Leila has been our guide as she shared her perspective of negotiating her role as a cultural agent for multiple cultural perspectives. For Leila, China is home and Canada is where she is from. Leila is an agent for her new home country, China, as she is able to translate cultural practices to her western colleagues and families. Leila also translates the western cultural practices of the school to the Asian families in her class, negotiating in areas that may otherwise lead to misunderstandings. Given her physical features, she recognizes she will always be negotiating tensions in her cultural agent role.

In her stories, Leila explained how she is conscious of her own sociocultural perspective. With this consciousness of her own cultural perspective, Leila analyzed how her experiences of living
in China for many years have led her to understand broader cultural ways of thinking. In her classroom and in her role as a staff member, she negotiated opportunities for her students to share their funds of knowledge and she views these differences as strengths. Whether it is in learning another language, celebrating a holiday or researching a query, Leila enacted opportunities for students to bring forth their own perspectives instead of adopting an American one built from the school curriculum. Leila’s responsiveness was exhibited through different literacy practices. For example, students wrote about their personal reasons for being thankful that could be interpreted across cultural perspectives. She brought in books that reflected meditation, sharing the Buddhist philosophy that students often encountered in the local culture. Leila invited students to research their own home traditions and family life—through interviews and literature. Furthermore, in several of her stories, Leila showed how she advocated for opportunities for her students to interact with the culture and daily activities of the Chinese people. At IASC, Leila put a priority on being responsive not just to the students’ home lives, but also to the many cultural worlds that intersect in the classroom in her literacy practices. However, we do not need to have lived abroad or become bi-lingual to be able to implement the insights Leila’s stories bring us. It is her stories that bring a spotlight to nuances that may be at play in the schools we teach and work in. By investigating the cultural worlds at play in our own classrooms, we can work towards practices that reflect culturally engaged ways of teaching and learning in our own classrooms.

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