

# Children's Literature to Develop Awareness and Advocacy for Social Justice

BY DR. KATIE KELLY AND DR. LINDSAY YEARTA



## Abstract

Children's literature can enhance readers' understandings of themselves and others in an increasingly diverse world. This article examines the need for inclusion and discussion of diverse literature in the classroom. Specifically, the authors describe a partnership between fifth graders and preservice teachers to digitally discuss the book, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010) using a student-friendly blog. Both groups broadened their worldview and the need for social justice through the reading and blogging about the selected literature. The authors share classroom implications and extensions to advocate for social action. Projects such as the one described in this article remind teachers and children that common bonds of humanity can build empathy, unite us all, and inspire us to take action for social justice.

Children's literature enhances students' understanding of inequities that persist at the national and global

level and can foster advocacy for social justice (Martin & Smolen, 2010). Literature opens the door to the outside world as it has the power to "put a human face on sociopolitical circumstances" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 262). From resettling Syrian refugees to the fight to stop the Dakota Pipeline, opportunities for students to engage in social justice issues are plentiful. However, awareness of issues is a prerequisite to engaging students in these discussions.

This article describes a blogging partnership between fifth graders and preservice teachers to discuss the book, *A Long Walk to Water*, by Linda Sue Park (2010). Both Katie's preservice teachers and Lindsay's fifth graders increased their awareness of social issues related to access to clean water, education, and war. This moving novel was selected as shared literature for several reasons. As a high-interest dual narrative based on a true story, it fostered rich discussions between the elementary students and preservice

teachers involved in the project. The book shares the compelling stories of two individuals in South Sudan whose lives later intertwine in an inspiring way. The novel is based on the true story of Salva Dut, a Sudanese Lost Boy who was forced to leave his home and family during the civil war. Salva traveled by foot across several countries to find refuge and safety from his war-torn country. The fictional story of Nya tells about the young village girl who spends most of her day walking to seek and provide water for her family. This story of hope for two determined survivors brings awareness to modern-day conflict around the world including the scarcity of water, which can so easily be taken for granted.

### The Need for Diverse Literature

As our world continues to flatten (Friedman, 2007) and we become more connected, the need to learn about other cultures and ways of being is a prerequisite for becoming informed, participatory global citizens. One way to enhance students' views of themselves and the world around them is with use of literature (Brinson, 2012).

Children's literature can have powerful effects on young children's self-concepts and worldviews (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley & Koehler, 2009; Jackson & Boutte, 2009; Sims, 1982). Specifically, literature can act as a window, allowing students to get a peek into another culture's way of being or as a mirror, allowing student access to deeper reflection of his or her own culture (Bishop, 1990; Brinson, 2012). When diverse literature is used as a window, it can shine a light on underrepresented groups to become more visible and in doing so, enable readers to develop empathy and challenge existing stereotypes.

Unfortunately, a small percentage of published books are written by or about cultures beyond that of dominant groups. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, of the 3,700 books published in 2017, 462 were written by or about African/African Americans and 332 by or about Latinos/Latinas. Souto-Manning (2013) notes that characters in books remain predominantly White, English speaking and represent heteronormative families. Furthermore, Koss (2015) analyzed 455 books and determined that only 36 depicted culturally specific characters as having a central role in the story. With inadequate representation of diversity in children's literature, there is an implicit assumption that the dominant culture is more valued and represents status quo (Rasinski & Padak, 1990). Therefore, it is essential that more diverse children's literature is incorporated into the classroom to avoid a narrow, one-dimensional view of the world (Anaya, 1992).

Literature that represents different ways of being can develop students' awareness and appreciation for diverse populations and encourages children to live harmoniously in an increasingly pluralistic society (Nilsson, 2005). "Stories (both fictional and factual) help humans to organize experiences, to make sense of them, and to learn from them" (Lehman, Freeman, & Scharer, 2010, p. 19). They connect us as humans by deepening our understanding of others and exploring our commonalities. Therefore, it is essential that teachers seek out and incorporate quality children's literature that includes diverse characters and situations to in order to help all children feel valued (Koss, 2015, p. 39).

There are numerous sources available to help teachers find more diverse literature. With a social media campaign known as #WeNeedDiverseBooks, teachers can easily find online discussions and book suggestions related to diversity. We Need Diverse Books™ is a grassroots organization that advocates for the production and promotion of children's literature that reflects and respects the lives of all individuals. Furthermore, several book awards including the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Award, and the Arab-American Book Award, offer educators lists of recommended children's books to infuse diversity in the classroom setting. Integrating diverse literature in the classroom is a crucial first step in providing students with a foundational understanding of global diversity. Another powerful approach to fostering deeper understanding of text and the world around us is through connecting with a wider audience through digital discussion.

### Digital Discussion of Diverse Literature

To move beyond exposure to diversity in children's literature and provide more opportunities for literature to act as a conduit for learning about ourselves and others, teachers can facilitate discussion and provide guidance to deepen students' understanding of the world. Discussion of diversity can be promoted through multicultural literature as children identify with their own culture as well as the cultures of others (Colby & Lyon, 2004; Koss, 2015).

While it is important to engage students in discussions about diversity using literature as a springboard, learning is invariably enhanced when students are able to interact with and hold conversations with students of other cultures and backgrounds. In fact, International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Students (2016) suggest the need for students to be global collaborators. The use of digital tools connects learners from different backgrounds and cultures and to explore local and global issues and explore possible solutions (ISTE Standards, 2016).

Blogging is one type of digital platform that allows students to communicate with an authentic audience beyond the four walls of the classroom (Merchant, 2005; Stover & Yearta, 2017; Yearta, Stover, & Sease, 2015). Blogs can be used for literary purposes as students discuss and synthesize literature, share resources, and communicate with a wider audience (Zawilinski, 2009). Additionally, students can use blogs in content areas, to compose reflections, to respond to literature, to journal about mathematical processes, as well as many other possibilities (Stover, Yearta & Harris, 2016).

### Digital Discussion of *A Long Walk to Water*

This section describes the blogging partnership between fifth graders and college students enrolled in a teacher education program to discuss the novel, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010). The fifth-grade students were part of an inclusion class in a suburban school located in the southeastern portion of the United States. Of the 21 fifth-grade participants, nine were male and twelve were female. Nine students were White, eleven were African American, and one student was Hispanic. The nine, white, female preservice teachers were enrolled in a literacy methods course in a small, private liberal arts university in the southeastern portion of the United States.

Two to three fifth graders were paired with one of the preservice teachers to communicate about the literature through a minimum of eight blog posts and responses. The preservice teachers elicited online dialogue through probing and open-ended questions to increase student engagement and comprehension of the text in an individualized manner.

Kidblog ([www.kidblog.org](http://www.kidblog.org)) was used as the blogging platform for the fifth graders and the preservice teachers although the ideas presented here can be used with any student-friendly blogging site. Both sets of participants began by creating an “All about Me” post to familiarize themselves with the blogging features. Allowing students to begin with a post as a means of introduction provided them with an opportunity to gain experience with aspects of the blog including how to select a font and background, embed links, images, and videos, and comment to classmates (Yearta, Stover, & Sease, 2015). Additionally, this initial post provided the reading buddies with a way to break the ice and gain comfort with communicating with someone new before delving into the content of the book.

Using the blog as a discussion platform had several benefits. First, the fifth graders were accustomed to this type of technology. They had used the blog since the beginning of the year and were familiar with its

features. The fifth grade teacher maintained a blog as well, providing the students with a safe space to ask questions or comment on posts in class or from home. Before the blogging exchange began, the fifth graders blogged to share about books being read independently. Their posts varied from in-depth and regular to surface-level and infrequent. With communication between fifth graders and the preservice teachers as reading buddies, Lindsay began to notice that the posts became more focused, detailed, and dialogic in nature. While there were noted benefits for the elementary students (see the article, “Fifth Graders Blog with Preservice Teachers” published in *Reading Horizons*), the next section focuses on the lessons learned by the preservice teachers as blogging partners.

### Lessons Learned

Prior to reading *A Long Walk to Water* and blogging with fifth graders, the preservice teachers indicated that they valued diversity but only demonstrated a surface-level understanding. They referenced holidays around the world as a ‘cute’ classroom activity and the need for understanding diversity for the purpose of travel. Many discussed their lack of knowledge and confidence about how to foster learning about diversity and social justice in the classroom. With limited previous experience, the preservice teachers desired to deepen their learning yet acknowledged that “attending to diversity and cultures is a challenge.”

Although viewed as a challenge, the preservice teachers examined ways to use children’s literature as a springboard to explore diversity in the classroom in more meaningful ways. Preservice teachers discussed how literature can create a safe space to explore the uncomfortable and the importance of students seeing themselves in the books they read. By participating in the blogging partnership to discuss the book *A Long Walk to Water*, preservice teachers observed how literature enhanced understanding of diversity and issues of inequality for themselves and the fifth graders with whom they blogged.

Literature with a focus on diversity acts as a catalyst to develop readers’ awareness of social issues such as inequality. In particular, *A Long Walk to Water* was “eye-opening” for many of the preservice teachers as they learned about the limited access to education and clean water in South Sudan. Reading this book increased participants’ awareness of their privilege and acted as a springboard for further conversation, research, and understanding about issues of inequality around the world. The preservice teachers learned the value in careful selection of literature that fifth graders can relate to. While the events in the story such as fleeing a war-torn country and walking to obtain clean

drinking water are strikingly different than the lives the fifth graders lead, the preservice teachers reflected that since the characters in the book were of similar age, it made it easier for the students to relate.

After reading and blogging about the book, *A Long Walk to Water* with fifth graders, the preservice teachers moved beyond their surface level view of diversity as a study of holidays around the world and for the purpose of travel. They realized the important role classroom teachers play in fostering awareness of injustice and inequality with students. One preservice teacher explained that “as teachers, it is our job to make sure that our students grow up to be responsible citizens... this includes being globally aware and having the desire to want to change the world for the better.” These preservice teachers now hold a broader perspective on diversity as an essential underpinning in the classroom to develop acceptance of others, build awareness of social inequities, and to foster action for social justice.

The preservice teachers learned about the value of using literature as a tool to develop understanding and to foster empathy and passion for social equality. One preservice teacher described the book as “a wonderful resource for teachers to expose their students to different cultures, societies, ideas, and economic disparities.” They discussed the importance of learning about other parts of the world so students can develop respect and an appreciation for global perspectives and cultures. In the words of one preservice teacher, “It is important that students see other groups and cultures and diversity so they can learn to cooperate and interact.” Acknowledgement of the importance of accepting others to coexist in a more peaceful world in connection with the book’s message of respecting and loving one another regardless of our differences was highlighted. One preservice teacher shared that “reading [the book] allows us... to move beyond the words hung from the pages and further into the depths of humanity. Through an increased awareness as global citizens, children can build empathy, understanding, and inspiration to help.” The book was a catalyst for potential change as noted in the following preservice teachers’ comments:

*“The theme and story based on Salva Dut’s real life is inspirational and should urge people of any age to be more aware of the world they live in and push them to possibly even get involved with the hopes of providing clean water or education for villages of Sudan.”*

*“[The book] leads us to a realization that our world is bigger than where we live, and there are many different kinds of people... it motivates us to help these people, so that others around the world*

*have privileges and opportunities that we get.”*

The use of literature allowed both sets of readers to develop global awareness to move beyond their narrow views of life through their own perspectives and privilege. Specifically, readers were shocked and saddened to learn about the current struggles for freedom and the lack of daily necessities such as clean drinking water in South Sudan. One preservice teacher explained, “Even in this modern world today, human beings don’t have an easy means of acquiring clean water.” Reading the book and engaging in conversations was instrumental in allowing the preservice teachers to see more clearly through the fog of their privilege. As one preservice teacher noted, “there are still places in the world struggling to get the basic necessities while we live in a country of opportunity and excess.” She continued, “[I] think the way I view education and [the book] has definitely allowed me to see how lucky I am to be living in a country where clean water is readily available.”

While the blogging partnership to discuss the book, *A Long Walk to Water* occurred prior to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan and the protest against the Dakota Pipeline, these events speak to the increasing importance of raising awareness of social justice issues for our students both abroad as well as in the United States and the possibility of using literature as a catalyst to begin important conversations about equality and access to water, a basic human need. The next section explores extensions to conversations about water as a human rights issue.

### Extending Conversations about Water as a Human Rights Issue

Water is a basic human right. Water is a necessity for life. Yet, millions of people, in villages around the world, including many in South Sudan, lack access to clean, safe water. According to the Charity Water Organization, 663 million people worldwide live without clean water. Often, girls, like the fictional character of Nya in *A Long Walk to Water* and African born supermodel Georgie Badiel featured in the book, *The Water Princess* (Verde, 2016) bear the burden of walking miles to gather water, water that is dirty and full of disease, at the expense of attending school. Access to clean water leads to greater growth of crops for food, overall health and well-being, and ability to obtain an education especially for women and children.

Access to clean water is not only a problem in developing countries. Here in the United States, the people of Flint, Michigan as well as members of the Sioux Tribe in Standing Rock, North Dakota continue to struggle for their right to water. In 2014, Flint, Michigan, a city with a high poverty rate, changed its



water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River in an effort to save money. However, this new water source was contaminated with lead which created a public health crisis. The polluted water with its yellowish color and foul taste contains high levels of lead, affecting people, pets, and plants. Many children have tested positive for lead in their blood which can lead to possible developmental delays, learning disabilities, and behavioral problems. President Obama declared a federal emergency and efforts to mitigate the effects have been underway. These efforts include providing water bottles and filters to residents as well as educating parents about healthy diets for children in order to counter the effects of the lead poisoning. However, the need for long term solutions remains as residents are still unable drink tap water without the use of a filter.

Over 1,000 miles away, concerns about pollution of air, water, and land as a result of the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline has led to protests at the construction site. The Standing Rock Sioux tribe aims to prevent the 1,100-mile-long pipeline that will carry half a million barrels of oil across four states daily from being built near their reservation in North Dakota. They are concerned about the contamination of their water supply and the threat to destroy sacred land and ancient burial sites. In order to protest actions and protect their land, a camp was established at the construction site. With the project nearly halfway finished, the federal government ordered a temporary cease to construction of the section north of Standing Rock. However, with the shifting power of a newly elected president, the future of the pipeline and the sacred land is again unknown.

While political shifts are inevitable in a democratic country, students and teachers do not have to remain uninformed and powerless. To raise awareness and encourage discussion and action, teachers can incorporate multiple text types including images, interviews, the novel *A Long Walk to Water*, the picture book *Water Princess*, and Dave Matthews' "Song for Billijo" (see YouTube) to raise awareness and increase interest in the water crises around the world. Lyrics (see Appendix) from the Dave Matthews' song depict the freezing temperatures at the camp in North Dakota as well as Standing Rock's threatened water sources.

Through examination of different types of nonfiction and fiction texts, students can engage in multiple discussions about the importance of access to clean water and begin to research ways to get involved to advocate for social justice. As students conduct research, they are encouraged to triangulate and synthesize sources and engage in ongoing class discussions as new understandings develop. The next

step is for students to get involved by writing for social justice. Students may have an outlet in mind before they begin to research, or the recipient may become clear as the students read and learn about the selected topic. Students can write letters or emails, or create infographics or videos. In fact, the options are endless.

### Classroom Implications

While the blogging experience focused solely on discussions of the book, *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2012), triangulation of sources to examine issues related to water could span across the curriculum and deepen students' understanding of how this human rights issue not only affected the lives of Salva and Nya in South Sudan, but also people living right here in their home country of the United States. In this article, we share how preservice teachers developed a broader worldview as a result of the selected literature and the dialogic conversations via blogging. Although many of the preservice teachers had limited notions of diversity or experiences beyond family travel, they developed an appreciation for the role children's literature can play in enhancing their own understandings as well as the perspectives of their students. Although teachers may feel trepidation towards their own experiences or a lack of comfort with addressing issues of inequity with their students, exposure to children's literature can help both the teachers' and consequently students' understanding and views continue to evolve. Educators should not allow their lack of experience with or knowledge of others to prevent them from engaging students in thoughtful, reflective conversations to examine privilege and issues of social justice. Reading and discussion of quality literature is critical in helping readers of all ages develop a worldview and greater understanding for and appreciation of diversity which leads to greater empathy and desire to take action to help humankind.

With a greater awareness of global diversity, students can then move towards action for social justice. Specifically, students can become involved in service learning experiences in numerous ways. For instance, in this project, one of the fifth graders did some self-initiated research on the Internet to discover information about Salva's organization, Water for South Sudan. She found the website: <http://www.waterforsouthsudan.org/salvas-story/> and learned more about Salva's work to build wells in South Sudan in an effort to bring fresh water to the community. This led to engaging classroom discussions to brainstorm ways to get involved such as making donations, sponsoring the construction of a well, and informing others as a way to advocate for the cause. Separated by diverse cultural norms and experiences, as well as geographic distance great or small, projects such as

this help to flatten the world and inspire children to learn how common bonds of humanity can bring us together.

As students develop their sense of agency and become more engaged in social justice action, the possibilities are truly endless. In addition to researching Salva's organization, students can engage in a myriad of other research related projects. For example, they could research and bring awareness to the Dakota Pipeline protest, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, or any number of social justice issues. To engage in meaningful writing experiences for real audiences, students could write lawmakers or create infographics to advertise for fundraisers for a number of causes. Projects can be ongoing and fluid as students develop interest in various topics and causes.

Intentional selection of literature to be more inclusive of diverse cultures and issues of social justice helps readers of all ages deepen their understanding of the larger world around them. As Bishop (1990) and Brinson (2012) reminds us, literature can serve as windows into other lived experiences. With increased reading of more diverse texts and multiple text types, students can enhance their understanding of others and their own privilege and ultimately develop increased empathy, tolerance, and an awareness of social injustices around the world. Reading and working with diverse literature in the classroom allows students to have a better understanding for other lived experiences and perspectives (Templeton & Gehsmann, 2014). Moving beyond awareness to action through research to foster change and action for social justice will help young students make this world a better place to live for all humankind.

## Conclusion

As educators, we are constantly pondering ways to enhance learning opportunities for our students. In this blogging project, the preservice teachers read and discussed *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2012) with a group of fifth grade students. By providing the preservice teachers with an opportunity to read global literature and communicate with elementary students via the blog, both sets of participants developed new understandings. The preservice teachers began to develop global awareness and consequently realized the importance of incorporating diverse literature in the elementary classroom. Specifically, preservice teachers learned that purposefully selected literature can serve as a catalyst to help elementary students engage in conversations about diversity and equity. Moving beyond the classroom, preservice teachers also learned that literature can help elementary students think beyond their own experiences to develop a deeper understanding of global awareness.

Literature is powerful, and "as technology advances and opportunities for global communication expand, the value and importance of international children's books will continue to grow" (Lehman, Freeman, & Scharer, 2010, p. 19). We agree with Linda Sue Park (2015) who stated from the TedTalk she gave that while a book cannot save the world, "the young people who read them can." Reading provides a window into a variety of lived experiences and important social justice topics. When preservice teachers expand their repertoire of children's literature beyond the traditional canon to include more diverse books and learn about ways to engage students in meaningful discussion of literature including digitally mediated approaches, they will be better prepared for meeting the needs of today's diverse student population in an increasingly pluralistic world. The result may be that readers of all ages learn to embrace the common bonds of humanity and leverage empathy to take action for social justice.

## Appendix: "Song for Billijo" by Dave Matthews

*A cold wind blows over North Dakota*

*Billijo says, "This is my fire"*

*"Come warm yourself by my fire"*

*She said, "Come, my friend, warm your soul"*

*The river flows in North Dakota*

*Billijo says, "Oh, this is my water"*

*"Come quench your thirst in my river"*

*Billijo said, "Come, my friend, warm your soul"*

*She said, "You are not alone, not in North Dakota"*

*Billijo says, "This is my home"*

*She said, "Come warm yourself by my fire"*

*Billijo said, "Come drink your fill of this water"*

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Once you learn to read,  
you will be forever free.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS