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Passports to Diversity: Educators and Students Travel the World Through Translated Texts

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 25, 2023

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Sweden's *Pippi Longstocking*, Italy's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, and France's *The Little Prince* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, plus most of the world's beloved fairy and folk tales—and a growing number of picture books sold around the globe—are translated texts. It seems that the more you look for them, the more you will find. In celebration of books in translation and World Kit Lit Month, we spoke with three educators who are infusing their classrooms and libraries with translated texts of all kinds. With each title, they're introducing students to diverse global perspectives and cultures, and helping promote empathy.



Lori Sieling charts her class's journeys in translation on a world map.

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Lori Sieling is a K–1 special education teacher at Van Holten Elementary School in Bridgewater, N.J., where she teaches in a self-contained classroom of five- and six-year-old children with learning and language disabilities.

She first came across the translated titles that now fill her lesson plans when she felt limited by her classroom library and was looking to venture outside the terrain of North American picture books. To find the highest quality of translated texts to read to her students and to tie into her curriculum, she first begins with the list of science and social studies topics she will be teaching. Next, she consults a

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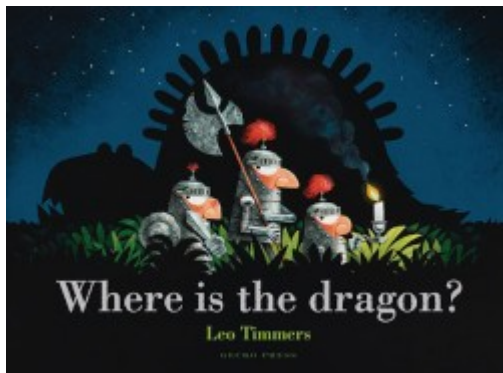
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Through her careful curation of titles, Sieling finds translated stories from around the world that reflect her students' diverse cultural backgrounds and help them with their individual language and learning needs. "Six out of 10 kids I have this year speak a different language at home," Sieling said. "This means that they're coming from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, practice different religions, and have knowledge that I don't necessarily have."

Sieling does her best to find texts from countries her students and their families come from, and others that they may be unfamiliar with, to offer different perspectives from around the world and encourage discussion—even if that is a challenge for many of her students.

"When I introduce titles that match their backgrounds, it lights a spark in my kids," Sieling said. "They may see something they're familiar with, and they're able to point to a picture that jogs their memories or can tell me about things they see or do in their homes—or things that are different."

To complement these translated texts, Sieling takes time to celebrate with students as many of the holidays from their cultures as they can throughout the school year. This allows her students to "be the expert" on how they mark their holidays at home, and to learn from classmates about their holidays, too. She says that noting and honoring these differences is especially important in a classroom where children have learning and language differences in addition to cultural ones.



Where Is the Dragon? doesn't stay on Sieling's bookshelves for very long. "The kids adore it, and read it constantly!"

A recent reading of the bilingual book *Maria Had a Little Llama/María tenía una llamita* by Angela Dominguez (Holt) allowed Sieling to demonstrate her own difficulties with Spanish. "They wanted me to read the story in Spanish," Sieling said, "and, I'm not a Spanish speaker. As I read, a few of my kids couldn't help but laugh, and say, 'No, no, no!' As a result, they were able to know something that I didn't know, and [see] that they were different than me—and that it was all right. It turned out to be a moment of self-acceptance."

To keep track of all the diverse translated texts they are reading, Sieling has a large world map on a bulletin board outside her classroom. "With each book, I use a piece of yarn that runs from the picture of the book cover to the country's location on the map," Sieling said.

She finds these books have brought her students closer together. "As we're reading, discussing, writing about them, and traveling the world, the stories have created a bridge," Sieling said. "Many books show us differences, but at the same time they also show us that we are more similar than different. Translated texts allow my students to see this for themselves."

Susie Isaac is the gifted and talented teacher at Holly Hills Elementary in Denver, a former school librarian, and a member of the ALSC 2022 Newbery Committee. She also is an avid reader and aficionado of translated texts to expand her students' worldview.

growing list of websites, including WorldKidLit, Outside in the World, and Planet Picture Book. She even created her own site, My Kids Read the World, to help other teachers and students read beyond borders.

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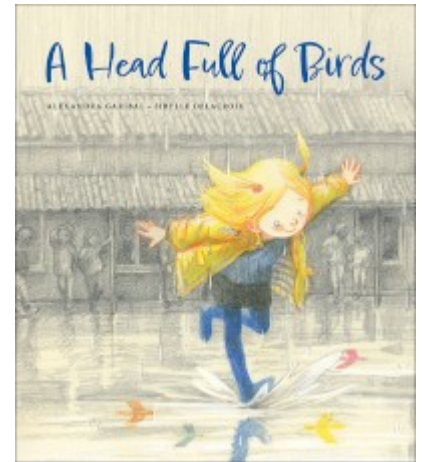
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Sieling turns to *A Head Full of Birds* to teach students about neurodiversity and foster acceptance for themselves and others with diverse needs.

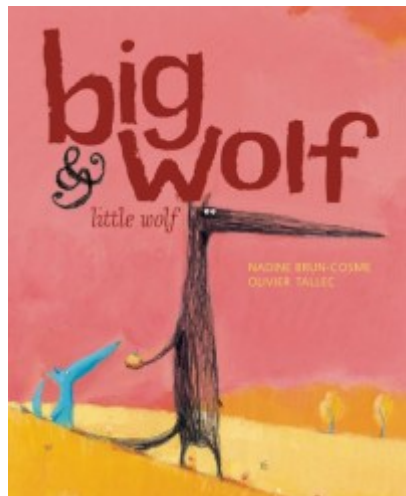


Her great appreciation and awareness of literature in translation stems from her meetings with a Denver area-based group of active and retired librarians and members of the publishing industry. They gather quarterly to share and discuss their “watch lists” for a variety of ALSC awards, including the Caldecott, Newbery, Coretta Scott King, and Mildred T. Batchelder Award books.

First hearing about Batchelder Award-winning books as a new teacher working with students who were refugees and immigrants brought translated texts to the forefront of Isaac’s instruction. “Finding these texts was eye-opening because they offered different perspectives from the white ‘mainstream’ American cultures,” Isaac said.



Susie Isaac reading a translated title to her students.



Big Wolf & Little Wolf “touches the core insecurities, fears, and desires” of students, Isaac says.

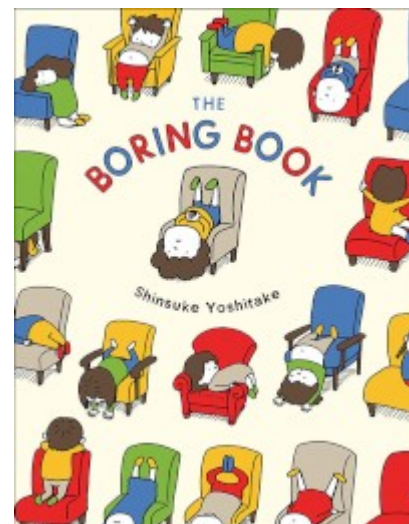
She enjoys sharing with her class favorite titles like *Big Wolf, Little Wolf* written by Nadine Bruin-Cosme, illustrated by Olivier Tallec, and translated by Claudia Zoe Bedrick (Enchanted Lion) a story of a friendship lost and found. With its spare text and bold yet touching illustrations, she said, the story engages thought-provoking discussions, higher-level thinking skills, and social emotional learning. “The book uses the bare minimum of words that you need to convey a feeling and leaves so much that the kids have to infer from the text,” Isaac said. “Younger kids whose whole world is their little community of friends are immediately connected to how at first Big Wolf doesn’t want to share his space with little wolf. But then when little wolf goes away, suddenly Big Wolf realizes that he’d never missed anyone or thought his life was lacking until that happened. It touches the core of kids’ insecurities, fears, and desires.”

In response to these multiple literary layers, Isaac sees her students spending more time with translated texts than other titles and taking the stories in like another one of her favorite genres. “It’s similar to the appreciation you might find with poetry,” Isaac said. “There’s a lot that’s not written on the page.”

Another translated title at the top of Isaac’s picture book pile is the *Boring Book* by Shinsuke Yoshitake (Chronicle). She said that it allows her students to explore something they are familiar with—boredom—alongside activities that aren’t what she calls “mainstream cultural experiences.” Because of her excitement about this book, she developed a whole “boring” project surrounding it. “I have my students think about things that are often considered to be fun like amusement parks, hotel or resort stays, playing on an iPad or using the phone, going to the beach—and turn them into the most boring examples of these things.”

Isaac finds that interacting with these texts provides students with a greater multicultural and international perspective, or what she calls “the global-ness of the world,” allowing them to see themselves in it. “As we all know, the more specific a story is, the more universal it is,” Isaac said. “While the cultural things in these books are very specific, reading them allows students to see that they are part of it!”

She hopes that other teachers will make translated texts a part of their curriculum and not fear that they have to know all about the countries or languages of origin. “We don’t need to be experts in reading these titles,” Isaac said. “But we need to be experts in finding and creating opportunities for these diverse books to be part of our conversations.”



The Boring Book inspired a writing assignment where Isaac’s students transformed interesting pastimes into ultra-boring ones.





Author and school library teacher Mélima Mangal holds a readaloud with her class.

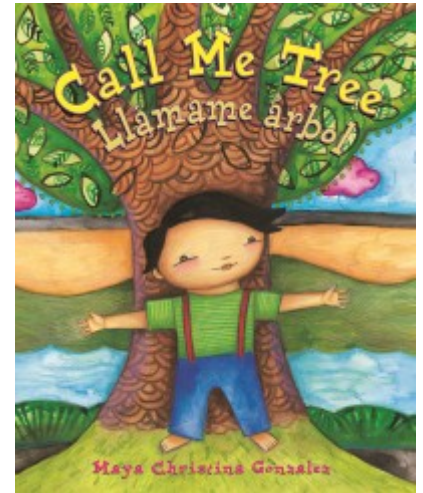
Mélima Mangal is a noted children’s author and a library media specialist in Minneapolis, Minn., where she presents a mix of translated texts for her increasingly diverse student population.

“In our district, we have diverse populations who speak different languages at home—especially Spanish and Somali,” Mangal said. Her district also includes students who speak Karen (spoken in Burma, Thailand, and Myanmar), and Pashto and

Dari (spoken in Afghanistan). “Because of this, I’m always on the lookout for translated texts that I can use with them.”

Mangal’s preference is using bilingual books because of their potential to aid both teachers and students. “They’re helpful if the student has the literacy skills and can read in their native language—and the teacher can read the English translation,” Mangal said. “They’re also wonderful for free reading, too.” Some titles that resonate with her students include *Call Me Tree/Llámame árbol* by Maya Christina Gonzalez (Lee & Low/Children’s Book Press), *Sofi Paints Her Dreams/Sofi pinta sus sueños* by Raquel M. Ortiz, illustrated by Roberta Collier-Morales (Arte Publico/Piñata), and the English and Spanish editions of *Just Ask/Solo pregunta!* by Sonia Sotomayor, illustrated by Rafael López, and *Dreamers/Soñadores* by Yuyi Morales (Holiday House/Porter).

She procures these types of titles through the Minnesota Humanities Center, which produces books in many languages spoken by newcomers to her state, reading book reviews, and searching for available bilingual editions via websites and databases, such as Diverse BookFinder,



Call Me Tree/Llámame árbol illustrates how a child, like a tree, grows strong. Mangal says her students find affirmation and a connection to nature in this poetic bilingual story.

By using a wide variety of these books, Mangal says that she can better serve immigrant and refugee students. “From the start, you can see them struggling—and trying,” Mangal said. “So, to have books in their native or target language can be welcoming to them, help bridge the gap between the language they speak at home and the one at school, and help them understand basic things about their new life.” These stories and the discussions that follow may oftentimes be comforting but at other times challenging because of the distress many have experienced leaving their homelands.

The bilingual texts can also challenge her other students by introducing them to unfamiliar languages, cultures, and alphabets as well as unique ways of thinking about the world. “They learn that kids are living different lives. Sure, many of the basics are the same: everyone wants to play, eat good food, have a safe home, and be loved,” Mangal said, “but it’s important for kids to see how these things happen differently, and that we all have the capacity to learn about diverse cultures, speak unique languages, and communicate with all kinds of people.”

Mangal believes this can unite us and increase our humanity. “This type of learning helps us see the world as a smaller place,” she said. “And once we feel this connection, the more we will care about each other; and the more we care about each other, the more we want to protect one another.”

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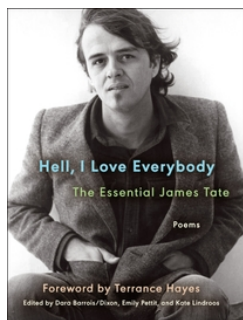
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