

Yo siento como un heroe:

Fostering global citizenry through an integrated unit of study on water

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**Abstract:** In this article, we uphold diversity and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as central to literacy pedagogy and use a cosmopolitan lens to present the integrated curriculum of a fourth grade bilingual teacher and the experiences of her students. We describe a unit built around language arts, science, and social studies with a focus on social justice and global connectedness for Latin@ students, many of whom were immigrants and transnationals themselves. We also analyze student responses to the unit in relation to cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. Students made connections to their own transnational experiences and were empowered to seek additional ways to engage in social justice.

**Key words:** globalization, cosmopolitanism, bilingual, English Language Learners, integrated units of study

In this era of increasing diversity and global connectedness, two of the most discussed issues in literacy research and teaching today are diversity and 21st century literacies. These are two concepts that are often discussed in disparate ways yet they intersect and can lead to transformative literacy experiences. Typically, the topic of diversity in education has primarily focused on various forms of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity within the United States, including immigrants, transnationals, students of color, and English Language Learners (ELLs). While this has been the focus related to diversity, when the term globalization is used, such historically marginalized students in the United States are often left out. Thus, we see a need to reframe diversity to include international and cross-cultural understanding. Herrera (2012) and her colleagues propose expanding our notions of diversity to include that of globalization and in so doing to include diverse learners in the United States in discussions of globalization. This expanded view encompasses diversity through the examination of interconnectedness of peoples across the globe by distinct cultural, racial, and linguistic narratives (Scholte, 2002). In this way, globalization represents the current demographic and sociocultural reality as well as looks towards how diversity may continue to evolve and be defined in the future (Herrera, 2012).

Currently, increased globalization has an impact on all areas of life, including education, culture, health, and the environment. In literacy education, the emphasis on 21st century literacies acknowledges new technologies and literacy tools and also recognizes the importance of global interconnectedness (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000). The National Council of Teachers of English suggests that 21st-century readers and writers must be able to “build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively,” “design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of

purposes,” and “attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013, np).

For this article, we uphold diversity and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as central to literacy pedagogy and use a cosmopolitan lens to present the integrated curriculum of a fourth grade bilingual teacher and the experiences of her students. We describe a unit built around language arts, science, and social studies with a focus on social justice and global connectedness for Latin@ students, many of whom were immigrants and transnationals themselves. We also analyze student responses to the unit in relation to cosmopolitanism and global citizenship.

### Cosmopolitanism

A philosophy rooted in classic and Enlightenment philosophy (Kleingeld & Brown, 2006), cosmopolitanism is an old viewpoint gaining new traction in discussions of globalization and new pedagogies because of its focus on difference, identity, and connectedness (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2010). Where globalization describes an increase in contact and interest of peoples globally, cosmopolitanism raises questions about how students negotiate their place in the world, a world that is increasingly in contact with others (Hansen, 2010). Cosmopolitanism is viewed as a way to reconcile tensions present in an interconnected yet divided world (Appiah, 2006) because it focuses not only on increased global communications and understandings, but also on balancing local commitments and identities with broader issues (Hansen, 2010). This focus allows us to work with students to increase their understandings of self and local contexts along with responsibilities towards others and the interconnectedness of the world.

To illustrate our work, we use a cosmopolitan lens with Damico & Baidon’s (2011) concept of *relational cosmopolitanism*. Relational cosmopolitanism extends thinking in the humanities by Appiah (2006) and in education by Hull and Stornaiuolo (2010). The

cosmopolitan point of view incorporates the local as well as the global and asserts that people can uphold local standards and customs while taking into consideration larger areas of concern. This is not a new idea but one that has been revisited with enthusiasm. In the early 1900s, Makiguchi (1903/2002) outlined three levels of the identity of global citizens; the local, national and global. Makiguchi recognized the importance of understanding self as well as other in order to foster global citizenship, central to relational cosmopolitanism.

Through relational cosmopolitanism, Damico and Baildon (2011) show how a curriculum can be interconnected to larger issues across the globe while remaining deeply rooted in a particular context. The challenges of living globally can be explored critically and creatively through six dimensions of their framework. These dimensions include:

1. Resources of participants
2. Relational knowing
3. Rigorous content and curricula
4. Facility with key tools and resources
5. Dialogic, problem-solving pedagogies
6. Transformative goals and outcomes

We apply these six dimensions to Kristina's unit in teaching language arts to show how literacy educators can take complex, multifaceted, and interdisciplinary topics and create an integrated curriculum responsive to both local and global issues. Table 1 presents the dimensions and descriptions by Damico and Baildon (2011) along with a short description of selected curricular choices and resources Kristina used throughout the unit.

**Table 1** Dimensions of Relational Cosmopolitanism and the Water Unit of Study

Dimension of <i>relational cosmopolitanism</i> (Damico & Baildon, 2011)	How Damico and Baildon (2011) define the dimension	Examples of the dimension in Kristina's unit of study
Resources of participants	Teachers acknowledge the beliefs, stances, perspectives, and knowledge that they and their students bring	Kristina fostered students' connections in various ways. She began by asking, "What were students' experiences with water? Water scarcity?" Students kept a water usage log for a week.
Relational knowing	Situates the topic/problem/issue as a shared problem that affects all of humanity. Encourages students to cultivate connections and forge alliances to grapple with the social, political, economic, psychological and historical facets of the issue	Kristina gave students access to understanding the economic (for example, as part of their water usage logs, students calculated cost in dollars as well as in environmental impact), and sociopolitical (readings covering different countries and how conflict can lead to disparities in resource allocation) facets of water scarcity.
Rigorous content and curricula	Participants engaged with knowledge and resources across, in and outside of academic disciplines to adequately understand the issue	Kristina used a range of resources for her standards based (TEKS) and rigorous curriculum. One example, guest speakers were brought in and skyped in from <a href="http://www.gazellefoundation.com">www.gazellefoundation.com</a>
Facility with key tools and resources	Teaches students to use a variety of resources, from traditional tools to state of the art technologies	Students read a variety of genres (short stories, chapter books, picture books, magazine articles), consulted websites for social studies knowledge (For example a Burundi web quest), and conducted scientific experiments regarding properties of water as well as pollution
Dialogic, problem-solving pedagogies	A commitment to dialogue helps ensure the creation of "communities of reason" as students question, challenge, debate, and deliberate a range of perspectives and alternative views of the issue in order to take informed action	There were spaces in the curriculum for dialogue through class discussions literature responses, and projects. In addition, students blogged and exchanged ideas with students in other classes, gaining an even wider range of perspectives and views.
Transformative goals and outcomes	This keeps participants focused on the larger picture or higher purpose – the cultivation of knowledge and skills to shape a more just and humane world. This moves away from the traditional focus on mastery of content and towards deeper understandings of how to respond to current issues in order to enact change.	Students reported how powerful this unit was for them in various ways. One of the most salient ways students cited its impact was the experiential nature of their learning. Kristina consistently incorporated experiences into the curriculum. Students reported feeling the way children in Burundi must feel when carting water 6 miles (because the students simulated the experience with help from volunteers from the Gazelle Foundation during the culminating walk-a-thon).

We have worked together collaboratively since Kristina (second author) came to the elementary school where I (Minda, first author) teach a field-based internship with my undergraduate preservice teachers. Kristina has over a decade of experience teaching bilingual students. She is committed to social justice and believes it can be at the forefront of the language arts curriculum while simultaneously following the mandated curricula and teaching important literacy skills. Throughout the school year, Kristina and her colleague Ilza Garcia, built their curriculum around social justice, integrating bilingual language arts instruction with social studies and science. This article describes a unit Kristina implemented in her fourth grade bilingual class after one of her students approached her with an interest in water conservation and Africa. We describe the unit and in student responses focus on the dimensions related most directly to pedagogy-- relational knowing and dialogic problem solving pedagogies. These dimensions encourage students to grapple with multiple aspects and perspectives surrounding an issue (in this case water scarcity) and approach action from a place of informed and global understanding.

#### The water integrated unit

This unit of study grew out of a students' interest in learning more about how she could help children in Africa. She approached Kristina one day after reading some literature in the mail about children in Africa that did not have access to clean water, to food or to hygiene. She said she saw "sad pictures" and the letter was requesting help for Africa. This student wanted to do something and asked Kristina what they could do. From this informal exchange, an idea was started.

Kristina was in a training program with a local running coach, Gilbert Tuhabonye, from Burundi. Gilbert has a dramatic story of escape from the genocide in Burundi that is detailed in

his autobiography (Tuhabonye, 2006). He also founded a non-profit whose mission is to provide clean drinking water to people throughout Burundi ([www.gazellefoundation.com](http://www.gazellefoundation.com)). Kristina decided to incorporate some resources from Gilbert's foundation into the curriculum and to focus on water issues around the world, including Burundi. She discussed her plan with school administrators who fully supported her work. Kristina also approached her class with the ideas and they were thrilled, particularly because the origins of the idea were from a classmate. Next, Kristina and her fourth grade colleagues worked to create an integrated unit that covered language arts, social studies, and science, was built on the Texas curriculum, and emphasized social justice.

The unit of study covered approximately six weeks in the spring semester. Kristina deliberately began the unit with ways that students could understand their own lives and cultures, specifically as it relates to water. First she asked her students to log their own water consumption for a week. She also had students read about local water sources and issues. Large areas of Austin are situated directly on top of an important water source for central Texas, the Edwards Aquifer. Together they studied the aquifer and how it had been an important water source for generations.

After spending time exploring local water issues and their own consumption, students learned more about water resources worldwide. They read and discussed various newspaper articles, short stories, and nonfiction picture books related to water. They also read excerpts from *A Long Walk to Water* (Park, 2010), a young adult novel that describes not only water scarcity in Africa but sociohistorical issues as well. It is important to note that Kristina chose to use excerpts from this book because of content deemed inappropriate for her students due to the graphic nature of the conflict in Sudan. Kristina asked students to respond to these texts in

various ways including multiple choice questions (to prepare them for the format of the upcoming state test they would be taking), open-ended questions, discussions, and student projects. As a culminating activity, all fourth grade classes participated in a Walk for Water walkathon.

The Gazelle Foundation has encouraged local elementary schools to engage in walkathons to raise awareness and this was one of approximately 30 events for school children across the city. The fourth graders walked multiple times around the track, with the option of carrying different amounts of water (1 gallon jugs, 4 gallon, 6 gallon, etc). Representatives from the Gazelle foundation were on hand to help with the event as well as dozens of parent volunteers and community members.

#### Student Responses to the Unit

While it was evident from the community response and students' enthusiasm that this unit was a success, we were very interested in understanding the ways the students made sense of the material presented in the unit, particularly in relation to global connections. Did students see themselves in any of these materials? Did students understand that we were discussing many larger societal issues that impact peoples across the globe? How did the fourth graders view themselves as global citizens? We worked together in documenting and analyzing some of the students' responses to the unit and here is what we discovered.

First, we asked students if they had made any connections to the ideas presented in the unit. Almost half (9 of 20) discussed their personal connection to the children of Burundi and the water unit because either they themselves or their parents had experienced a lack of access to water. This resulted in the need to find water through various means and students listed these such as bathing in a river or walking to bring water back to their home. Some students (5 of 20)



discussed the recent drought in Texas and the need to conserve water here in the area where we live. They referenced the aquifer and media reports of the dwindling water resources here in Texas.

In addition to connections to local water issues, students in Kristina's class also reported connections to their families' experiences with water scarcity in Mexico, primarily in rural areas. Almost half of the students (8 of 20) described how their own parents and family members had relied on water sources outside the home for drinking, cooking, and bathing back in Mexico. For example, student responses included, "I am making a connection that my mom also had to walk to get water" and "Back home in Mexico my parents had to walk miles to get water for food and for themselves." One student told us how he had gone home and asked his parents if they had experienced anything like this and that he was surprised with what he learned. He wrote, "I remember that my mom told me she had to walk 10-15 miles to get dirty, disgusting water from a swamp."

Students made personal connections to the issue of water and water access and they also expressed empathy for others. A majority of the students (16 of 20) expressed a feeling of care and empathy for the people in Burundi and elsewhere who did not have access to clean water. One student said, "The one thing I will remember [about this unit of study] for the rest of my life is that we helped Burundi because I care about Burundi and want them to have access to clean water." Students used words such as "worried," "scared," "shocked," and "sad" when commenting on how they felt to learn that children their age were living in areas without access to clean water. They also used words such as "love" and "compassion", "care", "proud", "happy", and "good" when they wrote about how their actions could positively impact people in

other parts of the world. These descriptors show that students felt empathy for people in other parts of the world.

Perhaps some of this empathy was brought on by studying and experiencing what people all over the globe experience. Kristina deliberately included experiences that would enable her students to feel what it was like to walk for water, to not have clean drinking water readily available. The students noted that experiencing what it was like to carry water for a long distance helped them understand what it was like for children in Burundi. A majority of her students (16 out of 20) wrote that their favorite and most meaningful learning throughout the unit was the Walk-a-thon where they carried the gallons of water to simulate what it was like for the people in Burundi. Most students indicated that this kind of experience helped them understand what people were experiencing in various parts of the world. They used language like “fun” and “challenging” to describe what it felt like to carry the water, even at shorter distances than those the children of Burundi were required to carry water.

Students also felt empowered by the ways they were able to help the people of Burundi. Through their efforts, students raised funds to build wells and improve the quality of life in rural Burundi. The money collected at this school was donated to the Gazelle Foundation. One student, writing in Spanish stated, “Yo siento que soy un heroe porque nunca habia hecho algo así. [I feel like a hero because I have never done anything like this].”

This kind of empowerment extended beyond the unit, exemplifying the final dimension of relational cosmopolitanism, transformative goals and outcomes. All of the students indicated that this unit of study had inspired them to help elsewhere. Of the 20 students, seven indicated they wanted to help in their home countries of Mexico. Students gave stories of their parents’ struggles for food and water and of seeing children who did not have access to clean water. In

addition, twelve students named countries on the continent of Africa as places they were interested in helping. Students named Burundi, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Egypt as countries they were interested in providing aid for.

### Cosmopolitanism in the Classroom

As a skilled teacher, Kristina fostered a sense of understanding and empowerment in her classroom community. Although neither of us knew about the concept of relational cosmopolitanism at the time she created her integrated unit based on state and national standards, the pedagogical practices she created and engaged in with her students align with Damico and Baildon's (2011) concept and the dimensions they outline for creating a learning environment that is aware of self and others in a conscious way.

Her unit begins with students understanding of themselves, their culture and the local context and moves outward to incorporate a variety of perspectives, resources and tools. While studying about water scarcity, students engaged in problem solving and experiences that moved beyond merely telling students what to do but instead engaged them in finding solutions and experiencing first hand what others endured. Additionally, students worked together to raise money for a community in Burundi. This represents the final dimension of relational cosmopolitanism – transformative goals and outcomes. Through this experience, Kristina aided her students in cultivating knowledge and skills for a more just and humane world.

Student responses to the integrated unit show that they indeed felt empowered and motivated to engage in social change. They also indicated that they understood the local context and culture related to water, water use and scarcity while also making connections to their own transnational and immigrant experiences. This points to the importance and relevance of issues

such as this in globalization and cosmopolitanism to English Language Learners and other diverse students who often are left out of such rigorous, relevant, and engaging curricula.

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