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Cultivating Thinking: Simultaneous Instruction of  
Metacognitive Strategies for Reading Comprehension and Cultural Understanding

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October 5, 2008

### Abstract

The purpose of this work is to present a comprehensive curricular approach that helps childhood educators empower students as developing thinkers who, by connecting with literature, build a deeper and more robust cultural understanding of themselves and others. Based on a formal content analysis, 44 picture books from and about the Middle East and Arabic speaking world were analyzed using a unique two-dimensional classification system developed by Brakas and Pittman-Smith (2005). The books--classified by theme-type and complexity of cultural content--are grouped on a curriculum tool using 9 sets of metacognitive questions that assist in identifying book content. The curriculum tool and the metacognitive questions provide an instructional framework for helping students develop strategic reading that, depending on certain book characteristics, requires thinking at different levels of sophistication. The classification system and the classroom approach are linked to best practices in literacy acquisition, thought provoking environments and global education. Two stories from the collection of 44 are presented as example instructional approaches, each requiring different levels of thinking. An interactive web site for professional growth, at [www.culturalvoices.org](http://www.culturalvoices.org), supports and enhances the work.

(Contains 1 table and 1 figure.)

## Cultivating Thinking: Simultaneous Instruction of Metacognitive Strategies for Reading Comprehension and Cultural Understanding

Educators who create thoughtful learning environments are keenly aware of their position as a guide and model. In the practice of cultivating thinking and maximizing the potential of students, teachers create classrooms that allow for (a) in-depth study of significant themes, (b) systematic and integrated thinking, (c) idea development and reflection, (d) challenging and focused conversations, and (e) justifications for reasoning (Onosko & Newmann, 1994).

We know that metacognition, or the self-mediation of thinking, is a critical aspect of learning environments and has a major impact on children's potential to grow and monitor their own intellectual development. Among the repertoire of metacognitive strategies important to learning, two are the focus of this paper-- metacognition in literacy and metacognition for cross-cultural understanding.

Metacognitive reading strategies help students monitor and regulate their own comprehension. Griffith & Ruan (2005), when referring to the reading process, inform us that "modeling and teaching developmentally appropriate metacognitive skills to young children can greatly enhance their abilities to acquire early literacy skills and empower them to become problem solvers and independent readers" (p.10). When students begin to learn and use thinking strategies in the primary years, the foundation is set for the formation of more complex cognitive operations as they progress through the grades.

Metacognitive cultural strategies are the self-monitoring operations that help individuals construct an understanding of the practices, values, and beliefs of their own culture and the culture of others. Learning to use these essential strategies helps students explore cultures in deep and meaningful ways. Developing cross-cultural understanding is a valued educational

goal, especially within a framework of culturally compatible schooling (Au, 1993, 2001).

Metacognitive strategies for cross-cultural understanding, like metacognitive reading strategies, help children become independent problem solvers.

The power of reading culturally diverse children's books, in helping youngsters construct an understanding of the reading process, themselves, and of the world, has been well documented (see for example Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Pratt and Beaty, 1999; Smolen & Ortiz-Castro, 2000). "Positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, ... raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity (Norton, 2005, p.2). Furthermore, international children's literature has been used to promote the perspective of unity within diversity as youngsters study and learn about people living in a global society (Swiniarski, Breitborde & Murphy, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of an essentially new curricular approach that uses *Cultural Voices* of children's literature to unite the teaching of metacomprehension with cultural understanding. To accomplish our goal, we build on a fundamentally new coding system that organizes children's culturally diverse literature into 9 *Cultural Voices*. These 9 *Voices* can be used for a variety of curricular approaches that have been delineated briefly in the initial research conducted by Brakas and Pittman-Smith (2005). An important aspect of the work is the interactive web site that provides a data base of coded and categorized literature upon which teachers can build their own curriculum. It can be found at [www.culturalvoices.org](http://www.culturalvoices.org).

Presently, we extend our original research in a number of significant ways. First, we highlight the theoretical underpinnings of *Cultural Voices* and how they support the simultaneous teaching of metacomprehension with content, concepts, skills, and attitudes that

reflect individual cultures. We look at this from a developmental framework linked to best practices. We provide teachers with examples that illustrate how this method can be applied using *Cultural Voices*. Furthermore, we examine this curricular approach through the lens of children's literature that originates from or is about people of the Middle East and the Arabic Speaking World. Our analysis of these books has been added to the web site.

### Cultural Voices, Deep Culture, and Common Ground

Preparing curricula founded on *Cultural Voices* sets the ground work for supporting students' understanding of "deep culture" about themselves and others (Kasten, Kristo, & McClure, 2005, chap.2). Learning about deep culture requires using a range of cognitive abilities and allows students, through a social-constructivist's approach, to develop their own understanding of the world. Students not only learn how to build knowledge, they practice analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating multiple cultural practices, perspectives, and values.

*Cultural Voices* also support the move towards common ground (Saito, 2003). Common ground is the sharing of old and new ideas between and among groups and individuals for the purpose of establishing a collaborative learning environment. *Cultural Voices* help teachers develop an organized curriculum so students can learn a set of metacognitive reading strategies while building on existing cultural schemas, modifying cultural misconceptions, or constructing new cultural understandings. Through these cognitive exercises that reflect democratic empowerment and convergent thinking, children have opportunities to search for common ground. While common ground may never be fully achieved, it is the process and the search that is essential.

### The Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Voices

A story's *Cultural Voice* gives an immediate "picture" of how two book dimensions highlight its contribution for studying diversity and the reading process. One story dimension is *theme*--the author's overall message or purpose for writing the book. The second is the literature's *complexity of cultural content*. Coupled together these two dimensions, *theme* and *content complexity*, create a *Cultural Voice*.

#### *Book Theme*

Three main beliefs grounded our thinking about interpretations of a *book's theme*.

- We recognize there is an on-going controversy concerning the existence of book themes (Cramer, 2004). However, we know that children's books are often written for didactic purposes and therefore have identifiable messages (Cramer, 2004; Galda & Cullinan, 2006).
- We look at reading comprehension from a social-constructivist's view (Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003) and thus recognize that culture, among other variables, can influence interpretation (Anderson, 1994; Rumelhart, 1981).
- Our interpretation of a book's theme is one that is well-grounded; however, other well-grounded interpretations may also exist (Anderson, 1994; Galda & Cullinan, 2006).

#### *Book Cultural Complexity*

Two studies were used as support for our analysis of a book's *cultural complexity*.

- We used Banks's (1989) work on teaching for cultural understanding, modifying his curriculum framework of four different levels of multicultural education by

reducing them to three. We combined his Contributions and Additives levels to one since they both address factual information.

- Furthermore, we saw Bieger's work (1995/1996) as an example of how Banks's (1989) framework could be used in identifying the cultural depth or complexity of a book's content.

### Methodology

We studied 44 children's stories that originate from or are about people of the Middle East and the Arabic Speaking World. We chose this focus because of its contemporary relevance. Each book's *Cultural Voice* was identified by using a formal content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). This involved a systematic and objective coding procedure that required working between and among five sources: the (a) book content, (b) Coding Directions, (c) Cultural Paradigm, (d) Coding Chart, and (e) Curriculum Tool. The book's content led the procedure. (For a detailed explanation of The Coding Directions, Cultural Paradigm and Coding Chart please visit the web site [www.culturalvoices.org](http://www.culturalvoices.org). One needs to check the section of Downloads titled The Middle East and The Arabic Speaking World.)

Data collection was continued until 100% agreement was reached among three coders. Verification of the coding was completed again a year later. This content analysis defined our *Cultural Voices*.

### Identifying Cultural Voices as the Source of Metacognitive Strategies

The Curriculum Tool, Table 1, is an organizational device that helps teachers quickly recognize the *Cultural Voice* of a particular book or groups of books. The Tool is a matrix consisting of nine cells, each describing one *Cultural Voice*. Three of the *Voices* speak to *universal* themes with each having a different level of *cultural complexity*. The other three

*Voices* describe *culturally specific* themes, again, each with a different level of content complexity.

The two major book themes are independent of each other. However, the three levels of ***cultural complexity*** form a hierarchy moving from the least to the most complex content. The foundation level is *contributions or additive*, followed by *transformation*, and then *social action*.

(When viewing the Curriculum Tool readers will notice that *universal/transformation* does not contain a title. However, in a prior study, this *Voice* was represented. For our current work, we can envision story lines that would fit the *Voice*, but our target books did not yield such results.)

An explanation of the steps and thinking processes involved in identifying a *Cultural Voice* are described below. Then, we explain how this process, when modified to fit the developmental levels of children, represents a set of metacognitive strategies youngsters can use to monitor their own learning.

#### *Guidelines for Identifying Book Theme*

Identifying a book's ***theme*** requires careful application of the Coding Directions (see web site for details). It also requires careful interpretation of the text, pictures, author notes, information on the copyright page and afterwords. When determining the book's ***theme***, the following focus questions are answered:

**What is the author trying to tell me?**

**What is the author trying to say about people and living?**

**Does the theme refer to all mankind, or is it specific to one or more than one culture?**

Then, one of the definitions from the Coding Directions, summarized below, is selected that best reflects the theme.

1. A *universal theme* transcends specific cultures and deals with characteristics common to virtually all people. Core values, virtues, and vices shared by humanity are emphasized. Some examples of *universal themes* are those that highlight honesty, loyalty, greed, or peace.
2. A *culturally specific theme* emphasizes particular cultural ideas, values, practices, or situations. If a *theme* is *culturally specific*, it is further coded as either *one culture* or *two or more cultures interacting*. *One culture* would include such aspects as the beliefs, practices, language, and history of a single culture. *Two or more cultures interacting* illustrates a targeted culture interacting with any other culture as an integral part of the story.

#### *Guidelines for Identifying Cultural Complexity*

To identify the level or levels of *cultural complexity*, a change of thinking is required. The book should be reread with a focus on cultural information. To group cultural content by levels, the following definitions and focus questions, from the Coding Directions, are used.

1. *Contributions or additive* content represents cultural facts only. To recognize these, readers employ thinking skills that require knowledge and comprehension. The following focus question is asked to determine if the content can be placed at this level.

**Have I learned facts or concepts about a specific culture without learning the why or how behind the facts or concepts?**

2. Content reflecting the *transformation* level includes ideas that require recognition of different ways of thinking and different values. Readers build on their thinking skills by

stepping outside of themselves and looking through the eyes of others. This includes at the least open-mindedness. Evaluation and judgments may also be involved. Books coded at this level may suggest or mention a social issue; however, taking action to resolve it is not included. The reader utilizes both the cognitive and affective domains.

To determine if content can be placed at this level two focus questions are asked:

**Have I read or seen why a specific culture, or many cultures, behave or believe as they do?**

**Or, have I learned from an insider's perspective how a member of a culture views a situation or issue, without trying to resolve it?**

3. *Social action* defines content presenting realistic social issues, problems and solutions that fall anywhere on a continuum from minor to major concerns. Readers are required to use a spectrum of thinking skills which include evaluation and decision-making. Not only do readers recognize the problem and identify the solution, but they make judgments concerning the outcome, and relate the information to their own value system. This level requires sophisticated thinking in both the cognitive and affective domains.

Social action focus questions are:

**Have I read about a character(s) solving or attempting to solve a realistic problem that centers on a social issue, no matter how major or minor, or whether it requires an internal or external resolution?**

**Or, have I read about a character(s) giving advice or suggesting a course of action that may alleviate a societal or personal problem?**

### A Metacognitive Curricular Approach by Developmental Levels

Learning how to identify a story's *Voice* teaches children how to select and properly use a set of metacognitive reading strategies that assist in building cultural understanding of self and others. The teaching of *Cultural Voices* supports best practices for literacy acquisition (e.g., Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003) and creates thought provoking environments (e.g., Mangieri & Block, 1994) within culturally compatible classrooms (e.g., Swiniarski, Breitborde, & Murphy, 1999). Figure 1 summarizes some of the effective classroom practices that are found naturally in *Cultural Voices*. Teachers, as decision-makers and guides, should determine how and when certain practices will be employed.

#### *Teaching Metacognitive Reading Strategies for Cultural Understanding*

It is important to keep in mind that the 9 *Cultural Voices* are not equal in complexity and therefore require different levels of thinking. Thus, we suggest that teachers begin instruction with books that are the least complex. Then, they can move to books with *Voices* that address more sophisticated cognitive operations.

It makes sense to start instruction with readings having *themes* that are likely to be familiar to children and with *content complexity* that is easily recognizable. Therefore, we recommend beginning with the *Cultural Voice, universal/contributions or additive* (see Table 1). *Universal themes* contain lessons about behavior and life that we would expect children to learn during their early years, at home, at school, and in the community. Many of these books happen to be folk tales and fairy tales.

*Contributions and additive content* helps children build knowledge at the factual level. We found that this information is often easily identified since many facts are explicitly stated in the text or presented clearly in the pictures.

### *A Beginning Approach*

To illustrate a beginning instructional approach, we use the book *The Hungry Coat* by Demi (2004). This story's *Cultural Voice* is *universal/ contributions or additive*. After reading the selection, educators can ask students to think about and respond to the specific focus questions. These should be restated based on the developmental level of the children and should eventually form the self-questioning metacognitive strategies children use when reading independently. Helping children develop thoughtful habits requires generous teacher scaffolding (Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003) and therefore considerable instructional time (Onosko & Newmann, 1994).

For those who have not read the book, we present a brief summary.

A Turkish man, Hoca, becomes soiled helping remove a goat from a caravansary. This makes him late for a dinner date, so he decides not to change his clothes and arrives at a party in a shabby condition. The host is embarrassed, guests and servants ignore Hoca, and he is not served dinner. Hoca realizes the situation and takes leave. He baths and dresses in his best attire. Upon returning to the celebration he is treated with much attention and served all the fine dishes. Hoca, instead of dining, puts the food in his coat telling the coat to eat. This surprised everyone. In response, the wise Hoca said that it must have been his fancy coat that was invited because when he wore the soiled one he was ignored. He stated that it is the man who is important not the coat. Everyone, then, celebrated his wisdom.

#### *Determining a universal theme.*

The story *The Hungry Coat* (Demi, 2004) teaches the lesson that the worth of an individual should be measured by inner qualities not outer appearance. When asking themselves **“What is the author trying to tell me”**, we expect children to say something like: “It is OK if

someone is dirty, you can still eat with them.” “It’s not what I wear that is important; it is who I am that counts.” The teacher would help the children synthesize their many thoughts into a single declarative sentence that, if possible, reflects their collective thinking.

To complete the process, educators will need to assist students in deciding **if the theme refers to all people or just some?** If the central idea, stated in a declarative sentence, reflects our common humanity then it is considered *universal*. In this case, the lesson “The worth of an individual should be measured by inner qualities not outer appearance,” is *universal*.

*Determining cultural complexity at the contributions or additive level.*

*The Hungry Coat* (Demi, 2004) is a Turkish folktale centered on Nasrettin Hoca, a Turkish folk philosopher and humorist. In the ‘Afterwords’ we learn about Hoca’s role in Turkish history. We see stylized clothing and architecture from the 1200s. We learn about some of the food people in Turkey eat.

Recognizing information at the basic level of **cultural complexity** requires educators to teach children to ask themselves and then answer the question “**Am I learning facts?**” For *The Hungry Coat* (Demi, 2004) we would expect children to answer something like: “Yes, we learn about how people dress, and the things they wear on their heads.” “The funny man, named Hoca, rides on a donkey and takes care of a goat.” This information, presented clearly in the illustrations and the text, contributes to a child’s cultural knowledge base, thus, indicating the *contributions or additive* level.

In essence, many experiences with literature having a *Cultural Voice of universal/contributions or additive* should allow children, with the help of the teacher, to generalize their learning. One generalization can be constructed by considering **themes**. Readers can conclude that there are many ways people think and act alike. Furthermore, many

experiences over time, with *culturally specific* information-- that which builds knowledge--helps children construct, at the basic levels, cultural schemas or modify cultural misconceptions. These experiences are the first step towards using self-monitoring processes while reading about cultural concepts and content.

### *An Advanced Approach*

One of the more complex *Cultural Voices* is *culturally specific, one culture/ social action*. The metacognitive strategies helpful when working with this *Voice* are more sophisticated than the example mentioned above. When a book contains ideas that necessitate a higher level of cognition and a higher level of engagement in the affective domain, a number of questions are required for analysis. Let us look at the book *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland, 1992), potentially appropriate for grades 4 and above, to illustrate the thinking involved.

For those who have not read the book, we present a brief summary.

Sami is a boy living in war-torn Lebanon. His mother, grandfather and sister take refuge, from bombing and gunfire, in a basement holding as many familiar objects as possible. They grieve the loss of Sami's father and their previous life. During quiet periods Sami, his family and friends try to resume normal life and clean-up from the bombing. As the story ends, we see Sami and his family yearning for a time of peace and thinking about organizing a children's protest march.

### *Determining a theme that is culturally specific, one culture.*

Heide and Gilliland, in *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (1992) tell us that patience, hope and action help people through the dangers and fear of a war-torn Lebanon. (Note: The knowledge about the setting comes from the copyright page and story's reference to "the day of

the children.”) To infer such a message, children need to answer a number of questions. They should begin by asking **“What is the author trying to tell me?”** and **“What is the author trying to say about people and living?”** We anticipate that students’ might answer: “Living in war is very scary.” “People need to do special things when there is a war.” Once students come up with a number of ideas, the teacher can help them combine their responses into a single inclusive declarative statement that summarizes the *theme*.

To determine the *theme* type learners consider the question **“Does the theme refer to all mankind, or is it specific to one or more than one culture?”** This particular story tells about a family living during the Lebanese Civil War. We consider this one culture since the theme is solely about a Lebanese historical event. Therefore, the book is coded as *culturally specific, one culture*.

*Determining social action cultural complexity.*

The next type of analysis requires a change in thinking. Rather than determining the book’s theme, children need to focus on the *content complexity*. For *contributions or additive* information students need to ask **“Am I learning facts?”** When answering, they would say “Yes, we see the houses and carpets on the walls.” “We see how some people get married.” “We know there are bombings and a war.”

Next, children need to move to the *Transformation* level. The two questions to ask are: **“Have I read or seen why a specific culture, or many cultures, behave or believe as they do?”** **“And, have I learned from an insider’s perspective how a member of a culture views a situation or issue, without trying to resolve it?”** Initially, we would expect that some children may answer the first question affirmatively, suggesting that there is content at the *transformation* level. The book explains why the family acts in certain ways. The story tells why they are living

in the basement and why they have rugs on the wall. However, with scaffolding teachers need to direct students to the second question to see that the motivation of the behavior is to solve a problem, and solving the problem is the key to identifying content at the *social action* level. In other words, although we learn many reasons why the family acts and believes as it does, their behavior is based on their attempts to solve their problem, surviving the war. Therefore there is no information that needs to be coded at the *transformation* level.

Finally, to identify content considered *social action* students would ask: “**Am I seeing how people think about and act to solve social problems?**” We anticipate with adequate scaffolding, students will say “Yes, people hide in the basement.” “They go outside only at night.” “They wait for the bombing to stop, and they protest the war.” In total, the content presented in Heide and Gilliland’s *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (1992) falls into two categories: *social action* and *contributions or additive*. As shown in the Curriculum Tool (see Table 1) the book is coded at its highest level, *social action*.

As students identify the *theme* and *content complexity*, teachers can help them relate these elements to their own thinking about cultures and to situations that may have occurred or will occur in their own lives. Students can then question their beliefs, confirm them, or change them. Teachers and students can discuss their reactions to the war, how they would feel or act in the time of crisis, whether they would protest the war, and the thinking behind their choices.

In essence, many experiences with literature having a *Cultural Voice* of *culturally specific, one culture/social action* allow students the opportunity to generalize about specific cultures. Children can see that cultures have their own history, practices, beliefs, and values. Also, with this *Voice*, learners may practice more sophisticated thinking. They recognize realistic problems, identify a variety of resolutions, and make judgments about them. The practices,

values, and beliefs of others may then be either accepted or rejected based on a developing personal value system.

### Support and Encouragement

The two examples described in the previous section--a beginning approach and an advanced one--illustrate how teachers can employ developmentally appropriate practices using *Cultural Voices* to teach metacognitive strategies that begin to empower readers to be independent thinkers and problem-solvers. All *Voices* provide an avenue for such development.

One suggestion in the quest for navigating an avenue is to use the “Book Search” option on the web site [www.culturalvoices.org](http://www.culturalvoices.org). It provides more than 100 stories that have already been categorized and coded for curriculum building. The books that were selected reflect our Cultural Paradigm which presents various forms of human diversity that go beyond and include ethnicity. The readings were selected to embody the cultural complexity that can be found in today’s classrooms. Referring to the Paradigm is imperative when analyzing and coding books for *Cultural Voices*. (The Cultural Paradigm can be found on the web site.)

Over time, we encourage teachers to begin to code and categorize their own favorite pieces. Information on the web site provides the supporting material for doing so. It is our hope that this will assist educators in creating in-depth units that fit their own professional needs.

### Final Thoughts

We have presented a curricular approach that uses *Cultural Voices* of books from or about people of the Middle East and Arabic Speaking World to illustrate how to challenge and promote student thinking. Through this simultaneous instruction teachers and students can utilize a set of self-monitoring strategies when studying culturally complex literature. This approach gives educators opportunities to be “models of thoughtfulness” (Onosko & Newmann, 1994) as they

support their students in a sustained examination of cultural understanding and the reading process.

Our work is but a beginning in developing well cultivated thinkers. Students need many and varied opportunities to practice and reflect on their own intellectual growth. We now leave this challenge to the creative and inquisitive minds of the classroom teacher.

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Table 1

*The Curriculum Tool: Cultural Voices of Books From or About People of the Middle East and Arabic Speaking World*

		<u>Level of cultural content</u>		
		Contributions or additive	Transformation	Social action
<u>Book theme</u>	Culturally specific	Celebrating Norouz: Persian New	Ramadan	Ali, Child of the Desert
		Year	Rashid of Saudi Arabia	Muslim Festivals
		Fasting and Dates: A Ramadan and	The Day of Amid's Secret	Sami and the Time of
		Eid-ul-Fitr Story		Troubles
		Madhi: A Child of Egypt		
One culture		The Hundredth Name		

	<u>Level of cultural content</u>		
	Contributions or additive	Transformation	Social action
<u>Book theme</u> Culturally specific Two or more cultures interacting	Sitti's Secret	Muhammad	Behold the Trees
	Vinnie in Egypt	The Storytellers	Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan
			Coming to America: A Muslim Family's Story
			From Far Away
			Magid Fasts for Ramadan
			My Name is Bilal
			Saladin: Noble Prince of Islam
			The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq
			The Roses in My Carpets
			The Stars in my Geddoh's Sky

<u>Level of cultural content</u>		
Contributions or additive	Transformation	Social action
Abu Ali: Three Tales of the Middle East	The sample yielded no title.	Nadia the Willful
Forty Fortunes: A Tale of Iran		No One Walks on My Father's Moon
Honsi the Dreamer		
Once the Hodja		
Sinbad: From the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights		
The Friends of Abu Ali: Three More Tales from the Middle East		
The Golden Sandal: A Middle Eastern Cinderella Story		
The Hungry Coat		
The Magic Horse		

Book theme  
universal

		<u>Level of cultural content</u>		
		Contributions or additive	Transformation	Social action
<u>Book theme</u> universal	The Patient Stone: A Persian Love			
	Story			
	The Persian Cinderella			
	The Rose's Smile			
	The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the			
	Sailor			
	The Three Princes: A Tale from the			
	Middle East			
	What About Me?			
	What's so Funny, Ketu?			
What's the Matter, Habibi?				
Zora's Magic Carpet				

Figure 1: Best Classroom Practices Reflected in the Teaching of Cultural Voices

