

Creating Multicultural Books for Children: A Writers' and Illustrators' Workshop

**School, Family, and Society Foundation
Tbilisi, Georgia**

Prepared by



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Introduction to Writing for Children

This guidebook has been created to accompany writing workshops for people who are interested in writing books for young people. It especially meant for people from Central Europe and the South Caucasus who wish to write works that are relevant to contemporary children and young people, and that reflect the variety of cultures of the children in those regions.

What Good Children's Books Do

There are many good reasons why children need books. The most obvious reasons are that children's books--

- **Stimulate the imagination**—whether fictional or informational, books give children good and important things to think about. Because books are more participatory than television or films, they encourage children to think. And because they are more wholesome than games that children might play on a computer, we can truly say they offer good and important things.
- **Expand children's awareness**— books explain more about the reality of our own lives and the world around us than children are likely to learn otherwise.
- **Provide frameworks of meaning to understand the world**—fiction especially has a way of explaining what events mean. Life just happens, but stories are our way of saying what the significance of actions and events are.
- **Offer occasions to get to know other people**—when books realistically display events from human life, and when young people are encouraged and allowed to respond freely and honestly to them, the books make *interpretive communities* of groups of people, and enable young people to understand each other's varying perspectives on life.
- **Provide a rich source of language**—whether they are written in a reader's first or second language, books are the richest source of vocabulary we have.

What Multi-Cultural Books Do

- **Provide a *window* into another culture for majority children**—they allow “mainstream” children to see what is similar and what is different in the lives of children with whom they may never have gone home.
- **Provide a welcome *mirror* of themselves for the minority children**—books can show children from minority groups portraits of other children like themselves. They become more interested in reading such books. If those books are found in school, they feel a closer attachment to the school, and more interested in learning.

What Books Written on Graduated Levels of Difficulty Do

In some of our writing projects we will be creating series of several books written on carefully graduated levels of difficulty. These books are especially helpful for children who are learning to read, or who are learning to read in a second language.

These books--

- **Provide children with memorable samples of language**—as you will see, the best of these books provide children with patterns of language that they can read aloud, dramatize, and use to create songs, poems, and books of their own.
- **Provide children needed practice in reading accessible text**—many reading schemes accelerate fairly quickly from letters to syllables to words to sentences to texts. Children who have limited exposure to literacy at home, or whose early school experiences have been sporadic, may find these schemes too difficult. They can benefit from the practice in reading that these books offer them. These books offer useful practice in reading for fluency and reading for meaning that is beneficial for all children.
- **Make learning to read, as well as learning a second language, enjoyable**—The “little Books” that are written especially for young people who are learning to read can be delightful and engaging—and because children can read them with only moderate difficulty, the books provide children a sense of mastery in becoming readers.

Who Can Write Good Books for Young People?

Some people believe that only a few very gifted people can write good books for children. Other people believe that writing for children is trivially easy, not worthy of a serious person's efforts. Neither position is correct. Writing an excellent children's book is like writing an excellent book for adults—it's just that the scale is smaller. If writing were painting, children's books would be small paintings. Writing children's books is like writing poetry: every word must count—in sense, meaning, and connotation.

Undeniably, some degree of native talent helps a person write well. But mostly, writing good books for children requires two things:

- 1) Some training,
- 2) And a great deal of practice.

Varieties of Literature for Children and Young People

Where children's books are plentiful, they come in these varieties:

Picture books. These books are usually short, 32 pages long, in fact, because pages are usually printed in multiples of eight. The texts may be reasonably sophisticated, because they are often read to children by a teacher or a parent. The illustrations usually take up half or more of each page.

Easy readers. These are books that are deliberately written with simple texts that are accessible to young readers. They may be short—eight or sixteen pages; or they may be extended up to 48 or 64 pages. Easy readers are illustrated, and—especially in the simplest ones-- the pictures are carefully designed to support the meaning of the text. The text employs patterns that help children predict what is coming: “On Monday I saw one ____, On Tuesday I saw two ____, On Wednesday I saw three ____,” etc.

Big books. Large versions of easy readers are made by teachers or sold by publishers. These books which may be nearly a meter high and a meter wide when opened, enable the teacher to read and point to the text and the pictures while the children read along.

Chapter books. Chapter books are written for children as young as second grade who are able to read on their own without constant support from an adult. They tell a single story or develop a single topic, but break the presentation up into chapters of between six and ten pages that are reasonably complete in themselves. Their authors expect that the young readers may only read one chapter at a sitting. Chapter books may range from 64 pages to a little over 100 pages.

Novels. For readers in fourth grade and above, novels that imitate adult novels are available. These may range from one to several hundred pages.

Young adult books. Books for teenagers constitute a somewhat smaller marketing the children's literature. By the time readers are in sixth or seventh grade, most are capable of reading adult fiction, and many enjoy adult science fiction and fantasy. But a special niche of books explores issues of interests to adolescents, and these are young adult novels.

Anthologies. Stories by a single author or by several authors may be collected around a single theme and published as an anthology. In some writing projects where authors are just beginning to write works for young readers, this is a popular approach, since it results in many short works that still address sophisticated themes.

Genres of Books for Children

Children's books are written in different genres, and each one of these elicits a somewhat different kind of thinking. The first group of genres are fictional.

Folk Tales, Religious Stories, and Legends. These are stories that have been told over and over again, whose authors are unknown. They usually feature striking events, but

minimally drawn characters and settings. They may contain supernatural elements. They may reinforce a piece of folk wisdom or moral teaching. Legends tell of the memorable, if often invented or exaggerated, deeds of famous people, including saints. Religious stories may be retellings of stories from religious scriptures, or further tales about religious figures.

Jokes and Riddles. Jokes and riddles are from the oral tradition, but they are written into books, too.

Scary stories. Ghost stories are a popular sub-category of folk tales.

Realistic fiction. Some stories treat events that *could have* happened. They are limited to real world solutions to problems, although the settings may be made up and the characters fictitious.

Fantasy and Science Fiction. Works that create imagined worlds are called fantasies. The most popular fantasy books currently are the Harry Potter books, but many others—many simpler and shorter—are also available. Fantasies usually depict great struggles requiring great endurance and heroism. Works of science fiction are special kinds of fantasies that show worlds that are logical extension of the real world

There are also many genres of books for children that are informational.

Concept books. For the youngest children, books can present a series of animals, jobs, foods, games, seasons of the year, numbers of things, and so on.

How-to books. Some books tell young readers how to carry out skilled tasks, such as playing a sport or training a dog.

Explanatory books. Books exist on a huge range of subjects, from varieties of trains to how mummies are prepared.

Single-topic books. As an improvement over earlier “all-about” books, single topic books focus on a few key aspects of a topic—not just everything about volcanoes, but the eruption of Krakatoa.

History and biographies. The best historical books create interest, and can read like detective novels. A subset of historical books are biographies.

Writing Books for Beginning Readers

What are some examples of good texts for beginning readers?

“Brown Bear, Brown, What Do You See?”

(Illustration not shown)	Brown bear, brown bear, What do you see?
I see a yellow duck looking at me.	Yellow duck, yellow duck, What do you see?
I see a green frog looking at me.	Green frog, green frog, What do you see?...

“When I Was Young in the Mountains”

When I was young in the mountains, Grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of a coal mine. Only his lips were clean, and he used them to kiss the top of my head.	(Illustrations not shown)
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When I was young in the mountains, Grandmother spread the table with hot corn bread, pinto beans, and fried okra.	
In the middle of the night, she walked through the grass with me to the Johnny- house and held my hand in the dark. I promised never to eat more than one service of okra again...	

“The Dance” (“Dansul”)

	(Illustrations not shown)
In the summertime, the children dance in the grass.	
After the rain, the children dance barefoot.	
When evening comes, the children dance around the fire.	
Sometimes, the children dance the <i>hora</i> .	
Once, the children danced on the stage.	

“Little Dogies, Lay Down”

“Blue, are you asleep?”	“Nope.”
“Is the ground too hard?”	“Nope, I’m waiting.”
“Waiting for what?”	“Something.”

“What something?”	“Stampede, maybe. Hear that?”
“Hear what?”	“Rumbling.”
“Yeah, just thunder.”	“See that?”
“See what?”	“Flashing.”
“Just lightning.”	“Getting closer, though. Look. Old Spook’s stirring.”
“Why, that old one-eyed trouble-maker. Now he’s stood up.”	“He’ll start a stampede for sure.”
“Start singing, Blue.”	“You, too, kid.”
<i>Lay down, little doggies, lay down. We’ve both got to sleep on the cold, cold ground. The wind’s blowing colder as the sun’s going down. Lay down, little doggies, lay down.</i>	<i>Lay down, little doggies, lay down. We’ve both got to sleep on the cold, cold ground. The wind’s blowing colder as the sun’s going down. Lay down, little doggies, lay down.</i>
“Can you still see him, Blue?”	“Yeah, he’s laid down.”
“Whew! That was a close one! ‘Night, Blue.”	“‘Night, kid.”
“‘Night, cows.”	

Of course, stories for young people can be much longer than these. But the three stories above give an idea how simple but engaging stories for young readers can be arranged.

Looking at the Patterns of Texts

“Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You see?” uses a question and answer pattern, supported by illustrations (not shown) that make it easy for the child to page through and recite the text after a few exposures.

Cynthia Rylant’s “When I was Young in the Mountains” repeats an opening phrase, “When I was young in the mountains...” and follows it with a vivid image from a child’s memory. It offers something of a window into, and a mirror of, a regional culture from the United States that children who grew up in that culture would recognize.

“The Dance,” by Mirena Cionca, begins each two page spread with a prepositional phrase naming a particular time, and describes the dancing that a group of Roma children do then.

“Little Dogies, Lay Down,” by Bucksnot Trout, is a story made entirely from a dialogue between two cowboys, and culminating in a popular folksong. The story is an enjoyable read by two children, who can dramatize it in front of a whole class.

Looking at the Language of Texts

Two of these stories simply relate events, and two of them are built around dialogue. None of them provides any explanation, or even any much description, of what is happening. Since they are written for young readers, who must work for every word they read, no unnecessary words are provided.

Note, too, that when things are not explained, readers have to think and supply the missing descriptions and explanations themselves. Did you need to be told that the girl narrator and the grandfather loved each other? Did you need to be told why the girl had to go to the Johnny-house in the middle of the night? Did you need to be told that the two cowboys were accompanying a herd of cattle on a cattle drive, that lightning and thunder

disturbed the one of the cows (the one with one eye) and that she nearly transmitted her fear to the other cattle and started a stampede? Did you need to know that the two cowboys sang their song in order to quiet the cattle? Most of the children for whom these stories were written do not need to be told these things. They enjoy constructing the meaning themselves from the details provided in the text. They appreciate texts that do not over-explain, that are sparingly written.

Writing New Stories to the Patterns

Imitation in art is perfectly acceptable. In fact, when writers imitate each other's literature, we have a flattering name for it: *intertextuality*. Let's practice a little intertextuality now.

“When I Was Young in the Mountains”

We're going to take the pattern from “When I Was Young in the Mountains” and write a story with it. Notice that the author used the phrase “When I was young in the mountains...” to begin many of her recollections, but not all. You will need your own beginning phrase, of course. How about: “In my village...” or “Up on Papa's hay wagon...” or...? One more thing: You don't suppose all of Cynthia Rylant's memories actually happened exactly that way, do you? She, like most writers of stories, probably started from a true impulse, but she may very well have added or subtracted some details or even whole events to make her story more interesting and beautiful. We have a flattering name for writers playing with the truth, that, too: *poetic license*.

Try this yourself.

- Think of a place you went or lived in your childhood that is particularly rich with associations for you.
- Jot down a list of images and events that you connect with that place.
- Think of a phrase to begin your recollections.
- Write six items from your recollections.

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You should read your recollections to a small group of colleagues. But first, practice reading the work to yourself. Read it to the wall. Make any last minute changes you need to, if something you hear doesn't sound quite right. Read it to the others as if it were poetry. Then ask for their comments. Later, you can go back over it and make any further changes you want to.

“The Dance”

This book follows a different kind of pattern from the previous one. It depicts the same people carrying out activities at different times, and in different settings. Does it suggest a parallel story? A day in the life of a village baker? Of a stray dog? Of a street-sweeper? Of a shepherd?

Imagine yourself as one of those characters, or of yourself in a particular role that you or someone in your family plays. Write out a list of events in the person's day, week, month, year, or life. You can expand on some of them, and keep other ones short.

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After writing, read it over and make any changes you wish before reading it to your colleagues. After you read it to them, make further changes.

Put it away for a day or two. The go back to it with a new set of eyes, and refine it further.

“Brown Bear, Brown Bear/Little Dogies”

Two of the four stories sampled above were in the form of dialogues. “Brown Bear, Brown Bear” is a rhyming book that thousands of children have enjoyed imitating over

the years. “Little Dogies, Lay Down” appeared in a children’s magazine with a circulation of 4,000,000 and has been read aloud by countless pairs of children.

Dialogue stories are easy structures for children to follow. Some of them include a sequential pattern, like this:

One morning Rabbit woke up. Where was Mama? Not in the den. Not outside the den.	Rabbit set off to find Mama.
Rabbit saw Jay Bird. “Have you seen Mama?” asked rabbit.	“No, I haven’t,” said Jay Bird. “Go ask Hedge Hog.”
Rabbit saw Hedge Hog. “Have you seen Mama?” asked rabbit.	“No, I haven’t,” said Hedge Hog. “Go ask Raccoon.”
Rabbit saw Raccoon, “Have you seen Mama?” asked rabbit.	“No, I haven’t,” said Raccoon. “Go ask Snake.”
Rabbit saw Snake. Snake was sneaking up behind Mama. “Run, Mama!” shouted Rabbit.	Mama and Rabbit ran home.
“Where <i>were</i> you?” asked Rabbit.	“Getting you a present,” said Mama. “Happy birthday!”

Pick **one** of the pairs of characters below and write a dialogue story. Keep explanations short, or leave them out all together. After the dialogue has gone on for some time, put in an exciting problem. Then quickly end the story on a calm note.

- A baker and a hungry, penniless orphan girl.
- An bus driver and a wagoneer.
- An eccentric artist and a town judge.
- A child seeking safety and a series of strangers.
- A teacher seeking an answer and a series of puzzled students.
- A football team captain looking for a goalie.

Writing Stories from Your Life

Many writers find that their best ideas come from their own family. Think about each of these prompts and choose one that suggests a story to you.

- How your mother met your father.
- An unforgettable day at school for you.
- A time when you were lost.
- A time you didn't want to do a chore.
- How you got your name.
- How you got a nickname.
- A family tradition.

After choosing your prompt, jot down some notes on paper. Then have a partner interview you. The partner should ask you about the details of your story. You should listen to yourself as you tell the story. What are the most interesting parts?

Now write your story. Give it a beginning, a middle, and an end. Or make it a chain of events. Either way, give it a pattern.

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Again, you should read your story to a small group of colleagues. But first, practice reading it to yourself. Read it to the wall. Make any last minute changes you need to, if something you hear doesn't sound quite right. Read it to the others as if it were a dramatic revelation. Then ask for their comments. Later, you can go back over it and make any further changes you want to.

Here are several more prompts for stories from personal experience:

- How you got a scar
- Warnings your grandmother gave you

- Superstitions you believed as a child
- Things you and your friends used to dare each other to do
- A pet animal that you had and the strange things she did.

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“Distancing” Yourself from Your Story.

Remember the story, “When I Was Young in the Mountains”? We noted that the experiences in the story really did happen to the author, but that she might not really have experienced all of them exactly as they were described. The events of our lives can be turned into wonderful books for children--but we have to be careful. Our real lives are usually too complicated, too full of details, to make interesting reading for young people.

Try distancing yourself from your real story in this way:

1. Think of a story from your life, preferably from your childhood. It might be about you, or a family member, or a friend of yours. It will probably be a story that has been told before, because it is memorable.
2. Choose a partner, one who doesn’t already know the story. Tell the story to your partner.
3. The partner must listen very, very carefully. Give the partner a few minutes after the story has been told to prepare to tell the story back to you.
4. The partner now tells the story back, but in a new way. The partner should exercise the poetic license mentioned earlier. The partner make you the most handsome or the most beautiful child ever. The partner can exaggerate the problem and make it HUGE. The partner can make the scary part a LOT SCARIER. That’s the partner’s job.
5. Listen to the partner’s story. Be careful: don’t think—“No, no!-- That’s not the way it happened.” Instead think, “Yes, yes! That makes an exciting story!”

6. Now write your own story, sing what you want of the things your partner added (or subtracted) and adding more things of your own. Make the story simpler, or more dramatic, or funnier—whatever you like. Just make it a good story.
7. Take turns. Let your partner tell her or his own story, and you listen to it carefully, and think of more dramatic ways to tell it back to your partner, and so on.

Writing from a Cultural Perspective

Writing from a cultural perspective is a complicated issue. The ways to depict children from a particular culture might vary along this continuum:

- **Cultural stereotypes**—the character from the other culture is depicted in the off-hand and often derogatory way that an insensitive member of the mainstream culture might use. These features might not even apply to most of the members of that culture.
- **Cultural emphasis**— the character from the other culture is depicted in ways that are realistic and specific to the culture, with the emphasis on the things that differentiate that person’s culture from the mainstream culture. The traits of the character may be largely tied to the person’s cultural background: she or he has little personality besides being a “walking version of X culture.” The result is that the person looks really different from, though not worse than, a similar person from the mainstream culture. And the person may be stuck in the role of a representative of her or his cultural group.
- **Cultural variety**-- the character from the other culture shows a mix of traits—she or he does or feels some things that are like members of the minority culture, but other things that are like members of the majority culture, as well as many things that are idiosyncratic to that character herself or himself.
- **Cultural invisibility**-- the character from the other culture is depicted exactly like everyone else in the story. It is as if the artist picked a person at random and drew an article of clothing that identified that person with a particular group—although nothing else in that person’s life is characteristic of a different culture.

When **cultural stereotypes** are used, they give offense to members of the culture that is depicted that way, and they may reinforce prejudices held by members of the mainstream cultural group who are inclined to think of members of the minority group in that way.

When **cultural emphasis** is used, a reader from the majority culture will be struck mainly by the differences—that reader may consider the character to be much more closely tied to her or his cultural group than the reader is. And a reader who is a member of the minority group thus displayed is likely to feel embarrassed to be singled out in this way, to be cast in the role of “cultural diplomat.”

When **cultural variety** is used, the character I portrayed as essentially like members of the mainstream culture, and also individualistic and “real,” so that the members of the mainstream culture are easily able to identify with the character. When that happens, members of the mainstream culture will experience the culturally-specific aspects of the character's life as interesting details to be understood and taken in stride, rather than as things that make that character “strange” or “weird.” And the reader who is a member of the minority group may feel proud to be recognized, but not alienated from her or his classmates.

When **cultural invisibility** is used, it may have the effect of making members of minority groups seem “just like everybody else.” While this is not harmful, the depiction may not seem very real to members of the minority group, and may do little to expand the awareness of members of the majority group.

Gary Soto's picture book, *Snapshots from the Wedding* is an excellent example of a book that shows cultural variety. The book's narrator is a young girl with a lively sense of humor, whose account of a Mexican wedding points both to aspects that will be familiar to most of her readers and other aspects, such as language, that will be new to them.

(Picture not shown) There's Rafael, a really, really nice guy. But <i>pobrecito</i> , a cast on his arm (Playing weekend softball, he slid into home, scored, but broke his wrist).	(Picture not shown) I think it makes him look brave y <i>guapo</i> . <i>Mira</i> , can you see Tía Maria crying big tears? See Tío Juan itching in his new suit?
<i>Pobrecito</i> = "Poor thing."	<i>Y guapo</i> = "and handsome." <i>Mira</i> = "Look." <i>Tío, Tía</i> = "uncle" and "aunt."

Patterns of Stories from a Cultural Basis

Here are some patterns that can be used to write stories that include cultural material.

- **A day in the life.** Write about a day in the life of a student from a particular cultural group. You might begin with breakfast—what she ate, and who prepared it. Continue with the walk to school, and who and what she passes along the way. That might be enough for a story! Or you might tell, event by event, what happens when the student leaves school on the last day of the week.
- **Going to market:** What happens and what a student experiences on the way to market and at the market.
- **Grandfather's journey:** The trip the first family member made to Georgia from his or her country of origin.
- **A festival:** What a young person experiences at a wedding, a birthday celebration, a christening, or another celebration. Imitate Gary Soto's character, and make it entertaining!

Finding Memorable Patterns in Local Culture

Books are more satisfying to children if they sound familiar to them. Families, neighborhoods, communities, and cultures have their own forms of memorable speech. Some tell tall tales—exaggerated accounts of bravery or prowess. Some tell praise stories, glowing accounts of the exploits of a relative or family friend. Some tell humorous but scary stories as warnings to children of the

consequences of bad behavior. Talk to the old people, and listen to the young people, in the community of the children for whom you are writing. See if you can find types of stories or other recitations that are commonly used. If you do, share them with your colleagues, and use them to write works for children.

Other Writing Strategies

“What if? “

Sometimes stories can be sparked by unusual suggestions. Copy both of the columns of items below onto pieces of paper. Then tear them apart and match different **characters** and **actions** until you find a pair that suggests a story to you.

Character	Action
A young shepherd	Marched in front of the wedding procession
A 9 year old magician	Hid in a trunk and was loaded onto a train
A very forgetful priest	Invented the world’s tastiest sandwich
A kindly schoolteacher	Stepped into a bottomless hole in the sidewalk
A child who walks people’s dogs	Banged on the cathedral door at midnight
A child who was always exaggerating about herself	Eyed the approaching trapeze bar and said, “Well, here goes...”

(After Bernays an Painter, 1991).

Exaggerations

Many stories begin with an event from real life, and exaggerate that event to dramatic proportions. For example, a middle school teacher complained that many of her

male students sometimes got into trouble by imitating negative role models. She exaggerated that problem into a story like the following:

A 13 year old boy imitates gangsters. He oils his hair, wears a leather jacket with the collar turned up, and keeps a cigarette dangling from his mouth (although he doesn't inhale the smoke). One day as he is standing idly on a street corner trying his best to look like a gangster, a big black car stops next to him. The window rolls slowly down, a voice says, "Here it is. Don't screw up!" and a plastic bag is thrust into the boy's hands. The car slips into the traffic and is gone...

Try this: Think of a situation your children or your students get into. Exaggerate it greatly, as the middle school teacher did in the story above. Write the story.

Visualizing

Writers and illustrators need to practice the power of the imagination to bring settings and characters to life. That power can be developed through exercises like the following. Go some place quiet, and free from distractions. Study these suggestions carefully so that you can repeat them to yourself. Then close your eyes and follow those suggestions, as you remember them.

Picture a character from your story.

Where is the person right now? On a bench with another student in a classroom?

Huddled in an alleyway? Walking along a sandy beach?

What do you see around this person? A crowd of strangers, looking in all directions? A dusty street, littered with puddles and horse-droppings? A bus station full of travelers, heavy with bundles? In the back of a truck, crowded with refugees, all standing upright?

What does the air feel like? Hot sun on the skin? Biting sand propelled by wind? Humidity from a lingering rain storm?

What is the light like? Is it painting everything in red—sunset after a storm? Is it reflecting gold off wave tops by the shore? Is it harsh, greenish fluorescent light?

(Remember, you can see it. And you are the only one who can.)

What is the character doing right now? Judging which way to jump, to escape an oncoming truck? Peeling potatoes in a steaming camp kitchen? Standing on a solitary rock overlooking a sheep herd? Looking for space to lie down on a crowded bed of sleeping siblings?

Look at your character's hands. Are they clinched around the handle of a shovel? Clutching a pencil and writing? Strained white from pulling on a rope on a sailboat? Folded prim and proper in the person's lap?

What sounds do you hear in that setting? Gentle breathing of sleeping people? The strain of truck engines and the grinding of gears? The shouts of vendors in a marketplace? The echoes of a teacher's voice in a crowded classroom with bare walls?

Take one more good look at your character and the surroundings.

Now open your eyes and write exactly what you saw.

(After Cindy Gregory).

Small Problems/Big Problems

Someone said "Life is what happens on the way to realizing your plans." It is certainly true that even though we all have big ambitions, the minutes of our lives are caught up in the small things.

Think of the small things that concern your students. Think of the girls first. Make a list of the things that concern them. For an example to get you started, here is the beginning of one teacher's list:

Who gets to sit next to Ana

Pink

Their bodies are changing. Why isn't mine?

Time management: fitting in everything I want to do

Try to list at least twenty items for the girls you know. Then do the same for the boys.

Now think of the big problems that some young people have. Make a separate list for girls and boys—you can put some problems on both lists. For an example to get you started, here is the beginning of one teacher’s list:

Both parents work outside of the country

The family is desperately poor

Violence in the family

Human trafficking—girls are being lured away to foreign countries

Try to think of a dozen items for this list.

Now if you want to write about a girl, hold the two lists for girls side by side—the little problems and the big problems. (Or do the same for boys’ problems). Put your fingers on different pairs of small and big problems, until a combination suggests a story idea. Write the story about the *small* problem. The big problem will serve as the background reality that you can point to but not dwell upon. Here are a couple of examples:

- A girl has her heart set on a dress of a certain color for a party, but her family was desperately poor.
- A girl is deeply worried about pubertal changes in her body, but her parents are working out of the country and she has no one to talk to.

Write the story for thirty minutes, without stopping. Let the story go where it wants to—after all, the real story may be what happens on paper when you are trying to write the other story you were planning to write. Go back and look it over, then write the story that is occurring to you.

Dramatizing as a Basis for Writing

A very wise teacher observed that different kinds of writing use different levels of abstraction.

- **Drama** tells *what is happening*.
- **Story** tells *what happened*
- **Essay** tells *what happens*.

Dramatizing a story, or a part of a story, can be a very effective way to explore the realities that lie beneath the surface—the motives, the feelings, the detailed actions. The procedures that follow are adapted from Spolin (1988) and Heathcote (Betty Jane Wagner: *Drama as a Learning Medium*. Washington: NEA, 1976).

Immerse students in the story. You need to make sure the students get the story on a literal level--that they know what happened. This may mean reading the story to them, or asking them to reread the part you are going to dramatize.

Warm up to do drama. There are many warm up activities that work well to prepare ourselves to act with more expression.

1. *Stretches.* Stand in a circle. Stretch your arms as high as you can as you spread your feet apart and make a very wide face. Now shrink up into a tiny ball. Then stretch out big again. Do the same with your face: “Lion face!” (Expansive expression). “Prune face!” (Shrunken expression).
2. *Mirrors.* Stand opposite a colleague. One of you is the person and the other is the reflection in the mirror. The person moves (slowly) as the partner mirrors your movements. Switch roles.
3. *Portraits.* Get into groups of four or five. Think of something to depict that uses all of them as parts. For example, if you choose **lion tamer**, one of you can be the lion tamer, others can be lions, others can be the guards, and others can be the thrilled spectators
4. *Machines.* Think of and dramatize an exotic factory machine in which parts move in relation to each other.

Superactions. When we do things with other people we often act on two levels: what we are doing, and what we mean by what we are doing. For example, when we pass somebody we know in the hallway, having just seen him a short time before, we may nod and say “hi.” But when we see a friend in the hallway who has just come back to town after a long time abroad, we say “HI!” In both cases the action is the same: to greet the friend. But the *superaction* is different--In the first case, it’s just to show the person we know he’s there, but in the second case it’s to show that we’re surprised and delighted to see him.

Practice dramatizing *superactions* by setting up brief situations. The action can be a waiter taking a customer’s order. Write *superactions* on small pieces of paper and give one privately to each actor: (to get this over with as soon as possible, to keep the conversation going--you’re bored or lonely or both). Different pairs of your colleagues act out the same scene, the same actions, with different *superactions*.

After a group of your colleagues has dramatized a scene with *superactions*, take fifteen minutes and write what you saw. Then share papers, and discuss them with the actors. Later, consider the motives of characters in your stories the same way: What are their actions? What are their *superactions*?

Choose critical moments of a story to dramatize. In order to explore the meaning, it can especially useful to dramatize just a few choice scenes from a story--especially the turning points: when the most is at stake. In the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” a critical scene might be the moment when Jack first approaches the Giant’s castle, knocks on the door, and is greeted by the Giant’s wife.

Segment the Situation. Now assign colleagues to take the roles of the characters in the scene. Invite other colleagues to join them as they to think about the situation from each character’s point of view. What must be on Jack’s mind when he approaches the huge door? What do the door and the walls of the castle look like? How large are they in

proportion to Jack? What does Jack hear around the place? What does he smell? How does the place make him feel? What makes him pound his fist on the door? What's at stake for him? What are his choices? What will he do if he *doesn't* knock on the door? Why does he decide to do it? Do the same for the Giant's wife. How does the knocking sound to her--huge, or puny? What does she think when she sees the small but plucky boy at her door? What thoughts go through her mind, knowing what she knows about her husband? What are her feelings as she looks down at Jack?

Ask the actors to focus their minds on a few of these considerations as they prepare to act out the scene.

Dramatize the scene. Use minimal props and minimal costumes to help your colleagues think their way into their roles. Ask the other people present to watch carefully and see what the actors make them think of.

Side coach. As the director, don't be passive, but take opportunities to make suggestions from the sidelines that will help your colleagues act more expressively: "As Jack, do you feel scared now, or brave? How can you show us how you're feeling?"

Write what you saw. Take fifteen minutes and describe as exactly as you can what you saw. Later, consider the motives of characters in your stories the same way: segment the situation as they face it, then focus on a few issues to guide your recounting of what is happening.

Names

The names that author's give to their characters can go some distance toward telling us about those characters. It is doubtful that examples from English will work in your language, so we won't give any. But what names would you give to the following characters? (Here is a hint: Don't give them names of real people. Rather, give them names that sound like the kinds of people they are).

- A rich and arrogant man who roars through a crowded market street in a black Mercedes Benz, forcing old people and children to jump for their lives?
- An old woman fortune-teller?
- An unlettered shepherd who knows all the stars in the sky and all the plants on the hillside by their true names?
- A young girl who asks for nothing, but smiles with genuine good will at passers-by?
- Someone who constantly talks and never listens?
- A devoted school teacher who goes to the houses of children who miss school to make sure they are all right?

(After Bernays and Painter, 1991)

Grounded Descriptions.

Descriptions can convey moods. Write all three of the following descriptions and share them with colleagues.

- 1) You and your beloved grew up on two separate farms. Late some afternoons you would meet each other underneath the big tree that stood on the boundary between the two properties. Underneath that tree, you pledged your love, and promised to marry. But one of you has gone away to war. For four long years you have been separated. The war is over. You wrote your beloved a letter, and asked to meet beneath the tree once again—if the other is willing. This is the afternoon of the meeting. You don't know if your beloved will be there. At last you see the tree. Describe it. But don't mention the letter, the promises, or your beloved.

- 2) It is said that bats bring nightmares. Nobody knows if that is true. But late some evenings, especially when the moon is full, from a hole in the side of a large tree on a dark hillside you can see a steady stream of bats emerge and fly among the houses in a nearby village. And in the mornings that follow those nights, people who live in those houses wake on sweaty pillows, relieved to see the dawn after a night of terrifying dreams. Describe the tree. But do not mention the hole, the bats, or the dreams.

- 3) For your birthday, people bought you a big surprise: You get to jump out of an airplane with a parachute! It is a beautiful day. Several people have jumped. Now it's your turn—you go. Guess what? The parachute comes out of the pack twisted. It slows your descent, but not nearly enough. You are hurtling toward the earth. But then you see below you a huge tree. Describe the tree. But do not mention the parachute, or the fact that you are about to land in that tree.

(After J. Gardner, 2001).

Some Suggestions for Those Who Would Write for Young People:

The Writer's Life

1. **Read.** Read new books for the age of your audience. Watch movies they watch.
2. **Be a big spender:** easy come, easy go. You will publish the ninth or tenth serious work that you write, and the fifty-third draft of that.
3. **Be a collector.** Keep a journal. Write down words. Make lists. Save scraps of conversation you hear from children of the age you want to write for. Keep clippings from the newspapers. Write character sketches. Describe the other riders on the bus, or the people in the doctor's waiting room. Capture the light in the waiting room. The tone of the furniture..
4. **Make time to write.** Every day. Some people need a place for that, too.
5. **Join a group.** Meet with others at regular intervals to listen to each other's work and encourage each other. At least you will have to show up with something written.

Sharing Stories

Share your story in a small group.

- a. Read it to the wall first. You may already hear things you want to change.
- b. Read it slowly and clearly
- c. Don't explain it or comment on it: Just read.

As the audience, listen.

- a. Take notes.
- b. Think about your minute-to-minute experience listening to the story, what you thought as the story unfolded.
- c. Tell the writer the words and expressions that penetrated your consciousness.
- d. Ask any question, or make any comment you want.
- e. Do **all four** of the above, and take the time to do them carefully.

Look back over your own story. Here are some things to keep in mind.

1. **Show, don't tell.** Relate the story action by action. Also, use dialogue.
2. **Get going.** Make it clear what the story is about right away.
3. **Make every word count,** as if you were writing poetry.
4. **Make the plot flow from your character's needs.**
5. **Make the child protagonist solve the problem.**
6. **Find a pattern, and stick to it.**
7. **Write in a genre.** If it's realistic fiction, don't resort to magic.
8. **Trust your reader:** leave room for inferences; make *real* suspense.
9. **Tell the truth.** Offer solutions that can work in real life.
10. **Say something, but don't preach.** Make the story "a slice of life."

On Illustrating Books for Children.

Illustrators of picture books control the following elements:

- Style of the book: collage, ink and water color; cartoon; classic; post modern; photographs, etc.
- Layout, including book size and shape, book covers and jackets, page turns, borders, text layout and typeface , and the number and placement of frames on a page;
- Characterization, which refers to the consistent visual identity of the characters;
- Perspective and placement of characters in pictures;
- Color, especially as it relates to mood;
- Picture/text relationships—that is, which aspects of the communication are carried by the text and which are conveyed by the pictures and how the pictures and text interact. (Temple, Martinez, and Yokota, 2005).

The Style of the Art. With modern printing techniques, the range of media for the art that can easily be printed has expanded enormously. Colored chalk or crayon is frequently used, and so are oil and acrylic painting, along with watercolor and ink—all of these can be photographed and reproduced. Collages are frequently used, and even compositions made of scrap materials or sculptures are seen. Cartoon styles are popular with children, but more classical styles now make their way into books for children. Post modern art is also increasingly seen.

Of course, the artist must work closely with the book designer. The range of possible styles of arts is large, but there are always economic considerations—most obviously, the number of colors used in printing adds to the expense of publishing the book. When illustrating books that will be used to help children learn to read, the artist must be careful to support the readers and not get in their way. For younger or less experienced readers, the art may be needed to carefully depict just what is described in the text. For older readers, the art may play a complementary role (see discussion below).

The Layout of Picture Books. Children’s books are printed in multiples of eight pages, and picture books are typically either sixteen or thirty-two pages long. One page is taken up by the title page, a second by the copyright information, and often another by the dedication—leaving the illustrator of most picture books a little less than thirty pages or even fourteen pages to work with. Within these few pages, the illustrator creates a visual world. By laying out the illustrations in a particular way, the illustrator controls the readers’ journey through that world, much as a tour guide leads a group through a city or a landscape. Like a tour guide, the illustrator can move readers quickly from place to place

and happening to happening or cause readers to pause in one spot and let impressions settle in.

Technical Issues in Book Illustration. The art needs to share space on the page with the print. In many book projects, the same book may be printed in more than one language. Since languages differ in the number of words and characters that are needed to express the same message, it is usually advisable to leave up to half of each page in white space on which text may be printed, so that different languages can be used when the book is printed. Some artists leave spaces right in the picture where print can be overlaid. The American illustrator Ted Lewin, for example, photographs his scenes and draws from the photographs—and he is careful to leave a blank space even in his photographs (a blue sky, and blank wall) where the text will eventually be printed.

If an illustration is to be spread over two pages (see below), the artist must be careful to leave the “gutter”—the place (usually five or six centimeters wide) in the middle where the pages are joined -- free of important art. Also, in the most common printing processes, room must be left around the outside of the illustrations so they can be taped to the drum on which they will be photographed. For other considerations, the artist should work closely with the book designer.

Book Size and Shape. The size and shape of a book has impact both in conveying content information and in eliciting the reader/viewer’s emotional and aesthetic response. Tall books align the viewer’s perspective to the vertical dimension. A wide book with pages shown as double spread units often gives a sense of the horizon and its vastness.

Book Covers. Readers are first introduced to a book by its cover. The cover serves as an invitation into the book, and offers a sample from what’s inside – something of a “window” to what lies within the covers. A good cover says just enough but not too much about what is coming, so it arouses curiosity, and a desire to read the book.

Single Pages and Double-Page Spreads. As a rule, putting a picture on each page propels readers through the story at an even pace, whereas putting more than one picture on a page is a way to depict a series of actions or the rapid occurrence of actions. Spreading a single picture across two facing pages (a double-page spread) can signal a pause, a moment to ponder the events.

Borders. Borders around pictures offer a means for the illustrator to control how intimately readers feel involved with the pictures. The absence of a border puts the action right in the reader’s face. White space puts the action at some distance. An illustrated border sentimentalizes the action, or makes it clear that the time period or place depicted is remote.

Page Turns. Page turns allow an illustrator to create and relieve suspense. Some call this phenomenon “the drama of the turning page.” Many illustrators make use of page turns to add dramatic interest. When Nancy Winslow Parker illustrated John Langstaff’s text *Oh, A-Hunting We Will Go*, she broke up the verse of the folk song as follows:

Oh, a-hunting we will go.
A-hunting we will go.
We’ll catch a fox

[page turn]

And put him in a box,
And then we'll let him go.

Given the rhyming word “fox” as a clue to what comes next, children enjoy predicting what will occur on the next page.

The Last Page. The last page of a picture book is often used for something of a visual afterword. Many illustrators reserve this last page for an epilogue, a comment on what has gone before, or a mirror, perhaps with changes, of the situation at the beginning of the book.

Characterization. Characterization refers to the way in which an illustrator makes readers identify a particular character and continue to recognize that character throughout the changes of scene or status in the whole book. Features of a character may become so recognizable that even a part of a character may serve to identify the whole.

Perspective and Positioning. The artist can vary the vantage points from which readers view the situation. Sometimes the artist lets readers see things that characters in the book do not—creating visual irony. A scene with a character's shoulder in the foreground suggests that the character is viewing the scene. A big person depicted from below looks like a giant. A small person depicted from above looks tiny and vulnerable. The placement of characters in a picture can also have significance. A character placed high in the picture may be in a more dominant position than a person placed low. In cultures where writing proceeds from left to right, a person placed far to the left of a picture may be more in control of the situation; a person placed far to the right may be overwhelmed by circumstances.

Lines. The nature of the lines in a book has significance. Curvy lines are comforting. Jagged lines with lots of angles arouse tension in the reader. Cross-hatched lines suggest complexity in the situations.

Color. Color reflects emotions and communicates moods. The choice of colors and their intensity convey a mood to readers. Dark colors suggest foreboding, or importance. Lighter colors are playful and “safe.”

Picture/Text Relationships. In easy readers, pictures should carefully support the meaning of the text. If the text says, “The boy saw three birds,” the picture can show three birds. In picture books for more mature readers, the pictures can complement rather than duplicate the text. For example, the art may include facial expressions that show emotional reactions that are suggested but not explicitly named in the text.

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