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Using storybooks to acquaint children with the continent of Africa

Mary J. Lickteig

Kathy Everts Danielson

I learned so much about Africa. I learned countries, cities, villages, mountains, deserts, rivers, languages. Have you ever been to Africa? I wish I could go.

This comment, by a third-grade student, was typical of the responses from students who participated in a project designed to help children learn about Africa by offering them books with African settings. In this article, we share the methods we used to acquaint students with the continent of Africa. We have also included students' responses to a questionnaire, information gathered by an observer, and quotes from students' letters.

Project Description

Eighty-three students in four third-grade classrooms in four different elementary school districts in a midwestern city participated in our project. We met with each third-grade class three times, presenting three to five children's books and introductory and follow-up activities at every session. At the beginning of the first visit and the end of the third visit, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire (table 1) on which they placed words associated with Africa in these categories: countries, cities, and languages. The primary goal of the project was to have the children enjoy the books; our other goals were to have them learn about the culture, languages, and geography of Africa. We prepared lessons to meet these goals. Realizing the importance of developing understanding, we employed two methods for providing meaningful experiences: We provided background material, and we linked the known to the unknown. Miller (1993) illustrated the dangers of presenting work from other cultures without providing background by describing a disastrous lesson in which children seemed to have their stereotypes reinforced rather than develop an understanding of a new culture. He concluded:

You can't expect your students to learn by osmosis. If they don't have a basic understanding of the cultures portrayed in their books, then you've got to provide the background they will need to make sense of what they're reading. (29)

We used several methods to meet these guidelines. For example, we placed a map of Africa in each classroom. This map was displayed in a prominent place and left up between presentations. In addition, vocabulary words associated with the stories were carefully presented. We showed the words to the students, pronounced them, placed a card with the word written on it in the pocket chart, and made references to the map of Africa. In subsequent sessions, we reviewed the words and organized them according to categories (cities, countries, languages, rivers, mountains, deserts) and according to books.

We used several methods for linking the known to the unknown to familiarize the children with the stories. These strategies included story structure, story theme, family structure, travelogue, folk tale structure, and comparisons. In the lesson plans that follow, we note these specific strategies. To demonstrate the application of these principles, we have included examples from the lessons.

Lesson One

We presented the books in the following order: *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* (Heide and Gilliland 1990), *Galimoto* (Williams 1990), *Not So Fast Songololo* (Daly 1986), and *Somewhere in Africa* (Mennen and Daly 1990).

The Day of Ahmed's Secret concerns Ahmed, a boy from Cairo, Egypt. At the beginning of the story, Ahmed proclaims that he has a secret that he will reveal to his family in the evening. The readers follow Ahmed through his typical day, as he delivers bottled gas in Cairo, and experience the sights and sounds of the city with him. At the end of the book, Ahmed reveals his secret: He can write his name. The word "Ahmed" is proudly displayed in Arabic script on the last page.

To introduce this book, we asked the children to recall a typical day in their lives, going from morning to evening. As the children recalled events, we encouraged them to describe the sights and sounds that surrounded their activities. This activity linked the known to the unknown and introduced the concept of story structure.

We related the introductory activity to the book by telling the children that the story involved a day in the life of the main character, Ahmed, who lives in Cairo, Egypt. We told the children to listen to what he does during his day. We asked them to describe the ways in which Ahmed's day was like their day and how it was different. We had the students listen for words in the story that depicted what Ahmed saw and heard in Cairo. The students compared Ahmed's day with their typical days. The word "Ahmed," written in Arabic, was discussed, and we stressed the fact that Arabic is read from right to left, not from left to right as we read English.

To help the children retain their new vocabulary, we had them write the words on cards and place them in a pocket chart: Cairo, Egypt, Arabic, Nile, Sahara. We had the students find the card identifying the country (Egypt), the language (Arabic), the river (Nile), the city (Cairo), and the desert (Sahara).

In the book, *Galimoto* (Williams 1991), Kondi, a boy from Malawi, wants to make a galimoto. Even though his older brother says he is too young, Kondi's sheer determination spurs him on to gather the materials, make a galimoto, and join the others in a procession of galimotos.

We introduced this story in this manner: "We will spend a day with Kondi who lives in another part of Africa. Ahmed lives in Cairo, a large city that has 9 million people, but Kondi lives in a rural area near a lake in the country of Malawi."

The children located Malawi on the map and placed the Malawi card in the pocket chart. Then we read the introduction to the book that noted that galimoto means "car" in Chichewa. A card for the word Chichewa was placed in the pocket chart. We pointed out to the children that there was a relationship between Egypt and Malawi: They were both countries in Africa. Arabic and Chichewa were related because they were languages spoken in Africa. Children were ready to listen to the story to find out if Kondi got a galimoto.

After reading the story to the children, we reviewed the pictures to show the many forms that galimotos take. We talked about the country in which the story takes place (Malawi) and the language that Kondi speaks (Chichewa).

Not So Fast, Songololo (Daly 1986) is a story about a boy from South Africa who accompanies his grandmother to the city. On this shopping trip, Songololo gets something he wants very much: a new pair of red tackies.

We introduced this story by telling the students that we would spend a day with a boy from a country in Africa called South Africa. The children located South Africa on the map and placed the card marked with that country's name in the pocket chart. We told the students, "This boy is called two different names: Shepherd and Songololo. He speaks English." A card marked with the word English was placed in the language pocket of the chart. We also told the students that the people of South Africa speak another language called Afrikaans. A card labeled Afrikaans was put in the pocket chart. Once the children learned that Shepherd/ Songololo lived in a large city called Cape Town, they were ready to put the Cape Town card in the pocket chart.

Before reading the book, we explained to the class that although South Africans speak English, they use different terms for some objects. For example, we call tennis shoes "tennies" or "sneakers," but in South Africa, they are called "tackies." We also told the children that in this story, Songololo's grandmother talks about the "green man." We asked the class to try to figure out what this term means as they listened to the story about Songololo.

After we finished the story, we made comparisons with the other stories. We concluded that these stories were alike because each character got something he wanted: Ahmed wrote his name; Kondi got a galimoto; Shepherd got his tackies (comparing story themes). The class reviewed the pocket-chart words and placed them in the appropriate categories: countries, cities, languages, river, desert.

In the book, Somewhere in Africa (Mennen and Daly 1990), Ashra, a boy from Cape Town, South Africa, goes to the library to read about the places in Africa he has never seen--those places where wild animals roam. We chose to read this book to the children as a culminating activity for Lesson One because the story would reinforce the idea that Africa is a continent of many contrasts.

Lesson Two

For the second lesson, we presented the following books in this order: *Rehema's Journey: A Visit in Tanzania* (Margolies 1990), *The Orphan Boy* (Mollel 1990), *Masai and I* (Kroll 1992), *Jambo Means Hello* (Feelings 1974), and *Moja Means One* (Feelings 1971).

In *Rehema's Journey: A Visit in Tanzania* (Margolies 1990), Rehema takes the reader on a tour of Tanzania. We introduced the children to the book by explaining that we were going to read a book about another country in Africa--Tanzania--that they could locate on their map. In this lesson, the categories for the pocket chart were country, city, mountains, and language. Students were told that as they read they would learn the names of a country, city, mountains, and language. The words they would hear were Arusha, Pare, Tanzania, and Swahili. Cards were marked with these words, and the children were asked to listen for the words and see if they could determine the proper category for each.

After we read the first paragraph of the author's note to the children, we asked them to see whether after reading the story they agreed with the author's statement that Tanzania is beautiful. We also told them that after the story, they would discuss the following statements, which we had written on the board: "The places Rehema visits are alike," and "The places Rehema visits are different." We introduced the story by saying, "At the beginning of the book, Rehema tells us about her family. Then, she tells us about the trip she took with her father through Tanzania. Let's see what she saw."

In our discussion following the reading of the book, we focused on it as a travelogue and asked the children to identify the pictures that showed beauty and the statements that best described the trip. To review the vocabulary, we referred to the word cards with comments such as, What language does Rehema speak? (Swahili). Find the card that tells the name of the country where Rehema lives (Tanzania). Find the card that tells the language spoken in Tanzania (Swahili). Find the name of the mountains (Pare). Find the name of the town in Tanzania (Arusha).

The Orphan Boy (Mollel 1990) is about a Masai folk tale describing the favors bestowed on an older herdsman through the magic of Kiliken, which is the term the Masai use for Venus, the morning and evening star. The magic continues until the old man seeks to discover its source, and Kiliken returns to the sky.

To introduce this book, we reviewed the story of Rehema, starting with her description of passing a Masai village. We reread the two pages dedicated to the Masai and emphasized that some of the Masai are nomads who move from one place to another to find new grass for their cattle. From the dust jacket of *The Orphan Boy*, we read the information about author Tololwa M. Mollel and noted that Arusha, the town visited by Rehema, was mentioned. When we began to read, the folk tale's typical story structure provided opportunities for stopping during the story to ask the children what they think will happen next and what a character is thinking or going to do.

For our next book, we chose *Masai and I* (Kroll 1992) in which Linda, a girl from the United States, goes about her daily activities, imagining how her life would be different if she were a

Masai. We told the students that the main character had learned about the Masai, just as they had, and that the author contrasts Linda's life with the ways of the Masai. We asked the children to note, as they listened to the story, which things were alike and which were different. When the children looked at a picture of Linda making a necklace, we reminded them that in *Rehema's Journey*, the warriors wore a lot of jewelry. Linda's necklace was like the jewelry that the Masai warriors wear. We found that the fact that this book involves two locations made it a perfect book to read in pairs, with one voice reading the section from the United States and the other voice reading the Masai section.

By using *Jambo Means Hello* (Feelings 1974), a Swahili alphabet book, and *Moja Means One* (Feelings 1971), a Swahili counting book, we were able to connect the Swahili alphabet and numbers to the Swahili words presented in *Rehema's Journey*.

Lesson Three

In the third session, we presented these books in the following order: *The Village of the Round and Square Houses* (Grifalconi 1986), *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Stephoe 1987), *Anansi, the Spider* (McDermott 1972).

We began by adding to the children's vocabulary with these words: Cameroon, Tos (*The Village of Round and Square Houses*); Zimbabwe, Shona (*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*); and Ghana (*Anansi the Spider*). We focused on the connections with the earlier books by stressing the travelogue similarity between *Rehema's Journey* and the first part of *The Village of the Round Houses and Square Houses* and the folk tale similarities among *The Orphan Boy*, the second part of *The Village of the Round and Square Houses*, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, and *Anansi, the Spider*.

Students' Responses

The highest possible score on the questionnaire was 17. The average score for the groups on the pretest was 3.8. After the children heard the stories about Africa, the average score for the posttest was 11.2. These results indicated to us that the students had learned much about Africa.

On the second questionnaire, we added a fourth question: From the books we have read, which books do you think we should read to other third-grade students? Choose three titles. Some students wrote down one or two titles; others wrote down more. Many students had trouble choosing only three books; they wanted to write all titles. In table 2, we show their responses. *The Orphan Boy* (Mollet 1990) was the clear favorite. In one class, students had been writing letters to their favorite authors. Some of these children showed an interest in writing to Tololwa Mollet, the author of *The Orphan Boy*.

To gather more than the information on the questionnaire, we directed a graduate assistant to observe the classes and record the observations and responses of the students. We received

additional responses in the thank you letters that some of the students wrote. From the letters, we learned that the teachers had done follow-up work with students and that the students had become genuinely interested in the countries and people of Africa.

The students' knowledge of Africa found its way into other curricular areas. One teacher mentioned that the students had written about the books on Africa in their monthly letters to their parents. Another teacher said that some children were using the names of African countries in their own writing. For instance, one child had written a story called "A Frog Went to Tanzania." One student showed us that she had found some Arabic in the Bible. Alas, she had even circled the word in ink! Other students crowded around to see the actual Arabic, just as in *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*.

The sessions also gave students an opportunity to bring their own knowledge of Africa to the discussion. One boy was anxious to share what he learned about Kenya during a slide presentation at his church. One of the classroom teachers showed a Shona sculpture before the reading of Mufaro's *Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe 1987). After the reading of this book, one student commented, "That's kind of like Cinderella." When the book *Artansi, the Spider* (McDermott 1972) was introduced, students noted that they had been to a local children's theater and had seen a play of three Anansi stories. Another group clapped when this book was introduced because several students had already read it. About half of the class had seen the movie, *A Far Off Place*, which was set in Africa, and the students mentioned that in their class discussions.

Most students in one classroom knew about the Swahili language because one student had been to Kenya and had talked of her experiences. Another student in this class was anxious to point out Tanzania on the map. He knew exactly where it was. He reported that he studied geography at home with a game he had.

Students responded to the various books read in different ways. *The Orphan Boy* (Mollel 1990) prompted many students to make predictions about the boy and to note the details in the illustrations. Very early in the story, one student whispered to another, "He's the star!" This book prompted much discussion. After the reading of it, one student said there were clues that he was a star because his eyes flickered in the illustrations and he always wore yellow.

Masai and I (Kroll 1992) was presented by having one reader read the United States section, another reader the Masai section. After this reading in two voices, an African American girl clapped in delight, leading the class in a spontaneous ovation for the presentation.

When students were shown actual galimotos that had been brought back from Africa (see photos), after the reading of the book *Galimoto* (Williams 1990), their comments ranged from "Oh, cool!" to "They made that themselves?!" and "That's neat!"

At each session, the students met us with enthusiasm. They associated our visits with stories from Africa and looked to see what we had brought with us. They were very eager to

participate in matching places to the correct category. One student, who did not seem interested during the first visit, volunteered enthusiastically during the second and third visits. Students collaborated to put the cards for the pocket chart into the correct slots. It was obvious to us that some students had reviewed the countries and cities of Africa. One teacher made her own word cards for the pocket chart, and the book Galimoto (Williams 1990) was on her desk.

After the end of the sessions, some students gathered around the map of Africa, pointed out different countries, and examined the map more closely. Children from several classrooms sent letters to us after the project was over, thanking us for teaching them about Africa. Some of their comments are shown in table 3.

This project not only enhanced students' knowledge of the people and places in Africa, but it also generated interest in the language and stories of Africa. For these reasons alone, we consider this a successful project.

TABLE 1--Pretest Questionnaire

Words about Africa

Afrikaans

Arabic

Arusha

Cairo

Cameroon

Cape Town

Chichewa

Egypt

English

Ghana

Malawi

Nile

Pare

Sahara

Shona

South Africa

Swahili

Tanzania

Tos

Zimbabwe

Questions

1. What are some countries in Africa?

- 2. What are some cities in Africa?
- 3. What language or languages are spoken in Africa?

TABLE 2--Students' Preferences among the Books Read

Book Title	Number of Votes
The Orphan Boy	98
Galimoto	47
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters	41
Masai and I	23
The Village of Round and Square Houses	20
Anansi, the Spider	17
Not So Fast, Songololo	15
Rehema's Journey	11
Somewhere in Africa	4
The Day of Ahmed's Secrets	3
Mojo Means One	1
"All of the books. I couldn't pick."	1

TABLE 3--Students' Comments from Their Follow-up Letters

I learned a lot more than I ever thought I would and the test was a lot easier than the first time. I think I improved!

Thank you so much for coming and sharing so many wonderful stories with us!! I had a great time!!!! When I wasn't here the first time my friends said I missed a TON of fun!!!

I'm going to look for some books like the ones you showed about counting and talking in Swahili. I like the sound of the word Swahili!

My grandma knows how to speak Arabic.

I learned a lot about Africa. A lot because when you first came I did not know half of what you were talking about. Now I know. Thank you very much for teaching me that.

I really enjoyed learning about Africa. My brother would have loved to see you because he is African American. [She's not; they're adopted.]

I learned a lot about Africa the most thing about Africa is that I want to learn Afrikaan numbers. I got the book of The Village of the Round and Square Houses at our library. The Orphan Boy almost made me cry. Rehema's Journey was the best book I've ever heard in my life.

I learned so much about Africa. I learned countries, cities, villages, mountains, deserts, rivers, languages. Have you ever been to Africa? I wish I could go.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS USED IN THE LESSONS

Daly, N. 1986. Not So Fast, Songololo. New York: Athenaeum.

Feelings, M. L. 1974. Jambo Means Hello. Ill. by Tom Feelings. New York: Dial.

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Grifalconi, A. 1986. The Village of Round and Square Houses. Boston: Little, Brown.

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Kroll, V. 1992. Masai and I. Ill. by Nancy Carpenter: New York: Four Winds.

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