Social Studies and the Young Learner 21 (3), pp. 21–24
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Pairing Folktales with Textbooks and Nonfiction in Teaching About Culture

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Social studies educators at all grade levels aim to integrate the curricular thematic strand ❶ CULTURE into their lessons.[1] Culture—which encompasses the unique system of shared beliefs, knowledge, values, and traditions that a group passes from one generation to the next—can be viewed metaphorically as an iceberg (**Figure 1**). While some cultural characteristics (e.g., language, styles of dress, foods) are readily apprehensible, like the tip of an iceberg floating visibly above the surface, most characteristics are hidden from view deep beneath the surface. These "deep" cultural traits include beliefs about personal space, attitudes toward time, and notions of modesty. Aspects of culture at this level may only become apparent after one has engaged with people in a cultural system for an extended period of time.

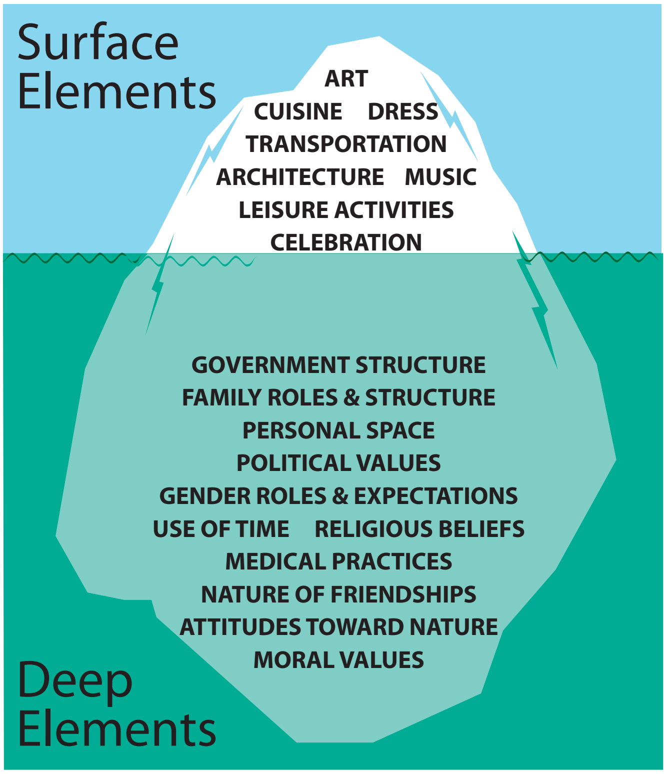
Below the Surface

Many teachers introduce children to cultural systems through a "contributions approach,"[2] which focuses on foods, festivals, music, language, and native dress. Teachers who employ this approach are only addressing the tip of the cultural iceberg, and they tend to keep the cultural group being studies at the margins of the curriculum. To promote deeper cultural understanding, educators could adopt a more transformative approach. We should look for ways to bring to light the more abstract, less visible, and deeply held traits of cultural groups, and we should seek to understand this content from diverse cultural perspectives. This can be challenging at the elementary level, when students tend to be concrete thinkers and the textbooks teachers have at their disposal are superficial and focused on lower level content (i.e., facts) and questioning patterns.[3]

While a textbook or non-fiction trade book can provide very vivid illustrations of clothing, housing, and visual arts, certain deeply held values and beliefs can be difficult to express visually or in a few words. Teachers can use folktales, which often embody core characteristics of a cultural group, as "cultural artifacts" to illustrate or extend the cultural content that might be found in the textbook.[4]

In this article, the authors offer some suggestions for using folktales as a resource for illustrating cultural content in textbooks and other nonfiction resources or to extend students' understanding of various cultural groups. Using examples from Denmark, Japan, and the United States, we highlight a few aspects of culture that an elementary student might encounter in a typical textbook or nonfiction trade book. We then show how these cultural elements are treated in selected folktales,

Figure 1. **Iceberg Model of Culture**


Surface Elements
ART
CUISINE DRESS
TRANSPORTATION
ARCHITECTURE MUSIC
LEISURE ACTIVITIES
CELEBRATION
GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE
FAMILY ROLES & STRUCTURE
PERSONAL SPACE
POLITICAL VALUES
GENDER ROLES & EXPECTATIONS
USE OF TIME RELIGIOUS BELIEFS
MEDICAL PRACTICES
NATURE OF FRIENDSHIPS
ATTITUDES TOWARD NATURE
MORAL VALUES
Deep Elements

and we recommend strategies for using these folktales in the classroom.

Whenever appropriate, we recommend pairing recent NCSS Notable Trade Book selections, which are marked with an asterisk (*) in the list on page 24. While many of the activities we recommend are geared toward upper elementary students, we hope to inspire social studies teachers at all grade levels to use folktales as an instructional resource.

Why Use Folktales?

Social studies educators have long used folktales and other forms of folk literature as instructional resources.[5] Folktales have a natural appeal to children, who respond to stories with quick action sequences, suspense, the juxtaposition of good and evil, just rewards and punishments, and the repetition of sounds and ideas.[6] In addition, they allow educators to easily integrate instruction across many disciplines including social studies, language arts, foreign languages, and the arts.[7]

The primary reason for using folktales in social studies classrooms is their "mirror quality."[8] Folktales reflect the dreams, customs, and philosophies of the cultural groups that have told and retold them for generations.[9] By engaging with these stories, teachers can create meaningful multicultural learning experiences for all children while validating culture for minority and immigrant children.[10] In the sections that follow, we show how folktales can illuminate aspects of culture using examples from Denmark, Japan, and the United States. We explain how folktales can enhance the treatment of cultural content presented in textbooks and other non-fiction resources, and we offer some ideas for pairing folktales with other texts and introducing them in the classroom.

Examples from Denmark

The people of Denmark, like most of their northern European neighbors, enjoy a very generous social welfare system. All Danes are provided a free education, medical care, unemployment insurance, and a host of other benefits that form a social safety net. The Danish tradition of social welfare is more than a century old. A typical textbook description of this aspect of Danish life may resemble the following excerpt from *AGS World Geography.*

> The welfare systems in northern Europe provide for people out of work, for older people, and for health care for every one. People say that this welfare system provides care from "cradle to grave." This system allows all people to share their nation's wealth. Few people are wealthy, but few are poor.[11]

The social welfare system in Denmark has endured because the people adhere to such values as equality, social responsibility, and frugality.[12] *Denmark*, from Scholastic's Enchantment of the World series, states: "If you are rich in Denmark, you don't show your wealth. Displays of wealth are considered to be bad manners because in Denmark a rich man is no better than anyone else." [13]

A teacher might choose to illustrate these deeply held cultural values by using two folktales, *The Fat Cat*, by Jack Kent, and *The Talking Pot*, by Virginia Haviland. *The Fat Cat* is a cumulative tale in which an old woman leaves her cat to watch over a pot of gruel while she attends to some business. The hungry cat eats all of the gruel and the pot, and then proceeds to gobble up all the characters he encounters throughout the story. Each time the cat meets a different character, he is asked the same question: "What have you eaten little cat that makes you so fat?" No matter how much the cat eats, aggrandizing himself at the expense of the characters he gobbles up, he is still called "little cat." The cat finally meets a woodcutter who splits him in half with an ax, releasing all of the characters he has eaten. There is no room in Danish society for "fat cats."

The *Talking Pot* is a folktale that can be interpreted as an allegory for the Danish system of social welfare. The tale depicts a sharp contrast between a poor family who was "so poor that they often lacked their daily bread," and a rich family "who never shared anything with the poor." The poor man encounters a stranger on his way to the market and he trades the family's only possession, a cow, for a magical pot that talks and skips about by itself. To the astonishment of the poor man and his family, the talking pot skips to the rich man's house and returns with food, grain, and money. The talking pot is an entity that balances the economic inequities among the "haves" and "have-nots" in society, much like the Danish system of social welfare that redistributes wealth through taxation and publicly funded social services.

Students can create story maps of *The Fat Cat* and *The Talking Pot* and look comparatively to identify thematic patterns between the two. The teacher may choose to add other Danish folktales to the comparison, or she may incorporate folktales from Norway, Sweden, or other neighboring countries to allow students to explore regional patterns of cultural values and folk traditions.

To highlight cultural contrasts, the teacher might compare *The Talking Pot* with the Palestinian folktale *Tunjur! Tunjur! Tunjur*!, a story in which a magical pot ventures away from home and returns with valuables taken from a rich merchant and a king. While the talking pot in the Danish folktale is a type of Robin Hood hero who takes from the rich and gives to the poor, the pot in the Palestinian tale is viewed as a mischief maker and is ultimately punished for stealing. The juxtaposition of these tales is an excellent way to introduce children to the idea that the same behavior may look very different when viewed from another cultural vantage point.

An exploration of Danish folktales can also serve as a springboard for learning about one of the world's most famous storytellers, Danish author Hans Christian Andersen. Two books about Andersen's life were recognized as Notable Social Studies Trade Books in 2006: *The Perfect Wizard: Hans Christian Andersen* and *The Young Hans Christian Andersen.*

Examples from Japan

As students read geography textbooks and nonfiction resources about Japan, they may learn that “the Japanese people feel a special relationship with nature” that stems from ancient Shinto beliefs “that gods or spirits existed all around them in nature. Mountains, trees, rocks, and rivers were gods.” [14] Students may discover that certain cedar trees called *hinoki* are considered sacred by many Japanese and are used to construct Shinto shrines, and they may read about the Japanese tradition of blending nature with art.

To illustrate these cultural traits, a teacher could read *The Stonecutter*, a Japanese folktale by Gerald McDermott that powerfully illustrates respect for the forces of nature, as well as certain Confucian values (for example, humility and respect). The protagonist of the story is a poor stonecutter who envies the easy life of a rich man. However, when the stonecutter is granted his wish to be rich, he learns that there are others who enjoy even greater comfort and power. He is transformed into a prince, the sun, a cloud, and, finally, a mountain of rock. Just when he feels satisfied that he has become the most powerful being on the face of the Earth, he feels a lowly stonecutter chipping away at his feet. The stonecutter finally realizes the foolishness of his longing for greater power.

Students can create a T-chart with Japanese cultural characteristics found in the textbook and other sources listed on the left side, and corresponding evidence of those characteristics in *The Stonecutter* listed on the right side. The left column can serve as a set of cultural criteria that can be applied to other Japanese folktales, such as *Basho and the River Stones* or *Kogi’s Mysterious Journey*, and more columns can be added to the right so students can identify cultural patterns in multiple Japanese folktales. The teacher may choose to employ other graphic organizers, such as a story pyramid (**Figure 2**), to further enhance reading comprehension skills.

Examples from the United States

While folklore in the United States is a blend of many traditions and genres, a particularlyAmerican form of folklore is the tall tale. Tall tales describe the exploits of larger-than-life characters who tamed wild America, such as Pecos Bill, John Henry, Captain Stormalong, and Paul Bunyan. Noted American folklorist Walter Blair wrote in his humorous book, *Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes:*

> When it comes to rising up heroes, there’s nothing under the sun that’s as helpful as hardships. This is because they way a man gets to be a hero is by overcoming hardships. Well, from the beginning, we Americans have had a better stock of snarling, snorting, rock-ribbed hardships than any other country in the world.[15]

Elementary students often learn about hardships when they study United States history. For example, when students study how The Homestead Act of 1862 helped spur westward expansion, they also learn about the many hardships settlers faced, such as summer heat, tornadoes, floods, and insects, any of which could destroy a family’s crops.

Figure 2. **Story Pyramid for *The Stonecutter***

THE STONECUTTER
Title of the story

THE STONECUTTER
Name of the main character

ENVIOUS, DISSATISFIED
Two words describing the main character

MOUNTAINOUS JAPANESE COUNTRYSIDE
Three words describing the setting

STONECUTTER DESIRES GREATER POWER
Four words stating the problem

STONECUTTER GETS WEALTH AND COMFORT
Five words describing one main event

STONECUTTER BECOMES THE SUN AND CLOUD
Six words describing a second main event

STONECUTTER BECOMES A MOUNTAIN OF ROCK
Seven words describing a third main event

MOUNTAIN IS CHIPPED AWAY BY A STONECUTTER’S CHISEL
Eight words describing the solution to the problem

These aspects of the natural environment profoundly shaped the lives of American settlers, and the heroes who occupied their imaginations and the stories they created were individuals who could change or harness the natural environment at will. Stories about these heroes are retold in such collections as *American Tall Tales* and *Sweet Land of Story*.

One book notes that Paul Bunyan is one hero of American tall tales who “generally has geography and the elements pretty well under his control.”[16] Paul Bunyan stories exist in dozens of volumes published during the past century, and students can read about this folk hero in numerous books readily available today: how Paul clear-cut Iowa and Kansas so farmers could grow corn and wheat, and how he dug Lake Michigan to provide a drinking trough for his ox, Babe.

Tall tales can provide a springboard for discussions or reflective writing about ways humans interact with their surroundings, which is an important component of the NCSS thematic strand III **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**. Prompts about Paul Bunyan tales might include the following questions:

- Given the societal trends toward conservation and “going green,” would the exploits of Paul Bunyan be considered heroic in the United States today? Students can consider this question after investigating ecology and environmental issues. Text sets for this exercise might include *A Cool Drink of Water* or *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth*.

- Could the Paul Bunyan of legend have helped avert catastrophes like California wildfires, Mississippi River flooding

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Folktales and Other Trade Books

NCSS Notable Trade Book Selections are marked with an asterisk (*)

Armstrong, Jennifer. *The American Story: 100 True Tales from American History.* New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2006.*

Balcziak, Bill. *Paul Bunyan.* Mankato, MN: Picture Window Books, 2003.

Bateman, Teres. *The Bully Blockers Club.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 2004.

Becker, Sandra. *Paul Bunyan.* New York: Weigl, 2003.

Bornoff, Nicholas. *Japan.* Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1997.

Cummings, Pat. *Ananse and the Lizard.* New York: Macmillan, 2002.

DeSpain, Pleasant. *Sweet Land of Story.* New York: August House, 2001.*

Goble, Paul. *Mystic Horse.* New York: HarperCollins, 2003.*

_____. *Storm Maker's Tipi.* New York: Atheneum Books, 2001.*

Haviland, Virginia. *The Talking Pot.* Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1971.

Heinrichs, Ann. *Japan.* Danbury, CT: Children's Press, 2006.

Hesse, Karen. *The Young Hans Christian Andersen.* New York: Scholastic, 2005.*

Hoffman, Daniel. *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods?* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1952.

James, J. Allison. *The Drums of Noto Hanto.*. New York: DK Publishing, 1999.*

Johnson, Paul Brett. *Jack Outwits the Giants.* New York: Margaret McElderry Books, 2002.*

Kellogg, Steven. *Paul Bunyan.* New York: Harper Children-Harper Collins, 1984.

Kerley, Barbara. *A Cool Drink of Water.* Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002.*

Kimmel, Eric A. *Anansi Goes Fishing.* Pine Plain, NY: Live Oak Media, 1993.

Kurtz, Jane. *River Friendly, River Wild.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.*

Lewis, J. Patrick. *Heroes and She-roes: Poems of Amazing and Everyday Heroes.* New York: Dial, 2005.*

MacDonald, Margaret R. *Tunjur! Tunjur! Tunjur!: A Palestinian Folktale.* Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Children's Books, 2006.*

McDermott, Gerald. *The Stonecutter.* New York: Puffin, 1978.

Murphy, Jim. *Blizzard: The Storm That Changed America.* New York: Scholastic Press, 2000.*

Myers, Tim J. *Basho and the River Stones.* Tarrytown. NY: Marshall Cavendish Children's Books, 2004.*

Olaleye, Isaac O. *In the Rainfield: Who is the Greatest?* New York Blue Sky Press, 2000.*

Palser, Barb. *Hurricane Katrina: Aftermath of Disaster.* Minneapolis, MN: Compass Point Books, 2006.*

Partridge, Elizabeth. *Kogi's Mysterious Journey.* New York: Dutton Juvenile, 2003.*

Sierra, Judy. *Wiley and the Hairy Man.* New York: Dutton Juvenile, 1996.

St. Romain, Rose Anne. *Moon's Cloud Blanket.* Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2003.*

Stein, R. Conrad. *Denmark.* New York: Scholastic, 2003.

Stoutenberg, Adrien. *American Tall Tales.* New York: Puffin Books, 1976.

Strauss, Rochelle. *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth.* Toronto, Canada: Kids Can, 2007.*

Tchana, Katrin. *Sense Pass King: A Story from Cameroon.* New York: Holiday House, 2002.*

Terry, Michael Bad Hand. *Life in a Plains Indian Village. 1868* New York: Scholastic, 1999.*

Yolen, Jane. *The Perfect Wizard: Hans Christian Andersen.* New York: Dutton Juvenile, 2005.*

Visit **www.socialstudies.org/notable** to see lists of NCSS Notable Trade Books from past years.

The current list is a benefit of membership in NCSS. See **www.socialstudies.org/membership.**

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in Iowa, and damage to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina? These questions can be explored in conjunction with current news items or notable trade books dealing with catastrophes like *Hurricane Katrina: Aftermath of a Disaster, Blizzard!, The Storm that Changed America,* or *River Friendly, River Wild.*

- In what ways are the heroic figures featured in the tall tales of American settlers different from the heroes depicted in the folklore of the Native Americans they displaced? What character traits are valued in Native American tales, such as *Moon's Cloud Blanket, Mystic Horse,* and *Storm Maker's Tipi*? What attitudes toward the environment are implied by the stories? Students can consider these questions as they extend their understanding of Native American life gleaned from sources like *Daily Life in a Plains Indian Village, 1868*.[17]

Paul Bunyan tales can help students understand how cultural groups create folk heroes who possess qualities that are valuable to them. Heroes featured in tall tales of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like Paul Bunyan and John Henry, can be contrasted with the men and women featured in *Heroes and She-roes: Poems of Amazing and Everyday Heroes* by J. Patrick Lewis or *The American Story: 100 True Tales from American History*. The teacher might ask students to create Venn diagrams comparing and contrasting attributes of their personal heroes with heroes and historical figures in these books.

Examples from Multiple Countries

Folktales often deal with universal themes that are not specific to the culture in a single country. For example, many retellings of the West African Anansi folktales, such as *Ananse and the Lizard* and *Anansi Goes Fishing*, convey moral lessons about universal values like honesty, trustworthiness, and the consequences of laziness. Similarly, the African folktale *Traveling to Tondo* has an important moral message about exercising poor judgment and "following the crowd" instead of doing what is sensible.

The David and Goliath motif in which a small protagonist overcomes a bigger, stronger antagonist is common in folktales from around the world. In many stories, characters find nonviolent ways to outwit their adversaries. Teachers can pair *The Bully Blockers Club*, which deals with the issue of bullying, with folktales in which featured characters outsmart bullies in clever or non-violent ways. *Wiley and the Hairy Man*, like many African-American folktales, features this motif. Possible titles from past Notable Trade Book lists include *Jack Outwits the Giant,* an Appalachian folktale*; Sense Pass King: A Story from Cameroon; In the Rainfield: Who is the greatest*? from Nigeria*; and The Drums of Noto Hanto,* a Japanese folktale. Students can use these stories as springboards for discussion or reflective writing about appropriate behavior in social situations and conflict resolution. These stories also lend themselves to roleplay and speculation about alternative endings.

Conclusion

The teaching of social studies and reading are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, we contend that elementary social studies teachers are obligated to help students become effective readers and writers while they learn powerful social studies content. Folktales can be effective vehicles for promoting reading in social studies. Struggling readers may find folktales to be more accessible than textbooks, and teachers can pair folktales with more complex texts to challenge advanced readers. Furthermore, teachers should be mindful of ways that the integration of folktales and other forms of literature can support school-wide efforts to support literacy development across the curriculum and a balanced literacy approach within the school.[18]

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS,1994).
2. James A. Banks, "Multicultural Education: Characteristics and Goals," in James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, eds., *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 3-31.
3. For example, Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, "Considering Textbook Limitations, and Strategies for Compensation," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 9, no. 2 (November/December 1996): 4-7.
4. Kaarle Krohn, *Folklore Methodology* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1971), 139.
5. For example, Joan G. Rosen, "A Bibliography of Folklore for the Social Studies Curriculum, Grades 3-6" (1976, ERIC: ED 129 638).
6. Bernice Cullinan and Lee Galda, *Literature and the Child* (Atlanta, GA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanavich, 1994).
7. For example, I. Gaidamak and T. Tiittanen, "The Social-Ecological Ideal," *Russian Education and Society* 34, no. 11 (November 1992): 43-57; Angela Lane, "Introducing Asia: A Starting Point for Teachers," *Geographical Education* 12 (1999): 44-48; Mary J. Lickteig and Kathy Everts, "Using Storybooks to Acquaint Children with the Continent of Africa," *The Social Studies* 86, no. 6 (March/April 1995): 248-252;
8. Elizabeth Nelli, "Mirror of a People: Folktales and Social Studies," *Social Education* 49, no. 2 (February 1985): 158.
9. Elaine Mindich Bieger, "Promoting Multicultural Education through a Literature-Based Approach," *The Reading Teacher* 49, no. 4 (December 1995): 308-312.
10. Susan Cox and Lee Galda, "Multicultural Literature: Mirrors and Windows on a Global Community," *The Reading Teacher* 43, no. 8 (April 1990): 582-589
11. Marcel Lewinski, *World Geography* (Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services, 2001), 213.
12. Stephen Borish, *The Land of the Living* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin, 1991).
13. R. Conrad Stein, *Denmark* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 113.
14. Lewinski, 382, 386.
15. Walter Blair, *Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1.
16. Daniel Hoffman, *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods?* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1952), 39.
17. Also see the American Indian Culture & History theme issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, March/April 2006, as well as book reviews at americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com.
18. Sandra F Reif and Julie A. Heimburge, *How to Reach and Teach All Children through Balanced Literacy* (Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass, 2007); Laura Robb, *Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science, and Math* (NY: Scholastic, 2003); Alexa L. Sandmann and John F. Ahern, *Linking Literature with Life* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2002).

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