Social Studies and the Young Learner 27 (2), pp. 5–8

Discovering and Constructing Our Identities:

Reading *The Favorite Daughter*

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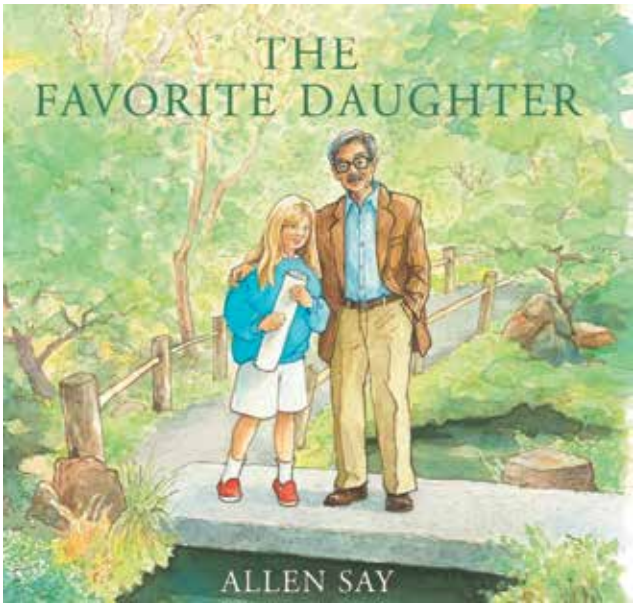
One evening my six-year-old daughter began indignantly narrating what happened during recess that day. I suspected the story to be an act of procrastination, as the hour was just before bedtime.

I tried to hurry her up, but she took her time. "There are three groups now during recess," she announced, "the always group, the sometimes group, and the goodbye group." I felt sick, wondering what had become of this close-knit, affectionate group of children. "I'm in the goodbye group," she said sadly. I was stricken. Two questions came to mind.



"How do I respond as a parent?" My daughter in the cast away group! Though I was relieved that she was not one of the "leaders" of this group that "assigned" girls to various degrees of belonging, I felt somehow responsible for her being in the goodbye group. My daughter's identity was somehow inextricably tied to who I was. I wondered what skill I'd failed to give her or what characteristic she had acquired that made her a member of the goodbye group.

"How do I respond as a teacher?" Both of her classroom teachers had worked hard to create a wonderfully connected community in the classroom. Were they even aware that these groups had torn through the fabric of the classroom community toward the end of the school year? Might it be possible that some children had outgrown this connected community, or were looking to form cliques?

Deep into the night, I contemplated the complicated issues of identity, belonging, and the voice within me that this incident raised. I wanted my daughter to recognize that being told she was in the goodbye group did not make her vanish. I wanted my daughter to have a voice—a voice that not only opted out of the goodbye group, but opted out of being delimited by any of those groups!

I wanted her to understand that she could use her voice to describe what she heard and saw, and to say that it felt unfair to her. I wanted her to understand that she could act to rectify the unfairness. And I wanted all of this self-awareness and assertiveness from my six-year-old!

Our Names, Our Cultures

For all of us—children, parents, teachers—who have experienced instances in our lives where we have been teased, alienated, isolated, shunned, Allen Say gives us the beautifully illustrated book *The Favorite Daughter*.[1] In this book (a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for 2013), author and illustrator Say wraps and unwraps issues of identity and belonging through a narrative that demonstrates the inextricable ties between a father and his daughter. His story invites readers to take a moment to pause and reflect on our society, our family histories, and on our own identities.

Blonde, pale-skinned Yuriko comes home from school one day wanting to change her name to Michelle or Jennifer ("I want an American name, Daddy"). She had taken to school a picture of herself as a baby in a pretty kimono and all the children laughed at her.

> "They said Japanese dolls have *black* hair. 'Yoo-REE-ko in ki-MO-na!' They sang it all day long. Ki-MO-na, Daddy! And the new art teacher called me 'Eureka.' So everybody calls me that now, even Josh and Tiffany."

Not only does Yuriko not like her name now, she also does not like art class anymore.

How does the father respond? By being there with her, asking questions, then taking her places in their city of San Francisco to reconnect with the "Yuriko" she no longer wants to be. For example, they visit her favorite restaurant, which serves sushi ("Can we go to Toraya?" "Ah, Michelle likes sushi

too." Father grinned), and the Japanese Garden at the Golden Gate Park (Father said, "How would you like to take a quick trip to Japan?").

A Web of Connectedness

There are some profound moments in the book that suggest the power of strong, supportive relationships and connectedness that are so important for discovering and constructing one's identity. One such moment involves the proprietor of a favorite restaurant.

> "Yuriko-chan! How you've grown!" The man behind the counter exclaimed.
> Father bowed. "Kudo-san, allow me to introduce my daughter Michelle."
> "Michelle? You look exactly like Yuriko-chan. I didn't know you were twins."
> "No, I'm Yuriko–I mean, I was—oh bother, you can call me Yuriko."
> "Good, it goes better with sushi, and I know what you like," Kudo-san said.

The web of connectedness extends to a seeming stranger at the Japanese Garden. Heading toward the gift shop, Yuriko wonders whether they might have a nametag with her name on it. ("You know, a little license plate or bracelet with your name on it. Everybody has one, but there's never anything for Yuriko.") While Yuriko is lamenting the lack of this quintessential American souvenir, even in a Japanese Garden gift shop, her father points to a live demonstration of *sumi-e* (Japanese ink painting).

> The man looked at the father, then at Yuriko.
> "What's your name, young lady?" he asked.
> "Yuriko."
> "A lovely name, *The Child of the Lily…* " The artist quickly drew a lily, and said, "A little present for Yuriko-san."
> "Oh, thank you! *Arigato gozaimasu!*"

The painting (which the artist has inscribed with the words "for Yuriko-san" in Japanese) re-connects Yuriko with her name and therefore with the language and culture from which she, only a day earlier, wanted to distance herself. But if a name is a representation of one's identity, then the action of saying or writing that word carries the real possibility of distortion or erasure.[2] Yuriko's peers were mispronouncing her name as "Yoo-REE-ko," and even the art teacher was calling her "Eureka" at first, by mistake.

Freedom to Experiment

Identity may be fragile at times, but it is also fluid. Identity may be grounded in one's heritage and therefore discovered, but it is also constructed in the present moment. At first, Yuriko rejects the current "Yuriko," tries on "Michelle" for size, and finally returns to a newly constructed "Yuriko." Her father seeks out strands from their Japanese heritage, but he does not attempt to force an outcome.

Allen Say's watercolor illustrations and narrative depict all of these ideas. The cover of the book depicts a Japanese (looking) man with his arm around a blonde, pale-skinned girl under the title *The Favorite Daughter*. The book begins: "Yuriko came to stay with her father on Thursday that week," which opens up possibilities: Where else does she stay? Who else does she stay with? The photograph of blonde, pale skinned Yuriko in a kimono (at the age of about two) lets young readers know that the narrative is authentic. We are invited to reflect on some of the ways that our own identities are influenced by societal norms and expectations.[3]

A Bridge to Her True Self

An art project (build a model of the Golden Gate Bridge) inspires Yuriko to sequester herself in her room and create a model of the bridge as she had last seen it—covered in a typical fog. Chopsticks, representing the main pillars of the bridge, disappear into a "fog" of cotton from a pillow. Yuriko's creative and unique answer to the art assignment parallels the way she constructs and transforms herself.

Yuriko's father offers encouragement during the creative "inner conflict."

> It's not fair! What good is a famous bridge if you can't see it!"
> "Well, maybe it's good you can't see it today."
> "Are you being mean, Daddy?"
> "Not at all. It makes you use your imagination."

When she bemoans the stale assignment ("We already drew the bridge in kindergarten, Daddy. And all the kids are doing the same thing now!"), he describes an apparent contradiction in her own opinions. ("So you want an ordinary name, but you want to do something different from everyone else in art. I like the second part a lot.")

"Covering" Our Identities

Blonde and pale-skinned Yuriko was accepted easily by her peers as American, but not as Japanese. Hence, she was teased when she shared the photo of herself in a kimono. To avoid being teased, one might argue, she could choose never to wear the kimono and to change her name. But such a "solution" begs the question: Why does she have to do this in order not to be teased? One way to describe the situation is to say that Yuriko feels forced to "cover—she is feeling pressure to assimilate to societal norms and expectations by hiding parts of herself.

Although our hard-fought civil rights laws forbid discrimination against categories of people (e.g., women, gays, racial and religious minorities, and people with disabilities), these laws cannot protect us from many forms of personal insult and social

exclusion. In many settings there are still strong pressures for individuals to not prominently display their mutable (changeable) traits. For example, some people may hesitate to display a physical manifestation of their religious beliefs (a *yarmulke* or a *burka*) or announce a marriage to a member of the same sex. Individuals "cover"—they make less obtrusive that which is mutable. Kenji Yoshino, professor of constitutional law at New York University, wrote in a 2006 article "The Pressure to Cover."

> The demand to cover is anything but trivial. It is the symbolic heartland of inequality—what reassures one group of its superiority to another. When dominant groups ask subordinated groups to cover, they are asking them to be small in the world, to forgo prerogatives that the dominant group has and therefore to forgo equality.[4]

Yoshino believes that the civil rights challenge of our times is to recognize that everyone "covers" some aspect of who they are at some moment in their lives. The new civil rights demands a shift from equality to liberty—so that we all enjoy a personal freedom of being and doing. This will happen not only through courts of law, but through a rich and vigorous discourse about liberty, equality, and our individual pursuit of happiness. We must talk about the complicated dimensions of equality and liberty, and the thorny issue of "where my liberty ends and yours begins." Such a dialog may "illuminate our common humanity" and lead to a fuller expression of it.

Starting Conversations

How might teachers foster a classroom environment that allows for authentic conversations about freedom and fairness, inclusion and rejection? Probably no one was better at doing this than teacher and author Vivian Paley, who recognized that classrooms are inherently exclusionary places, and that children are fundamentally concerned with issues of fairness as they go about constructing their identities through play. In her book *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley describes introducing a rule (which is the book's title) to her kindergarteners.[5] But rather than unilaterally enforcing this rule, she provided all children access and opportunities to speak their minds about it —both children who felt rejected and those doing the rejecting—and she listened with care. She heard children debating whether inclusivity, creativity, and fun might co-exist, and whether exclusion is part of the human experience. In other words, they discussed the multi-dimensions of the human experience.

Paley was adept at gently inserting her voice into these conversations so as to help develop children's sense of empathy. In one example, Paley revisited a problem at "rug time," carefully constructing the dialogue to be inclusive and to present the dimensions of the problem: "Something unhappy took place today in the blocks."—"I couldn't decide what to do about Clara's unhappiness." The rejected child, Clara, the rejecters, and other children all had a turn to speak up. Paley further guides the conversation: "It's a hard problem, … and the same thing happens to other children every day." Giving voice to this fact provided opportunities for children who had been rejected to speak up, and they did. Paley described her own internal thoughts about the situation: "So I thought, I want to do a favor for Clara, but is it fair to spoil Lisa's and Cynthia's play? Yet would this really spoil their play? How?"

Finding a Balance

There is, of course, a balance to be struck, a need to find the balance between personal freedom and responsibility in any situation. Sometimes a person might choose to "step back,"

Questions for Exploring Identity

(with Recommended Resources)

Given the dynamic nature of communities, how can you make the community that you built with your students at the beginning of the year last through the year? Is your classroom an inclusive space?

Have you considered that tattling may be a way for students to check to make sure they understood a classroom rule correctly, or it may be a clue into exclusion or "covering?"

Have you provided your students with concrete experiences to discuss the social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of issues of fairness and inclusion? Have you considered using concrete activities such as The Peaceable Person Profile, Musical Chairs, and The Tight Hands Game? (**teacher.scholastic.com/professional/classmgmt/playhelp.htm**). Older students might also benefit from simulation games (e.g., Sivasailam Thiagarajan, *Diversity Simulation Games*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2002;).

Have you given students opportunities to pause and have conversations about issues of fairness and inclusion? (And do you help by scaffolding those dialogues?)

Have you considered how books such as *The Favorite Daughter* may serve as valuable resources to address issues of inclusion and exclusion, equity and fairness? Check out the NCSS Notable Trade Book lists at **www.socialstudies.org/notable**.

Have you visited the Rethinking Our Classrooms (**www.rethinkingschools.org**) and *Teaching Tolerance* (**www.tolerance.org/publication/classroom-culture**) websites? The information there can help you understand your own opinions and concerns on matters of fairness, find activities, and lead better discussions in your classroom.

to allow another person the time and space to "step up" and express who they are, Teachers can help students distinguish between unsocial behaviors (e.g., explosions of anger, lack of respect for personal space, or whining) from healthy assertiveness (e.g., confronting a bully with one's frustration over the repeated injuries). Teachers can challenge children to think about how friendship between two or three kids can be enjoyed without being exclusionary or hurtful to others.

It would be difficult in our achievement-driven era for most teachers to devote time to a whole curriculum based on exploring fairness and social behavior. Yet, it might be worthwhile for teachers to recognize that classrooms are inherently exclusionary spaces, where children often learn to cover in order to be included in a group.. The "resolutions" to conflicts that children work out on their own might not always be helpful to their social and emotional growth in the long run. Can we find the time to have conversations about feelings and fairness with our students? There are many resources to help teachers do this, including picture books. (See sidebar, p.7)

Teachers can view conflicts between students (including social exclusion) as opportunities to help children pause, define the problem together, discuss solutions, and then enact a solution that respects everyone's feelings. "What can we do if we feel hurt? What can we do when we realize that we have hurt another person's feelings?" Such conversations are important for both identity construction and social learning. Maybe conflict resolution in the classroom and on the playground will help support a much-needed conversation about civil rights, liberties, and freedom of expression in society at large.

As complex as these conversations are, classrooms are fertile places for this work to begin, where children can have guided opportunities to experiment with who they can become, and to discuss the consequences of "covering" as opposed enjoying the full range of their personal liberty. Yuriko needed to understand her multiple, layered selves in order to construct and transform her identity. So does my daughter, and so does every child living in our global world today.

Visit the "Changing Face of America" National Geographic webpage and click on the "Feature Article" at ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/10/changing-faces/schoeller-photography

"The Golden Gate in the fog! Who would've thought of it! Absolutely wonderful! But wait a second, who's the artist? What name are you going to put on it?"

Notes

1. Allen Say, *The Favorite Daughter* (New York: Arthur A. Levine, 2013).
2. There is a similar realization in the book *School Days* by Patrick Chamoiseau (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. pp. 20-21). Translated by Linda Coverdale. *School Days (Chemin-d'Ecole)* is a captivating narrative based on the author's childhood in Fort-de-France, Martinique. We meet his severe, Francophile teacher who is intent upon banishing all remnants of Creole from his students' speech. This domineering man is succeeded by an equally autocratic teacher, an Africanist and proponent of "Negritude." *School Days* "mixes understanding with laughter, knowledge with entertainment, in ways that will fascinate and delight readers of all ages."
3. "We've become a country where race is no longer so black or white." An interesting free webpage to share with children features large photo-portraits of multiracial people, many of them children. For example, the first caption reads, "Kelly Williams II, 17, Dallas, Texas; Self-ID: African American and German/multiracial; CENSUS BOXES CHECKED: black." You can also read the free, brief feature article by Lise Funderburg as well. See Martin Shoeller's portraits at ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/10/changing-faces/schoeller-photography.
4. Ideas and quotes in this section are from Kenji Yoshino, "The Pressure to Cover," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 15, 2006, pp. 36-37); See also *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006).
5. Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); see also Patricia M. Cooper, *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

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