

CRITICAL GLOBAL LITERACIES

BOGUM YOON, *Column Editor*

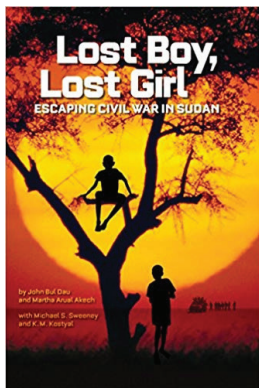
*A high school teacher examined a unit she designed for seventh graders on the autobiography *Lost Boy, Lost Girl*, using the critical global literacies framework.*

Expanding Our Critical Global View from the Classroom

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In their course evaluations at the end of the year, my middle school students referred to our reading of *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* by John Bul Dau and Martha Arual Akech positively. The book focuses on the authors' experiences as children during the civil war in Sudan in the late 1980s and their moves to the United States in the 1990s. My students and I had read and admired the courage and determination of the authors, and we delighted in their marriage at the end.



My teaching purposes for the unit that included the book were numerous (writing personal narratives and source-based arguments, reading informational texts, classroom dialogue, etc.), but one of my personal goals was to help students see how large and diverse the world is. I hoped they would end the unit knowing that there are regions of the world that they have not learned about in school, and that does not mean that those stories and those people are any less valuable than the people and stories they are taught. In this column I discuss the ways my students responded to *Lost Boy, Lost Girl* and what I learned from using the critical global literacies framework to reflect on students' developing critical awareness (Yoon 46).

TEACHING FOR CRITICAL GLOBAL LITERACIES

While I felt successful in my primary goal of showing students a region of the world they had little familiarity with, I knew that I wanted to do more to help them engage in critical literacy (Luke 19). Eight years into my teaching career, I felt like I was getting better at framing assignments, but I was

not sure whether the students were reading and writing with a critical stance. I decided to examine the kinds of thinking students were doing in their writing about the book. I ended up looking closely at the idea of critical global literacies and searching for examples of their thinking across the four dimensions of the framework: “developing global awareness with an interconnected world concept, making connections from a personal to a global level, analyzing and critiquing texts from global and cross-cultural perspectives, and promoting social and political actions on global and multicultural issues” (Yoon et al. 2006). Using these four dimensions, I analyzed the quick-writes and essays of eighty students.

EVALUATING STUDENTS' WRITTEN RESPONSES

As part of the unit on the book, we read multiple news articles about the current situation in South Sudan. In a final writing assignment, the students were asked to respond to one of three writing prompts: explain a main cause of the current problems; explain a possible solution to one of the problems; or explain what

actions, if any, the United States should take in response to what is happening in South Sudan. With regard to developing global awareness, the first dimension of the framework, more than half of the students provided evidence that they were developing an awareness of the larger world. One student wrote that, “unlike some other wars, there is no sole oppressor, so the UN has to pick a side or effect the whole country.” This comment showed the student’s understanding of the complexity of the conflict in Sudan and that any action the UN might take would have ramifications for the country. In response to a quick-write prompt, another student wrote this: “I learned that other cultures don’t really know about our culture and vice versa. And I know that this will always stick with me because you know not to judge or overlook another culture.” This response showed her emerging understanding of the world around her and the value of culture around the world.

Another interesting finding was that the second dimension of the framework dealing with making connections between the personal and the global showed up most frequently in their writing. Bogum Yoon et al. state that students will struggle to develop a critical stance and global awareness if they are unable to actively make personal connections (207). Several students wrote that the personal accounts of John’s and Martha’s struggles made them remember how lucky they are to not have to struggle as the

storytellers did. They emphasized that they needed to remember to be grateful for their families and their lives. Other students noted that, as in the book, situations can change quickly, so they felt the need to appreciate what they have.

They learned how to integrate sources, write for a formal audience, and question and analyze their own experiences and judgments, but within the context of a new-to-them global issue.

The third dimension, which focuses on analyzing and critiquing texts, was the area I struggled with most. I did not want to unduly influence the class, and I was not sure how to share analyses and critiques without them thinking that my opinions were right. Rather, I wanted them to develop their own abilities to analyze and critique. I was not surprised to find that my students did not offer much analysis or critique in their writing, mostly because I knew we had not used that frame for our discussions often enough. However, there was one response that hinted at this dimension. The student wrote, “According to the article, ‘South Sudan still at risk of catastrophic famine, warns David Millibrand,’ this will never stop. The country can’t provide enough food, but one day we [US citizens] hope they will be able to.” This student was challenging the author of the text who said that South Sudan will never be able to provide

enough food. She argued that hope should be the basis of future actions, rather than other countries or the United Nations (UN) supplying food for the nation. I interpreted this response to the article as the student’s effort to disagree with the author and to offer an alternative perspective.

Finally, for the fourth dimension, promoting social and political action, I invited my students to write persuasive letters to an audience of their choosing advocating for the change they wished to see. Several students wrote to the UN, asking them to intervene to stop the South Sudanese militia’s recruitment of child soldiers. Others wrote to their representatives, advocating for allowing more refugees from South Sudan. While the letters were not mailed, the students were passionate and knowledgeable about the issues, and (if I had been planning further ahead) I would have reserved the school’s computers to have students email their letters to the appropriate officials.

LEARNING FROM STUDENTS’ RESPONSES

For the students, this unit was different from their previous experience in an English class. They learned how to integrate sources, write for a formal audience, and question and analyze their own experiences and judgments, but within the context of a new-to-them global issue. I believe I helped them grow in the first and second dimensions of the framework. We had multiple experiences

(with the text, supporting videos, and current events readings) to develop global awareness. Questioning for personal connections to the global level was an area I was comfortable with, and we frequently spent time talking about our own connections to the issues we were studying.

More importantly for me, this “formal” reflection on my teaching allowed me to name my sense of reluctance and discomfort with analysis and critique and the promotion of political action. I struggled to find my footing as I tried to balance modeling for students and inviting them into critiquing perspectives and social action. While I was frustrated with myself for not being able to find that balance, I

am grateful to have examined the unit using the critical global literacies framework. Without understanding my discomforts, I am not able to improve and provide better learning opportunities for students. In the future, I hope to plan activities, conversations, and assignments that help students experience all of the dimensions more fully. While my own discomforts will probably never go away, I know I need to spend more time both examining the dominant ideologies (Gee 20) and my own thinking to show students how to experiment with doing that themselves. I look forward to reading about how others are implementing critical global literacies in their classrooms so that together we can

better equip our students for the diverse, amazing world they are going to be leading soon. [EJ](#)

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