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Power of Yet: The Integration of the Culturally Responsive Literature with the Productive Struggle in Mathematics

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“Power of Yet”: The Integration of the Culturally Responsive Literature with the Productive Struggle in Mathematics

by Kathleen Crawford-McKinney, S. Asli Özgün-Koca, and Kristy Rebar



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Abstract

We used a children’s book with three groups of students (ages 6-9) to foster mathematical engagement through read alouds. We will share lessons learned from this experience as we integrate children’s literature with mathematics through the lens of Dweck’s “Power of Yet.”

Introduction

Have you ever questioned how to support your students to make authentic mathematical connections through children’s literature? Have you also wondered how you create a teaching and learning environment that supports perseverance and culturally responsive teaching? We, a third-grade teacher, a mathematics educator, and a literacy educator, engaged students with mathematics and children’s literature through a read aloud experience during which the teacher and students interacted with the text while developing mathematical understanding. Many educators share how children’s literature can enhance students’ engagement with mathematics (Larson & Rumsey, 2018; Radebaugh, 1981; Russo & Russo, 2018a, 2018b; Shatzer, 2008; Strain, 1969). Some of the common elements that these

authors share to foster the integration of mathematics with children’s literature include being able to

- make authentic connections, especially connections to students’ lives,
- use integration as a strategy to decrease mathematics anxiety, and
- provide a context for mathematics.

They also highlight that the teachers need to strategically plan their lessons to connect the mathematical concept to the literature selection. While planning these lessons, the teacher should keep in mind higher level thinking questions, authenticity, and hands-on experiences with manipulatives to provide multiple access points to the mathematical task.

We know the integration of children’s literature with mathematics has been examined, but in this article, we are using the lens of the Power of Yet to highlight productive struggle in mathematics and culturally responsive literacy. Professional educational literature is lacking in the area that explores ways to combine

these four topics for elementary classroom teachers. We attempt to bring these ideas forth to help teachers understand the importance of book selection, listening to students' meanings of the text, and mathematical contexts while acknowledging that to help students, we need to recognize and act on their cultural differences to help them move beyond the struggles through the Power of Yet.

Description of Our Task

Before we read the book, *When Sophie Thinks She Can't* (Bang, 2018, see Figure 1), we asked the students to share their personal thoughts about doing complex tasks and how they problem-solved when the task felt too difficult. By doing this, we wanted our students to realize that everyone has different backgrounds and understandings of doing difficult tasks. In the story the characters are in a school setting where they are examining concepts of squares and rectangles. One of the authors read the book using a document camera so all students could see the illustrations and text because we were in a Zoom classroom meeting format. As we started reading the story, we stopped and waited for interaction on the pages to bring out the meaning of the story. Bang introduces the word "YET" as a way to think beyond what the students think they can't do. "*Now's the time to use the most important word. That word is... YET. You haven't figured it out.... YET. Keep working! Keep trying, and you will.*" On one particular page in the story where the teacher discusses squares and rectangle with her students, we asked our students what they knew about squares and rectangles. As we continued reading the story, we asked them to create their own rectangles using twelve square-shaped post-it notes to work on their understanding of the concepts/properties of rectangles. In this story, the word "yet" was used to demonstrate productive struggle (NCTM, 2014) and the ways in which the students in the book could figure out complex problems, while acknowledging that everyone may have a different answer. We deliberately provided students the time to stop and share their connections to the story, focusing on the similarities and differences between the way the characters built their mathematical knowledge and how our students built their own mathematical knowledge.

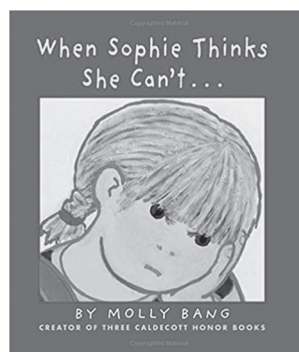


Figure 1. The cover of *When Sophie Thinks She Can't* (Bang 2018)

We met with different groups of K-3rd grade students to explore the content area of mathematics and children's literature. The students are from diverse backgrounds and various parts of the United States including Detroit, Michigan; Eagle River, Alaska; and Mesa, Arizona. The students were categorized into three groups: one group of K-1st graders, and 2 groups of 2nd – 3rd graders.

Theoretical Background for the Task

The literacy instructional strategy that we primarily focused on was interactive read alouds. There is significant empirical evidence supporting why reading aloud is important for children. As such, we believe that the value of teachers reading aloud to their students helps benefit students' literacy growth in multiple ways, including syntactical development, vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and fluency to name just a few (Lane and Wright, 2007; Beck and McKeown, 2001; Santoro, Chard, Howard and Baker, 2008; Hurst, Scales, Frecks, and Lewis, 2011; Routman 2003; Witte, 2016). We also know that children who hear texts read aloud to them not only think more broadly and open their imaginations; the read aloud also, "affords them the opportunity to become more culturally sensitive" (Layne, 2015, p. 9). This cultural sensitivity is the key to the Power of Yet especially as students share their own personal responses to both the content of story as well as through solving the mathematical problems contained within the text.

In this experience, the literature selections were deliberately chosen to elicit connections among the two

content areas: mathematics and literacy, as well as to foster personal connections so that the meaning of the text would come to life. Although there is a plethora of children's literature that focuses on mathematical concepts, there are fewer that have a powerful sense of story in them; for this study, the sense of story was important to allow students to more easily make connections between mathematics and literature. For this article, we deliberately chose *When Sophie Thinks She Can't* (Bang 2018) which explores the concept of persisting on a task even when the task seems difficult.

Our students transacted with the text to make meaning (Rosenblatt, 1938). We encouraged them to draw on their past experiences to base their expectations of what came next in the text. Therefore, the meaning was continually shaped and tested. Each student interacted with the text and expressed their own particular value of the text. We acknowledge the need to consider that we have a group-responsibility when we respond. We need to take our personal experiences with the words in the text, to create our own meaning, while checking ourselves to consider other responses to the text. So, much like the transactional theory, mathematics acknowledges that there are always multiple ways to approach a problem while coming to a shared result. We wanted to encourage students who struggle with a problem, to focus on their own transaction while problem solving, which helped lead them to a solution through the Power of Yet.

Power of Yet: Bringing Culturally Responsive Teaching and Productive Struggle into Practice

The Power of Yet is described "as being on a learning curve and gives you a path to the future" (Dweck, 2014). As teachers and teacher educators, we recognize that our role is to provide paths for our students to grow as learners. The Power of Yet provides the opportunity for us to stop and reflect with our students about their responses. Through this reflective stance, students are encouraged to step back and be critical about their own learning. In this process, the teachers' role is to create a learning environment that supports critical thinking (Hilaski, 2017). This contradicts a deficit model of learning, in which we,

as teachers, try to fix the wrong answer. Instead, we encourage our students to stand back and cultivate a compass through a complicated situation. It is through this notion of "*not knowing yet*," that we can support our students' uncertainty, fear, and anxiety of being open to learning the new in this complicated world (Hansen, 2011).

In a general sense, the word struggle has a negative connotation and having to struggle might be associated with failing and frustration. However, research shows across both disciplines that we learn more when we struggle (Boaler, n.d.a & n.d.b). The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2014) describes productive struggle as when students are "delving more deeply into understanding the mathematical structure of problems and relationships among mathematical ideas, instead of simply seeking correct solutions." (p. 48). In order for a struggle to be productive and accepted as a part of a learning process, some classroom norms have to be in place (Baker et al., 2020; Livy et al, 2018; NCTM, 2014; Warshawer, 2015). These educators listed the following norms:

- Valuing, acknowledging, and encouraging struggle,
- Choosing worthwhile tasks which will allow productive struggle,
- Giving students access to tools to support their thinking processes,
- Providing ample time, and
- Communicating and reflecting on the thinking process.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) focuses on improving the learning capacity of diverse students who have been marginalized educationally. We believe that we leverage children's community funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) to build brain power. It is important as teachers that we do not mistake cultural differences for intellectual deficits (Hammond, 2015). Being a Culturally Responsive Teacher means we leverage the Power of Yet mindset and recognize that through the connection of mistakes, we can support children's growth as

learners. We are kinder to ourselves when we are still making mistakes, but we take time to notice that we are making progress.

It is the role of the teacher to foster the Power of Yet, by letting students know they have progressed and yet still have room to grow. By helping students understand this, and having discussions about their mistakes, errors become normalized. Engaging students in instructional conversations is an opportunity that provides time to level up their learning by embracing failure and growth. Creating an environment and attitude of a growth-mindset in the classroom is the purpose behind the Power of Yet.

How the Power of Yet Was Fostered in Our Lesson

We asked the students to talk about the story as we read different parts of the book. At one point in the story, Sophie gets frustrated because she “can’t” do a puzzle that she thinks it is too difficult. The students talked about what they do to learn something that is too difficult. One of the 3rd grade students connected to the Power of Yet by sharing that he goes to the library to read in order to get smarter. When he talked about the story, he connected to the importance of not giving up and to keep trying. Another student talked about challenges he has when he takes apart his go-cart and tries to put it back together. Still another talked about how she kept trying to learn how to do particular kicks with her soccer ball. All of the children connected to Sophie’s struggles with visualizing the mathematical problems in the story. These three students were not able to do things perfectly at first, but they realized that through the Power of Yet, they could persevere to accomplish their goals of learning to read by going to the library, to do mechanical go-cart building, and to improve soccer skills. Here, we highlighted these text-to-self connections to emphasize the productive struggle which is also crucial for mathematical knowledge building. The focus is not about a specific mathematical topic, but the *way* someone learns mathematics.

Integration of Mathematics and Literature

In another article in preparation, we share how we

adapted Russo & Russo’s (2018a) Narrative First Approach to integrate mathematics and literature. This approach involves finding rich narratives, mapping out key components of the story, developing rich problem solving investigations related to the components and then linking them back to the mathematics curriculum. Russo & Russo (2018b) take the Narrative-First Approach and use five steps to enhance student and teacher engagement. The first step is shared reading of the text, followed by having some connecting questions to relate. Once this has taken place, the teacher then poses the mathematical problem. The students complete the initial problem, and then they extend their thinking with another problem to challenge themselves further. The last step is a reflective discussion in which the teacher and students reflect on mathematical learning. In the adapted version—what we call *Narrative-throughout Approach*—we provided a read aloud throughout the learning experience by stopping and talking about the text as the students interacted with problem solving ideas gleaned from the story. Students’ engagement with both the text and the mathematics was continuous. In other words, as we read the story, we intentionally stopped at certain points to discuss the text and do mathematics.

When Sophie Thinks She Can’t, includes a mathematical problem as part of the narrative. For our lesson, we used the task as it was presented in the text, since we thought it was a rich mathematical task with multiple entry points and answers. The task was to build as many rectangles as possible using 12 small squares (see Figure 2). This task was categorized as a rich, worthwhile task because it had multiple answers, and it allowed students to use several approaches. It was also a low threshold task due to the fact that it was accessible with both groups of students (K- 1st and 2nd – 3rd graders), but at the same time, the task has a high ceiling to study more complex mathematical concepts. “A low threshold high ceiling task is one which is designed to be mathematically accessible, and to have built-in extension opportunities. In other words, everyone can get started and everyone can get stuck” (NRICH, n.d., para1).

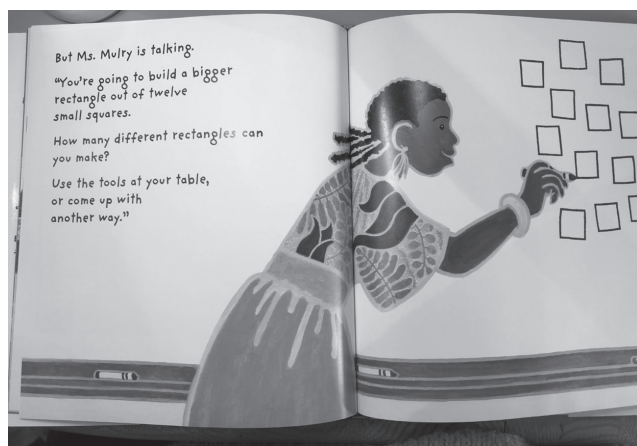


Figure 2. The Mathematics Problem from the book

How the Integration Was Fostered in Our Lesson

Twelve post-its were provided for students to use during the problem solving. As students came up with different answers using 12 small squares, we had to pause and discuss what the question was asking and how to tile the small squares so that each rectangle would have the area of 12 small squares. This task had low threshold, since it allowed the younger group of students to think about the rectangles via manipulatives. It also had a high ceiling since it allowed students to see how the number 12 could be represented in different ways, interpret multiplication as an area, and even start thinking about the commutative property of multiplication. Figure 3 shows students showing their rectangles 6x2 and 2x6 at the same time during the lesson.

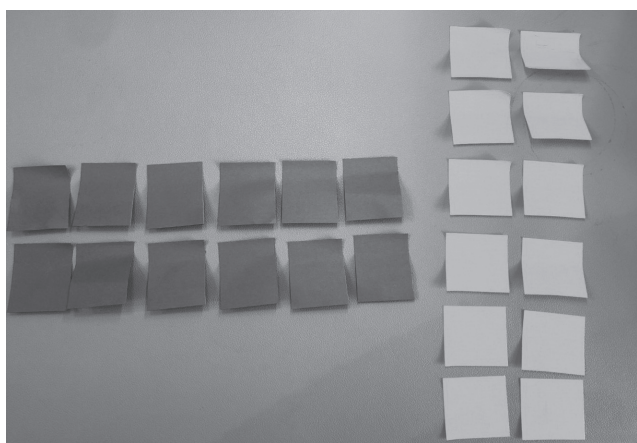


Figure 3. The Commutative Property of Multiplication

When planning for this lesson, we made some deliberate instructional decisions and moves to increase the mathematical and literacy engagement of the students. Some of those decisions were to ensure that all students had the materials in front of them before we began. Each student was provided with a packet of materials for this lesson including the children's book and hands-on manipulatives. Post-its were ready for students to use as we started the mathematics problem. Students were encouraged to use their own copy of the book to reread and find examples through illustrations and texts to support their thinking about the mathematical task. We anticipated how the students might have responded and ensured all students could share their work. Welcoming and making each student's work public was intentional to make sure that everyone's thinking was valuable and worth sharing even it is not complete. Labeling the work of students as "not complete" instead of "not correct" was another intentional choice to support productive struggle. As students created different rectangles, we asked students to show their work for others to see.

Teachers need to anticipate potential student responses and misconceptions and be ready with questions to support student thinking. For instance, we knew that we wanted to ask them how they knew that the shape they created was a rectangle. Here, we wanted to reinforce the definition of a rectangle. Being prepared with these kinds of questions ahead of time allowed us to have a reflective mathematical discussion throughout the learning engagement. For instance, one first grader used the post-its as seen in Figure 4 to create her rectangle. The child's shape resembles an image of a rectangle (with a border and an empty space in the middle), but we needed to discuss the concept of an area and why post-its were supposed to be tiled next to each other.

How Literacy and Mathematics Leverage Each Other

To support the productive struggle, we needed to be patient and trust our students and their thinking. We took our time as we read the story and solved the mathematics problem. We paid special attention not to rush the read aloud nor the mathematical work. In



Figure 4. Post-its used for the border of the rectangle

Bang's story, the teacher encourages students to share their beliefs about what smart means. "*What's the ONE word on the board?*" SMART. "*How do we become smart?*" asks Ms. Mulry. Nobody knows the answer. They all think you have to be born smart." Stopping to discuss our students' definitions and interpretations of "smart," allowed us to see the degree to which they see struggle as a part of intelligence. Providing time to discuss this piece of literature and not categorizing the notion of struggling through a deficit lens was crucial for mathematical knowledge building. Some students saw that struggle was part of learning and growth. They stated that one can become smarter by "working hard" and "trying hard." Moreover, our students had a text-to-self connection by empathizing with the character of Sophie when she had a challenging time while working on a problem during the read aloud. Our students shared that they also felt "frustrated" and "sad," when "they think they can't." A crucial aspect of Power of Yet was following up with these comments to discuss the value of struggle and to re-define struggle as a part of

learning, especially mathematical learning. Again, we are not focusing on a specific mathematics content but the *way* to do mathematics such as not only expecting but also valuing that problem solving process might take time and effort.

A strategy to promote Power of Yet with a culturally responsive lens to help students connect literacy and mathematics is to encourage students to think like mathematicians (Muhammad, 2020). If we ask students to search for truth and errors in the work they do, as it relates to mathematics through the selected picture book, we are encouraging them to take on the role of a mathematician. We encouraged our students to examine the importance of each word in the book about the rectangle problem, and to interpret what information they thought was vital, thereby digging into the story for clues to help them with both the mathematical problem and making meaning of the story.

Concluding Thoughts

We agree with Russo and Russo (2018b) that the literature selection is instrumental in creating rich and authentic problem-solving mathematics learning engagements. We believe that keeping the connection between the narrative and mathematics alive throughout the engagement enabled us to engage students more effectively. Interactive engagement between children's literature and mathematics should add to both learning of mathematics and literacy learning. Integrating children's literature books with mathematics is not a new idea, and there is a plethora of children's literature texts that connect to mathematics. Our aim has been to deliberately seek out literature that facilitates students to be open to think more deeply (about both mathematics and literature). Our intent is that such thinking is not a forced connection, rather one that evolves naturally. We had two main reasons to choose the book *When Sophie Thinks She Can't*: (i) the mathematics problem in the book was a worthwhile problem and (ii) the book's context enabled us to bring out the Power of Yet. If the mathematical problem is not rigorous enough in a text, then the problem could be revised to embellish how you want your students to think like mathematicians (Muhammad, 2020).

As we continue to examine the learning experiences of students, our hope is that we foster children's literature experiences that are both engaging for them to interact with the story and to make connections to mathematical concepts in ways that facilitate opportunities for them to remain sensitive to productive struggle that acknowledges diverse cultural ways of thinking.

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