

Children's Literature: Students as Readers, Global Citizens

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Abstract: Student identity is an important aspect of development for both the learner and for learning. Oftentimes, identity development is sacrificed for content goals in university courses. However, the inventory of 21st century competencies reminds us that more needs to be done to help students embrace their future roles as readers and global citizens. In this paper, I present findings from a study of reader and global identities in university students. Quantitative and qualitative data reveal that student identities are developed through engagement in literacy activities like collaborative online discussions, social media and digital book talks. Findings from the study suggest that identity development is possible when introduced explicitly in tasks through course content. The findings suggest that by strengthening student identities in courses, we may be inching towards helping students rescript their identities as readers and global citizens.

Key words: children's literature, reader and global identities, university learners

INTRODUCTION

In institutes of higher learning and teacher preparation where the development of professional qualities is a priority (Tatto, 2015), understanding student identities is of particular interest. Current understandings of identity is that it is socially constructed rather than “a unified, cohesive essence belonging to an individual whose core unfolds or develops in stages (Erickson, 1968)” (as cited in McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 229). As such, identity construction is shaped by “the experiences individuals [they] have had in their families, their previous experiences with institutions such as schools, as well as the larger social and political frameworks”. (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 230)

Furthermore, because identity construction is argued to be relational and situated in relationships, they can be unconscious, conscious or strategic depending on who individuals choose to align or contrast with. Importantly, power has been identified to play a role in how identities are expressed or enacted. In classrooms, positionings by teachers, peers and others have also been found to impact the development of student identities (Wortham, 2004).

Another key idea is that individuals have a hybrid of identities which are fluid and flexible (Tomlinson, 2010) “depending on the spaces they are in and the relationships they enact within those spaces.” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 230). Gee (1996) explains that identities are “culturally situated, mediated and constructed” as individuals move from relationships, groups and spaces. Consequently, identities are “clusters of stories” (Anzaldúa, 1996) that represent individuals to themselves and inform others about them.

From the perspective of identity construction, literacy tools are expressions of identity and “constructed in relation to others’ perceptions (Tatum, 1997)”. They are described as “moments in identity construction and representation” and teaching literacy are “acts of supporting and challenging learners’ identities and providing spaces for learners to explore how their identities are hybrid, and how hybridity is stabilising” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 233).

University Students: Stage Development & Identities

Developmentally, the post-secondary and university years are described as “transitional and novel” that “has the potential to evoke feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (Faye & Sharpe, 2008, p. 190). We know that at this stage, student personal identities are forged by many first-time and new experiences such as leaving home, learning and experimenting with new skills along with forming new friendships. Importantly, as students' personal identities mature, academic motivation and purpose intensifies.

Against this psychosocial backdrop lies the need to strengthen metacognitive decision-making since these stage-related experiences require students to make efficacious decisions about life goals, personhood and relationships. Significantly, identity development is a component of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1979) where positive learner and learning identities have been found to enable purpose, autonomy and self-improvement (Simon, 2004).

The process of learner identity development is also described as fluid and personal to the learner (Tomlinson, 2010). At university, students begin to adapt to their roles as university students by relating to themselves as learners, their learning experiences, interaction with peers and their professors and mentors. Research has found that this process is linked to academic performance (Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, & Gibson, 2005).

Learning identity, on the other hand, speaks to the attitudes and beliefs of students towards learning and their abilities to learn. Kolb and Kolb (2009, p. 1) argue that this is “the heart of the learning way”. Interestingly, they point out that “positive learning identities are less about past learning successes or failures but about self-attributions about successes or failures”. Dweck (2000) explains that learning identities can be fixed or incremental and that peers play an important role in shaping learning identity.

Universities of today attend to more than learner and learning-focused identities. Today, universities include within their repertoire of student outcomes related to identity development that prepare students for the roles they will fill in their future.

Reader and Global Identities

Conversations about reader identity development are usually focused on school rather than university contexts. Furthermore, Vetter, Myers, Reynolds, Stumb, and Barrier (2017) observed that reader identity development is either misunderstood, devalued, or ignored in academic contexts.

Wagner (2020) explains that reader identities are the ideas that people have of themselves as readers. These identities include the sense of confidence about reading, reading preferences and reading experiences. Reader identities have been argued to form at childhood when children draw upon concepts, patterns of speech, behaviours, and actions of people they interact with and associate them with texts they read. These reader identities reflect the ways individuals make meaning of experiences in their formative years with reading and language. In the middle and senior school years, learners take greater charge of their identity development by either engaging or avoiding literacy activities (Hall, 2010). Fairbanks and Ariail (2006) found that when student identities were not aligned to school expectations, learners did not use their skills and knowledge to reading tasks.

Reader identities are also argued to be dynamic, continuously being shaped and adjusted within reader communities. As students strengthen their own awareness of who they are as

readers across courses at university and other spaces, they repeatedly re-formulate their ideas about themselves as readers. Literacy activities such as book talks encourage further exploration, refinement and development of these identities.

At university as well is attention to the development of student global citizenship by requiring students to keep abreast of world issues that shape cultural understanding. Schall (2010) observed that students often have simplistic understandings of culture and cultural identity despite exposure to a wide range of global literature. They often resort to limited labels and stereotypes that may not reflect an understanding of their own identity as citizens of a global village. The need to attend to the development of global identities in students is critical since cultural diversity is a norm (Ogbu, 1992). If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic is confirming of this.

The Study

In this study, I aimed to locate and determine changes of reader and global identities of university students who were enrolled in an open elective course on children's literature for the Bachelor of Arts programme. The course was chosen for two reasons. First, the popularity of the course with students who were from a range of programmes and second, the course required students to read a range of young fiction aimed at developing children as readers and global citizens. In addition, the course allowed me to determine if student consciousness about their own reader and global identities could be raised when considering how young fiction may shape these identities in children.

As such, the research questions for this study were:

1. What are the reader and global identities of university students enrolled in the course?
2. In what ways were their reader and global identities shaped through course activities and tasks?

Children's Literature as The Research Site

A significant category of young fiction introduced and discussed on the course is multicultural or global literature. This category of fiction reflects a multitude of real and imagined story-worlds and identities that students are not always familiar with. As Harris (1997, p. 43) notes "If literature is a mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read and are read to see themselves reflected as part of humanity." Stories from this category of young literature reflect a range of experiences, cultural, ideological and naturalistic, that offer opportunities to shape reader and global identities. As a conduit of identity development, children's literature in general and this sub-genre specifically gives students as readers the opportunity to meet new characters and their cultures as windows or as sliding doors (Bishop, 1990, 1997) where the potential for readers to be "conscientized" (Freire, 1970) to praxis through the reading of literature.

The Course

a. Overview

The course is a 39-hour course that runs for 13 weeks. Teaching and learning on the course is organized according to lectures, tutorials, and seminars both on and offline. Student learning outcomes for the course were:

- Read, view and listen to a wide range of children's literature from different parts of the world
- Select appropriate books for children
- Critically respond to selected children's literature
- Create a promotional book talk for children

Features of the course curriculum also included: (a) a selection of sub-genres reflective of the reading preferences of today's children, (b) inclusion of children's literature in different modes, (c) the use of book talks for students to refine their own learning and (d) the use of social media to encourage exploration, exchange, discussion and learning from experts, enthusiasts from the wider global community.

b. Student Profile

Students who usually enroll for this course specialize in a wide range of disciplines. For this study, Table 1 presents the student profile.

Table 1: Profile of Students Enrolled

School of Humanities	5
Sociology	2
Aerospace Engineering	1
Psychology	8
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication	2
Public Policy and Global Affairs	2
Sports Science and Management	1
Teacher education	4

c. Assignments

There were two assignments required of students on the course. The first required them to select a story for children that would model positive reader and/or global identities in children and argue for their choice in a talking point discussion with peers. They were then to write a reflective essay on their understandings of reader and global identities. The second required the students to revisit their initial story choice and develop a promotional video for children on their book choice before reflecting on their understanding of the importance of developing reader and global identities in children through their book choices.

The assignments were structured as developmental tasks with reflection opportunities to consider how stories enabled identity development and why identity development is critical for children and for themselves.

d. The Role of Social Media

Social media played a role in fashioning aspects of reader and global identity given the role it plays in student lives. Social media was situated both as a collaborative learning tool as well as a tool to engage with the world. Three social media platforms, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest were identified for these purposes.

Twitter was selected to encourage interaction with writers of young fiction. The research on the use of Twitter, however, is at best mixed with some evidence on its use increasing student engagement (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010), which is important.

Next, Instagram was selected as a means to allow students to appreciate the role of literature in their own lives. By applying knowledge learned on the course about text-visual relationships in picture books Instagram posts showcased their own applications of learning course content (Huang & Su, 2018).

Finally, students were asked to create Pin boards of sub-genres as a longer-term task on the course. These boards were to serve as personal collections of young literature that they could share with their peers and other enthusiasts. As argued by Knake, Chen, Yang, and Tait (2021), Pinterest allowed for students to access the wider global community for book treasures beyond local or university libraries.

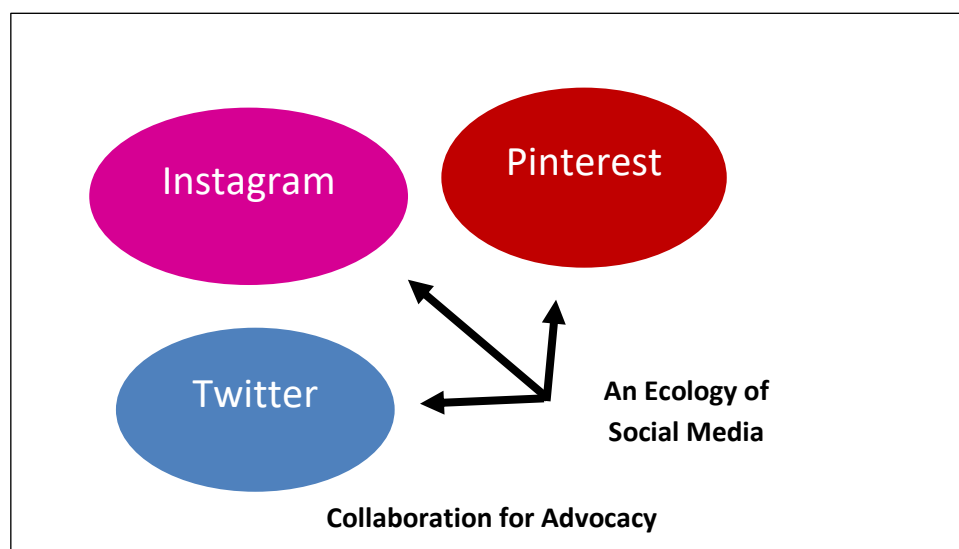


Figure 1: The Use of Social Media for Identity Development

METHOD

a. Quantitative Data

In this mixed-method study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. I analysed two surveys that the students completed during the course. The first was on reader identity and the other on global identity. The reader identity survey comprised 20 questions on self-perception and self-efficacy as readers while the global identity survey comprised 23 questions on reading for self-development and global citizenship identity and action. In both surveys, students were asked to respond to questions on a 4-point Likert scale.

b. Qualitative Data

Four additional sets of qualitative data were collected: (1) student social media interactions, (2) peer discussions on the selection of children's stories, (3) peer discussions

clarifying the initial selection of children's stories and (4) student reflections on reader and global identity development. An inductive thematic analysis (Hayes, 1997) was conducted on the discussions to answer the research questions.

Quantitative Findings

Student Reader Identities

Quantitative data on student reader identity showed that their reader identities were neutral in terms of self-perception and efficacy. Possible reasons include “the type of material I am reading - scholarly articles and journals are more challenging to read at times” or “the type of text or genre that I am reading. If it is up to my liking, I am able to read with not much problem”. Student reader identities seemed to be shaped by the type of reading they were engaged in.

In answer to questions about reading pleasure, students seemed to have very positive identities as shown in Figure 2. Students identified fiction as the preferred genre for reading such as “fantasy, mystery/thriller, anything supernatural honestly” and “classic lit, Japanese fiction” suggesting that potential need for book clubs and reading interest groups.

Self-Perception & Efficacy



Figure 2: Reading for Pleasure

In terms of whether reading was a characteristic of their identity, many rated that reading was not (see Figure 3) because “everyone's tastes are different” and that “none of my friends judge me for what I read”. However, among the responses was the view that “most people have the perception that classic literature as a genre is difficult to read”, revealing students' specific reading interests.

Self-Perception & Efficacy

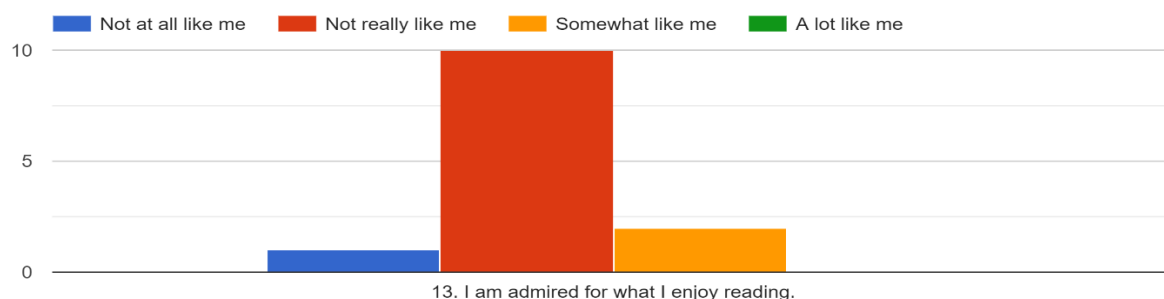


Figure 3: Reading as an Admirable Characteristic

In terms of setting reading goals, most students preferred fiction rather than non-fiction although some revealed a strong preference for non-fiction (see Figure 4). This confirms the potential need for book clubs and reading interest groups.

Self-Perception & Efficacy

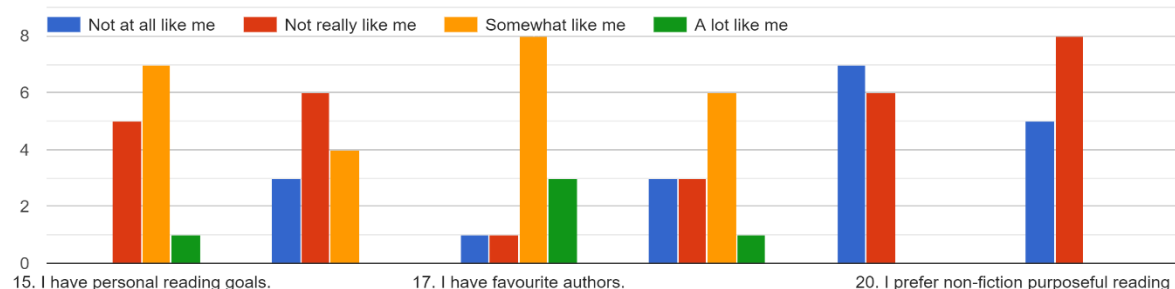


Figure 4: Reading Goals

Student Global Identities

The data suggests that students did not value the development of a global identity and were ambivalent about this aspect of identity development despite that they were preparing for employment around the world. It was also clear that students did not perceive that their global identities would be encouraged by the development of their reading identities either (see Figure 5 and 6).

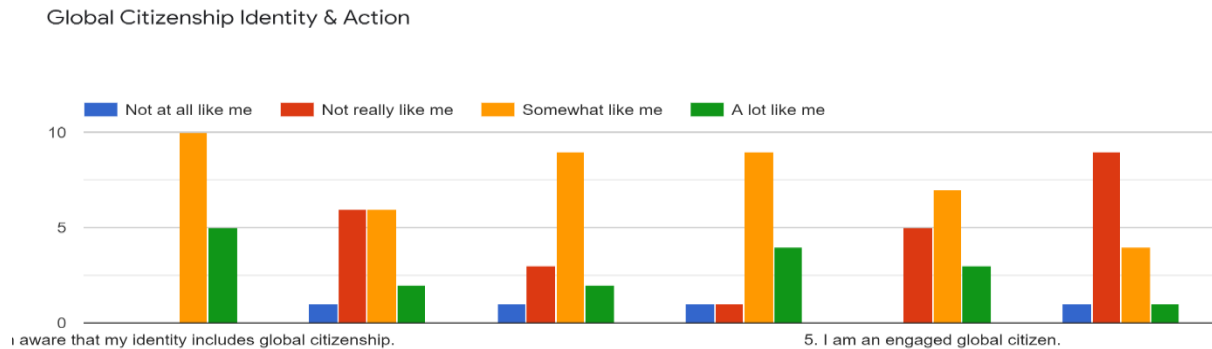


Figure 5: Global Identity Awareness

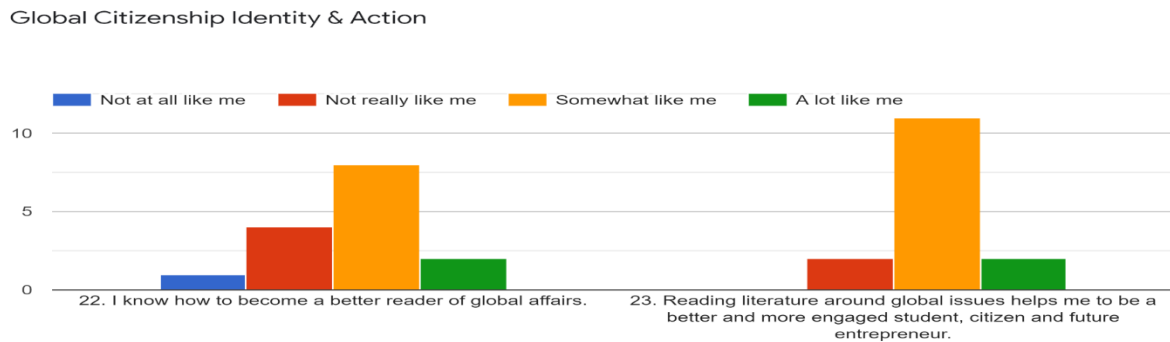


Figure 6: The Relationship Between Reader and Global identity

Overall, the data from the surveys reveals an ambivalence and lack of development among students about their identities as readers and global citizens. If left unchecked or unshaped, these beliefs are likely to remain and continue into their personal and work lives.

Qualitative Data

Social Media Interactions

Twitter Interactions

Students were provided with detailed task prompts that required them to engage on Twitter. In the Twitter task prompts, students were asked to interact with their favourite children's writers by tweeting about the impact of their book choice on their personal lives. Findings from student Twitter interactions reveal that interactions were limited to the task prompt alone. Student interactions reveal that while students tweeted, few encountered extended interactions with authors or the wider online community on topic. One example is provided in Figure 7.



Figure 7: An Example of a Student Tweet #1

There are some reasons for this: first, the task prompts did not explicitly state that the goal of the tweet was to engage in extended conversations. Second, some attention is required in terms of guiding student Twitter profiles to create authenticity. Finally, in discussions about their Twitter experiences, students indicated that authors would only respond when tweets were about more than usually accolades. Figure 8 provides an example of an author who responded to a



student's tweet.

Figure 8: An Example of Student Tweet #2

Tweeting is an activity that is assumed to be comfortable for students as 21st century digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Yet, through this activity, I observed that students were challenged by interactions arising from lack of confidence in both content and their own identities. The following is an example of how the tweet failed to adequately capture a student's point of view.

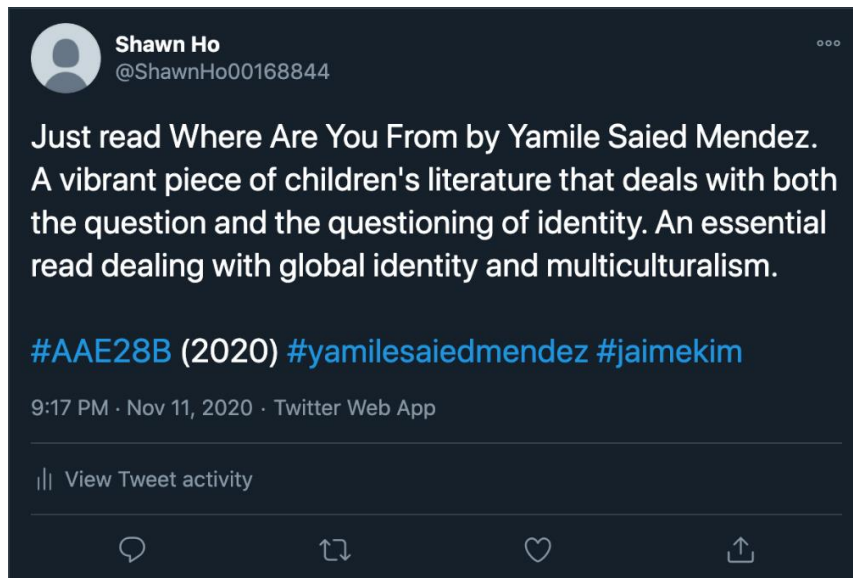


Figure 9: An Example of Student Tweet #3

Instagram Posts

Findings from Instagram posts were much more encouraging. To develop student understanding about the place of poetry in the lives of children, students were asked to create an Instagram post using formulaic poems such as cinquains or diamante poems as text with an accompanying photograph as a visual. Student posts tended to be about aspects of their personal lives and were successful applications of this aspect of course content. Figure 11 is an example.



Figure 10: An Example of Student Post #1

Pinterest Posts

Findings from student Pinterest boards also proved to be promising. Through the support of ways in which to search for pins that in the task prompt, students discovered and collected novel examples of children's literature advocated by practitioners, experts, writers and enthusiasts. This elevated student confidence about the course content. Figure 11 is an example of children's literature for girls in STEM.

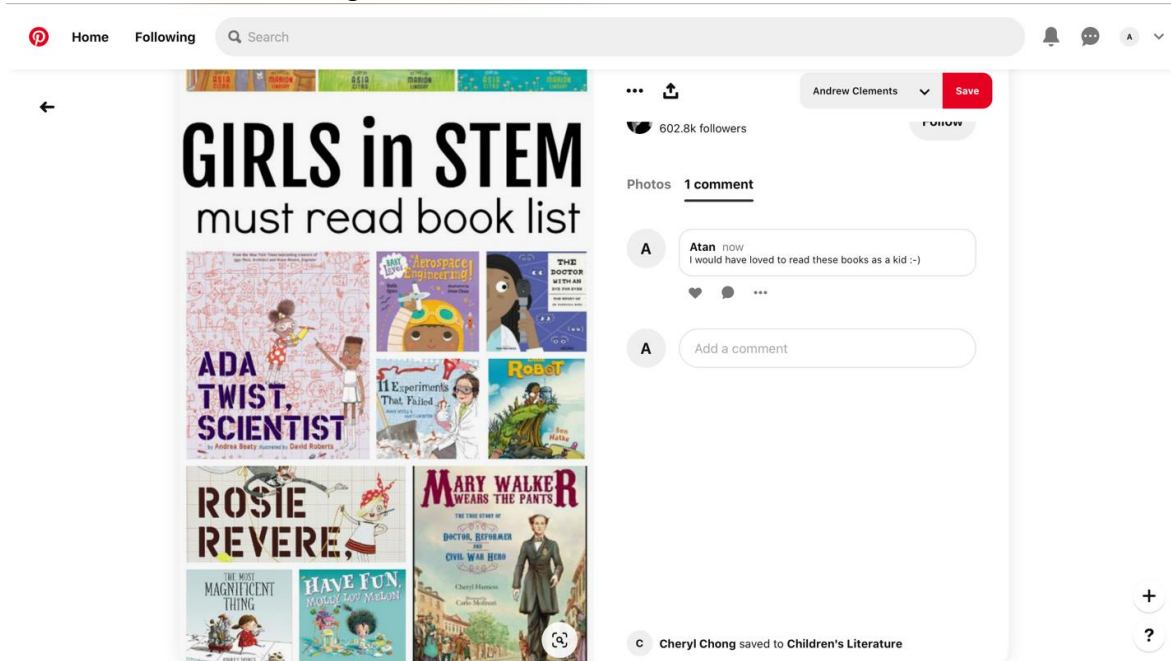


Figure 11: An Example of a Pinterest Board

Overall, the use of social media tools extended the course “beyond classroom walls” (Greenhow, Galvin, & Staudt Willet, 2019) which urged students to develop their identities as readers and global citizens more fully.

Peer Discussions 1

Peer discussions were analysed for students' initial understandings of reader and global identities of children. The following themes were found in these discussions:

Reader Identities

Students found that when reader identities were modelled in literature such as through “constant reference to reading and stories...allow[s]ing [the] children...to realise that... reading is fun and can be seen as a leisure activity” (Discussion 1b). Others pointed that activities where “the characters...constantly exchanging and reading letters from each other” (Discussion 1c) were equally powerful. Students remarked that representations of reading, however, in their selected stories remained monomodal, passive and initially negative as explained by one student: “So when the TV is broken, the boy has no choice but to engage in the book that is in front of him” (Discussion 2a). Representations of reading ranged from functionalist “a means in itself” (Discussion 2b) to its use in building understanding of themselves and others, a trait of global identity. Students also found stories of poor reader self-concept shaped by teachers and other students in schools (Discussion 1f) as well as stories about the lack of access to books (Discussion 2c). Others pointed out that fractured fairy tale characters like Rapunzel were reconstructed as one who “is definitely seen to be an avid reader” (Discussion 2f).

Global Identities

Students argued for stories that “depict[s]ed an inclusive community” (Discussion 1a) where there was representation of cultures reflective of the wider society. The findings reveal that student notions of inclusion were current in terms of cultures, both specific and global, animals, nature (Discussion 2e), the “disadvantaged, like, for the global issue” (Discussion 1b) and migrant children (Discussion 2d). The findings also revealed that students were aware of the “urgency” (Discussion 1b) of inclusion in current times. Students expressed that stories with a focus on how to develop inclusion were of greater value for children than those that presented the ideal. Others argued that stories about love and happiness were equally enabling of global identity development in children (Discussion 1d).

21 Century Identities

Found in the data as well were justifications for stories that “mirrored” (Bishop, 1990, 1997) the identities and lives of 21st century children. Stories about critical reading was argued to be more important than stories about reading and stories of self-acceptance were argued to be important for identity development in children: “Children can learn from this book that they should embrace themselves, since everybody can contribute to society in their own ways, and they should always feel positive about themselves” (Discussion 1e).

Student Reflections

The Role of Literature in Identity Development

Student reflections revealed that students appreciated the role of literature in shaping their own identities: "As a child, the telling of storybooks in my childhood impacted me more rather than the act of reading it individually." (Student #2) Others explained that visuals were important in modelling positive identity important since "the illustrations help children better visualise the characters for themselves." (Student #4). Others felt that stories taught children "the way I should react, to what I should say when similar occurrences happen to me in real life." (Student #4) by 'providing them with a safe environment to possibly learn from the characters in the book on how to deal with their own stressors and problems (Pulimeno, Piscitelli, & Colazzo, 2020)." (Student #29)

Overall, student reflections revealed an appreciation for literature in their own lives in terms of shaping "the values and perspective that I have grown to adopt as I got older." (Student #13) and in terms of shaping their identity as "a critical reader especially when deciding whether the book is suitable for young children." (Student #18)

Development of Student Reader and Global Identities

Reader Identities

The reflections also revealed development in student understandings of reading identity. Some explained that "Reading is a hobby that I developed recently" and that "books taught me how to be more compassionate and respecting others, and in the future I know these qualities I learnt from books will help me live as a global citizen." (Student #3). Others observed that their reading choices were evolving as they embraced "a progressive global identity" (Student #11). Family literacies such as reading with siblings were argued to be critical for this: "As the eldest daughter of four children, I was reminded of my role in shaping my younger siblings' reader and global identities. Growing up, I realised that they modelled after me by copying the things I did. If I read a book, they would also want to read a book. (Student #22) Library visits was also argued to be an important literacy activity that "allowed the child to realise that there is more to just reading on their electronic gadgets." (Student #7)

One pointed out that positive reading identities were not celebrated in schools: "Personally, I was in Library Society CCA in Secondary School, but that has never made me feel proud, as I felt like it was not an activity that positioned me to be in a 'lame' group. But the wholesome self-confidence Estella has truly touched me and made me feel a sense of connection to her devotion towards literature. Reading is not something to be ashamed of, and neither is being in Library Society" (Student #32).

Global Identities

Student reflections revealed an increased awareness about their own global identity development. One student remarked that ideologies about children could be a reason: "The tutorial on the changing ideologies of childhood as well as this experience really helped me be aware of my own tendency to fall into this 'trap' of adhering to dated ideologies of children and the books they should be reading" (Student #31). Another added that "Personally, much of what

I learnt about the world around me was through the books that I read during my childhood” (Student #19) suggesting an awakening to the role of children’s literature in the development of global identities. Another acknowledged that “While I was an avid reader growing up, I now recognize through this module that my exposure to books were largely limited to conventional Western setting and characters, which does not reflect my lived experience at all” (Student #16).

Furthermore, student reflections revealed the realisation that global identity development was dependent on reading identity development, as found in this comment: “I see now that I could have vocalised the connection between the book and global identity more specifically, referencing the variety of ethnicity and clothing in illustrations and normalizing of multiculturalism” (Student #10). As one student concludes: “For global citizenship awareness to blossom, it is vital for children’s literature to keep pace with the breathtaking changes around the globe, reflecting the diversity of problems and burdens” (Student #33).

Book Talks - A Means for Student Reader and Global identity Development

Overall, students appreciated the role of book talks in deepening their own understanding of identity and their own reader and global identities. Students remarked that “The creation of this book talk has also led me to reflect on the role of literature in my own global identity. Reading about a cultural or societal issue is nowhere close compared to reading a personal account of a person’s private encounter with these issues” (Student #20). Another asserted that “All in all, the book talk allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how reader identity and global identity can be constructed” (Student #24) which one student suggested was “to look inwards at my own experiences with the two components” (Student #29).

Others argued that “I hope that I can continue to do book talks so that I may share my passion for reading and let reading touch the hearts of more children” (Student #6). Students explained that book talks were an excellent platform to demystify reading by sharing how they overcame negative experiences such as this one: “I fumbled and blurted out the wrong words when I was tasked to read a difficult passage” (Student #11). The same student added that book talks “helped me improve my reading behaviour which in turn enhanced my awareness of being a global citizen” (Student #11).

Students also pointed out that book talks as a collaborative activity enabled development of their own understandings of reader and global identities. For example, one student relates that “The experience of reading the book also inspired us to present this seamlessness of text and images in our book talk, and we carefully curated the images we selected for the video to support our script. This experience of both reading the text and creating the book talk really exposed me to the importance of being an informed global citizen and strengthened my reader identity as it made me realize the importance of reading widely” (Student #13). Another student points out that “my identity as a global citizen was refined through my role as script writer and video editor” (Student #23).

Another key activity of the book talks were online discussions that students felt were engendering of their own identity development. One student remarks: “Through the online discussion, I have likewise developed a positive reader identity. The brainstorming of ideas...pushed me to think critically about how much I comprehended the book, so as to condense it into a simpler form for the children. This shaped my identity as it trained me to become a responsible reader, sieving out valuable information as I read, and not just reading

for the sake of it" (Student #27). The student goes on to say that "When creating the book talk, my global identity was also shaped." (Student #27).

Students also reflected that the book talks revealed to them "the impact the new digital age has on readers' identity" because "the Internet "offers a vibrant and significant storehouse of literature intended for children to explore and enjoy" (Wolf, 2014), just like *The Mermaid's Purse* was for Stella and the villagers" (Student #28).

DISCUSSION

Vetter, Myers, Reynolds, Stumb, and Barrier (2017) observed that reader identity development is either misunderstood, devalued, or ignored in academic contexts. Yet, they are crucial as students take ownership of their future roles as 21st century citizens. Findings from this study reveal that through explicit attention to student identity development in assessment tasks, student identities will develop.

A crucial aspect to identity development is the selection of literacy activities that will provide students with opportunities to form and shape these identities. In this study, literacy activities such as social media interactions, peer discussions and the creation of book talks enabled students to explore, revisit and determine whether they wished to repair, reformulate

or reassert their identities as readers. This would not have been achieved otherwise. Reflective essays that directed their attention to identity development were handmaidens to their own identity development. The data reveals that students who had negative experiences that initially shaped these identities could revisit and restore these identities through the course tasks. Others, who had positive experiences showed appreciation for their ownership of these identities.

The study also affirmed the place of collaborative talk in exploring and shaping personal reader and global identities. Students reported positive experiences from peer discussions as they learnt from one another how their personal reader and global identities might be realized. Through the sharing of personal experiences, negative and positive, students affirmed their own identities as readers and the special role that literature plays in shaping these identities. Equally significant is the understanding that their identities as global citizens are dependent on positive reader identities. Student understandings of these sorts holds promise in terms of the larger but important goals of university education.

CONCLUSION

The study attempted to locate that third space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Prensky, 2001) in a university course where students have insight to their own development as learners. Learners began the course with little or no idea about their own reader or global identities but ended it with better understandings of themselves as readers and global citizens. Findings from the study reveals that consideration needs to be given to the kinds of literacy activities on courses that students are to engage in that will illuminate these identities to themselves. The findings also reveal that reflective essays with an explicit focus on identity formation through the course content offer students the opportunity to consider this important aspect of work and learning in the 21st century.

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