



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2012 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

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## **The Storytelling Cycle: Navigating Our Way through the Listening and Sharing of Stories**

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### **Introduction**

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In a small Mississippi town, young Gladys lived a memorable life during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She gracefully walked into local stores, visited fairs, and enjoyed opportunities only afforded to those considered to be part of the "privileged" crowds. What was thought to be "taboo" by most was considered a treat for her. She recalled a memory of going to "town" with friends to visit a local traveling fair. Everyone was excited about a new ride called the "Flying Jenny." While the sign clearly stated that the ride was for "Whites Only", Gladys knew how to "bend" this rule. She separated from her friends and entered the line on her own. As in most cases, Gladys' "fair" skin was the passport to her temporary enjoyment of becoming a part of the "privileged."

Gladys' story was first shared with me during the summer before my freshman year of high school. While I had already spent numerous summers with her over the years, this summer and the sharing of that story proved to be a pivotal point in both of our lives. It was clear from Gladys' laughter after sharing the story that she was glad to be passing on a part of her adventurous life into the mind of one of her first grandchildren. It was also clear from my glazed eyes and wide opened mouth that I was totally shocked about my grandmother's experience. Gladys also spent a great deal of her life standing up for a series of causes aimed at assisting others. During her adulthood you could find her throughout the community marching for civil rights, campaigning for political hopefuls, and taking time to encourage other African-Americans to exercise their right to vote. Gladys' stories have become a part of my life lessons. Listening to her stories has instilled in me that I can do anything. Gladys is now deceased, but her stories helped lay the foundation for every decision I have made in life.

Everyone has a story to tell - no matter where we're from geographically, our cultural background, or our status in life. Storytelling is a universal tradition. This tradition allows the sharer to provide the receiver with his or her interpretation of an event. The receiver then becomes the sharer and carries forth that cycle of sharing the story. Once the receiver becomes the sharer and begins that cycle, he or she must be able to gather the information to accurately share and continue that tradition.

While I learned a lot about my "Granny's" strength through this process of storytelling, I feel that it is part of my duty to make sure that sixty-two energetic and engaged 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders are given that same

opportunity. These opportunities will potentially assist them in gaining a valuable part of their families' heritages through this rewarding cycle of storytelling.

My aim, during this unit, is to give my students the basic components of the tools needed to become a storyteller. Becoming a good storyteller will happen through a number of activities and exercises prior to students actually gaining information from their family. Some of the activities to assist them through this process include: (1) listening, analyzing, and writing about a variety of stories; (2) increasing their listening and verbal skills through a variety of Storytelling games; and (3) working with a certified storyteller. Details on these activities are listed in the "Classroom Strategies" section.

## Rationale and School Context

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A good story for telling is one that has something to say and that says it in the best possible way. It is a story that has vision as well as integrity and that gives a child something to hold. There should be sound values – compassion, humor, love of beauty, resourcefulness, kindness, courage, kinship with nature, zest for living – but they should be implicit in the story, because a good one is didactic.

Augusta Baker and Ellin Green, *Storytelling: art and technique*

I have come to a number of conclusions on why this unit is important. Initially, I thought that the unit would serve as an outlet for my students' writing. This unit would be an opportunity for them to develop personal narratives reflecting on a small moment and how their lives were impacted. After careful consideration and thought, I concluded that my students definitely have stories to tell, but those stories, like mine, are deeper than them as individuals. The stories we gain through daily conversations and interactions only provide us with superficial motivation. They are part of the temporary fix for enjoyment in our everyday lives. So much more can be gathered from a story shared through conversations with our families – about their experiences, the stories that helped shape their lives. These stories would have a much greater impact on us. This impact can be seen through the process of digging deeper and learning more about experiences within the family structure. This process of digging deeper with the family structure would assist my students in creating stories with a greater impact and a more universal approach. After reflecting, I concluded that my students are already excited about writing and would be up for whatever writing assignment presented. Therefore, I needed not only to make this unit engaging, but also to include a key component of their lives – their families. "Storytelling is a way of keeping alive the cultural heritage of a people." <sup>1</sup>

I am not sure why my initial thinking did not lead me to my students' families. The family structure is a key component to my students' lives. Their conversations are usually focused around the family structure. Topics typically range from what happened over the weekend, plans for the holiday, or school vacation breaks. Some of their stories, although not as in-depth as some of the stories shared by Gladys, could provide that initial "spark" that leads to greater stories developed and shared through the conversations held with family members. Providing an outlet for students not only to learn, but also to share that learning experience with a historical connection through family interviews could prove to be a learning lesson for all involved. Being able

to gain a part of your family's experience or life lessons through storytelling allows the receiver to gain knowledge while spending time with key members of their family structure. "As these tales and experiences were told, and as people began wondering about themselves different forms of stories began to take shape." <sup>2</sup> Through this gaining of information, students are not only developing a sense of kinship within their family circle, but they are also gaining "nourishment" to their souls through this process by bonding with their families.

After learning about the characteristics of storytelling, reviewing and analyzing stories, and spending time with a certified storyteller, students will begin the process of creating their own stories. Their stories will be created through the development of questions to be used during the interview process with their family members. The interviews with their family members will assist them in creating a product, their own stories, to be shared and used during their final performance assessment. Details on these activities are listed in the "Assessment" section.

In selecting the stories to be shared during this curriculum unit, I looked at several things to make sure that the stories reflected the diversity within my classroom. Identifying characters that reflected not only the age of my students, but also their backgrounds and experiences was important in this process. I personally felt that my students would gain so much from and would connect better to characters or events directly related to the makeup of our classroom. Holly Martin in *Writing between Cultures* shares that, "For some characters, as we shall see, mythical and legendary figures can provide the inspiration or the role modeling, for at least one aspect of their multicultural identities." <sup>3</sup> Being able to hear stories that directly relate to us personally or our experiences is pivotal to what we learn, how we learn it, and what we share. Due to the fact that my classroom is diverse, I felt that it was important to capture stories that represented a variety of cultural backgrounds. I feel that because I took time to make sure that my stories represented the diversity within my classroom, my unit will be better accepted by my students and made more appealing to the two grades.

I also feel that as an educator it is my obligation to make my classroom environment one that is safe and inclusive. With this safety and inclusion comes celebration. Celebration is built around everyone, highlighting each person's uniqueness and diversity. Everyone plays an important part in celebrating this diversity, the experiences of everyone, their perspectives, and their differences and similarities.

During my first year of teaching, my school's population consisted of 100% African-American students. Personally, I thought that this would be a piece of cake when it came to teaching. There was a lot to learn about my own race. While my students and I were of the same ethnic background, our experiences were totally different. That first year of teaching showed me that I needed to look at each encounter with students, no matter what was their cultural background, as a new learning experience. Following that year, I worked at a school where the student population was about 73% Latino, 25% African-American, and 2% other. While there were some similarities and differences, I haphazardly made an attempt to learn to celebrate and gain a better understanding of everyone.

This past year proved to be the greatest learning experience during my entire teaching career. I transferred to a new school and began what turned out to be one of those life journeys connected to the lessons learned from "Granny." This experience provided growth for not only me, but also my students. For my students, this was the first time they had a male classroom teacher (other than in physical education). For me, it was my first time working with students beyond the Latino and African-American populations: my classroom is truly America's melting pot! It was also the first time I taught in a classroom lower than 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to better understand how to build my instruction around diversity. Which leads me to

my other desire for this unit: that my students learn from each other.

With the diversity in my classroom, comes a variety of experiences and stories. My classroom consists of students from backgrounds that include: Americans (both Caucasian and African), African (of the continent), Asian, Irish, Polish, Russian, and Indian. The stories my students inherit from their families for this unit will be the base of their storytelling cycles and the projects they complete. Because of their unique and diverse cultural backgrounds, I am confident that there is an array of stories to be shared.

## Objectives

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This unit, adhering to the Common Core State Standards, will be implemented during a four week period during the Language Arts/Social Studies block. During this time, students will take part in a number of activities (discussed in detail in the Classroom Activities section) through which students will learn the following:

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and make logical inferences from it;
- Determine central ideas or theme of a text and analyze their development;
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in text, including determining technical connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific words shape meaning or tone;
- Analyze how point of view or purpose shapes the context and style of text;
- Read and comprehend complex literary and information texts independently and proficiently;
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences;
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

While I personally feel that I have grown as a teacher, I wanted to make sure that I took additional steps to make sure that I consciously looked at ways to meet the needs of each student within my classroom. In the book *Multicultural Teaching*, authors Pamela and Iris Tiedt state that the foundation for multicultural education is using the 3E Model. The 3E Model focuses on Esteem, Empathy, and Equity. In my paraphrase, these consist of the following:

### **Esteem**

Students come to school expecting success. Success can be promoted through a consistent connection with the multicultural programs aimed at affirming the diversity within the classroom. Students are aware of themselves and others when explorations of their heritage and values are acknowledged and explored with their learning. Their self-esteem is a key component of their self-expression.

### **Empathy**

Being able to feel connected to our learning environment helps eliminate boredom and isolation. It also encourages active participation. Being able to find people who model extraordinary accomplishments or obstacles and are like them are ways of incorporating the student into the classroom. Inclusion of empathy into the multicultural classroom is another route to allow the learner to express his or her feelings.

## Equity

It is evident that we don't all come from the same background. Therefore, being able to recognize and promote the contributions of a variety of multicultural groups is essential. Multicultural classrooms are those that include examples of all groups. This can vary from studying the enslaved African to showing Native Americans living in the modern world.

When using the 3E model effectively in multicultural education, it should be student-centered to be effective. Therefore, students should be looked at individually, but should definitely be the driving force to what is being taught in the classroom. When used through the classroom effectively to assist students in achieving multicultural goals, the following basic objectives are met: (1) self-worth is identified and developed, which leads to increased class motivation and contribution; (2) opinions and perspectives are varied and valued; (3) learning about a variety of cultures/heritages is openly accepted, minus stigmatizing; (4) increased global thinking and the interdependence of humanity; and (5) recognition and acceptance of citizens in a multicultural society.

While I consciously look at diversity in all aspects of my teaching, I feel that this storytelling curriculum unit will definitely allow my students to bring in parts of their lives into the classroom. This project is a true reflection of implementing the 3E Model mentioned earlier. Being able to bring in parts of all students' lives will definitely open the door of diversity and build solid relationships of respect for each other within the classroom.

## Elements of Successful Storytelling

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The learning process for storytelling will require great use of auditory and verbal skills. Auditory skills will play an important role during the process of receiving information. Being able to accurately hear or receive information is essential to the receiver. He or she is then charged with sharing that information effectively with others, which in this case is the story. Once that information is shared you begin the process of using your verbal skills through the sharing of accurate information. This then allows the continuation of the storytelling process. Students will not only need to be able to accurately hear to story, but they must also be able to share that information received. Being able to accurately receive information is essential to the individual now moving into the role of the storyteller. "Through the act of telling a story or listening to the story of another, children acquire skills in crafting and listening to lengthy, complex, and interesting texts. In addition to the development of oral language abilities, these skills also carry over to facilitate the development of some reading and writing skills." <sup>4</sup>

A great story is recognized and defined by its characteristics. In the book, *Storytelling: Art and Technique*, Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene clearly define, What Makes A Story Good to Tell? Those characteristics will be learned by students during this unit. They include the following: (1) a single theme, clearly defined; (2) a well-developed plot; (3) Style; (4) Characterization; (5) Faithfulness to the source material; (6) Dramatic Appeal; and (7) Appropriateness for the listener.

(1) A single theme, clearly defined

A successful story has a single, clearly defined theme. Part of the concept of engaging your audience is making sure that they are able to understand the message within your story. When this is seen, the receiver is more likely to comprehend and clearly follow the story. Students will gain a better understanding of developing a story by making sure that there is a single theme that is clearly defined.

#### (2) A well-developed plot

The story should include a brief opening that introduces your audience to the main characters, sets the scene and builds up audience anticipation. Once this is achieved, the storyteller can freely move into the action of the story. Your story, while providing a series of events, should clearly provide the listener with a clear image within his or her mind. My students have a thorough understanding of plot. This is an area where they should do well.

#### (3) Style

The storyteller should provide the listener with vivid word pictures and sounds that are pleasing to the ear with lots of rhythm. Being able to paint a picture, through your voice and/or words, is key in grabbing the reader's attention.

#### (4) Characterization

Your characters should always be believable, unless in the case of traditional folklore. Within folklore, characters should represent qualities. Examples include: evil, beauty, and goodness. The stories selected for this unit are full of characters and should provide the students with a good foundation to begin their projects.

#### (5) Faithfulness to the source material

The storyteller should stay away from text and vocabulary that are too complex. A story should suit not only the reader, but also the audience. Making sure that the material presented to your audience is appropriate is essential to the storyteller's success in engaging his or her audience.

#### (6) Dramatic appeal

Storytelling should provide the reader with an arena that is perfectly safe of fear and sadness. The art of Storytelling has been called "drama in miniature." It is believed to satisfy the dramatic instincts of the child. Making sure that the story has an "emotional appeal" to the audience is essential.

#### (7) Appropriateness for the listener

This component will vary depending on the age and interest. It can range from younger students (ages 3-5) wanting rhythm and repetition; ages 6-8 typically enjoying traditional folktales and 9 to 11 year olds wanting more sophisticated folktales. Children at the age of 9 are typically looking for something that will appeal to their power of reason and judgment, such as tales that will include heroes, myths and legends. Children in the 11 to 13 year old age range are usually seeking stories that assist them in their search for personal identity. Personally, I look forward to seeing where my students fall within this characteristic. While my students are 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders (ages vary from 8 to 11 years old), their level of comprehension usually falls beyond that area. Therefore, I am looking forward to seeing where their interest levels may take them when it comes to selecting stories.

"When teachers promote high expectations for everyone, project care for each student as an individual with different strengths and weaknesses, provide content that acknowledges the diversity of the classroom, and adapt their teaching to take into account the knowledge and experiences that every student can contribute to the class, they are teaching "multiculturally." <sup>5</sup>

## Storytelling Resources

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In order to move my teaching more towards a diverse approach, I looked to several resources to assist me. Students will be exposed to a variety of storytelling texts that appeal to all audiences and will cater to the diversity seen in my classroom. Being able to provide my students with stories that closely relate to their backgrounds and closely relate to their own experiences could prove to a key to this unit's success. When students can feel a connection to the stories being shared, they will probably be more excited to identify stories within their families. The following four texts can be used to provide the instructor with a number of sources to enrich the learning experience during this unit:

*Favorite Folktales from Around the World - Jane Yolen*

This book is a collection of 160 folktales taken from a variety of cultures which range from Irish, Eskimo, Afghanistan, Afro-American, and Scottish traditions.

Pete Seeger's Storytelling Book - Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs

This book provides the reader with a series of stories based around songs, family histories, and events from the past. The book provides the reader with ways to personalize stories and provides insight into the process of storytelling.

The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales - Virginia Hamilton

This book provides the reader with a twenty-four suspenseful and gruesome accounts of the African American experience during slavery.

*Twenty Tellable Tales - Margaret Read MacDonald*

This book provides the reader with a collection of stories highlighting a number of cultural backgrounds.

## Classroom Strategies

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During this unit, students will spend time gaining an understanding of the storytelling process. It is my aim to make sure that students are exposed to every aspect of being a true storyteller. This process, which will not happen overnight; it is aimed at building a foundation for their understanding, which will lead them to a total understanding of what it takes to become a storyteller. While there are a number of daily activities that students will undertake, listed below is an overview of some the core activities to be used during this unit.

## **Listening, Analyzing, and Writing**

Providing students with an opportunity to listen, analyze, and write about stories is essential to the success of this curriculum unit. While they will have time to gather stories from their families, they will spend time in the classroom examining numerous stories. While my students have had the opportunity to use these techniques (listening, analyzing, and writing) during our Reading block, using them with this genre of writing will require a totally different approach. This series of exercises will require the students to do a number of things. First of all, they have to take time to patiently listen to the stories. Following this part of the process, students will be required to analyze and write about the story from a variety of perspectives to gain a better understanding of the text. During the process of analyzing the text, students will ask themselves a series of questions, which can include, but not be limited to the following: (1) What is the theme of this text?; (2) What was the author's motivation/purpose for writing this text?; (3) What words or phrases resonate with you while listening to and reading this text?; (4) Are there any words or phrases within this text that inspire you to move parts of your body?; and (5) What makes this piece of text a good/bad for storytelling purposes?

### Storytelling Games

Taking students through a series of games connected to storytelling will assist them in developing skills needed to be successful during this process. These games, which can be tailored to fit whatever age group you are working with, are designed to give the classroom teacher a series of creative activities. The activities will enhance their communication skills (verbal) and listening skills (auditory). Both skills are essential to effective storytelling. Some of the storytelling games that can be used are: (1) Walks of Life; (2) Pun Puzzles; (3) Places, Persons and Things; (4) Town and Countries; and (5) Questions and Answers. Details about these games and others can be found in the book, *Storytelling Games* by Doug Lipman.

### **Working with a certified Storyteller**

While we as classroom teachers are experts at a number of things, I know that taking on the role of a storyteller for me can be a daunting experience. With this in mind, I have contacted my local state Storytelling Association and local city chapter to seek professionals to come into my classroom. Depending upon your budget, this can be an affordable experience. While still in the planning stages, we have had conversations around the development of a Short Term Arts Residency (STAR) program. The STAR program will allow the certified storyteller to come into my classroom and work with my students on a number of techniques that include: development of visualization, student engagement, and connecting the story to a life lesson.

## **Assessment**

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Upon the completion of this unit, my students will have the opportunity to choose from a number of performance assessments to display their understanding of what was learned during this unit. Providing students with choice was not something that I looked at as an option prior to transferring to my new school. Since that time, I have seen the excitement of my students as I "roll" out the variety of options for them to show their understanding of what was learned. Seeing their excitement has truly made my experiences as an educator more rewarding. While each performance assessment will require the student to work with members of his or her family, the desired outcome will be formulated through the direction and guidance of each



student based upon his or her preference.

For this Storytelling curriculum unit, I have developed a number of performance assessments that will allow my students to show their understanding of what was learned. These options include the following: (1) Personal Story Projects; (2) The Power of the Storyteller's Pen; and (3) Channel ST2. Listed below are highlights for each option.

### **Personal Story Projects**

This performance assessment allows the student to create a display board highlighting what he or she learned during their storytelling process. This board can consist of formatted questions and responses to questions that they asked family members and photographs connected to the story and/or the process. Students will have the opportunity to share and present the personal story project to a larger audience.

#### The Power of the Storyteller's Pen

This performance assessment allows the student to create, in a written format of his or her choice, the actual story developed during the storytelling process. Each story created under this option will be compiled into a "Power of the Storyteller's Pen" storytelling booklet that will be shared with each participant.

### **Channel ST2**

This performance assessment, Channel ST2 (Storytelling <sup>2</sup>), will allow the student to tap into his or her visual or auditory sense of learning. Channel ST2, which means telling the story twice (going through the storytelling cycle), gives the student a chance to create a video presentation (with the assistance of iPads and iPods) highlighting his or her finished product. This performance assessment can include interviewing family members and/or the student in the role of the storyteller performing the story.

Each performance assessment created by the students will be included in an event aimed at highlighting those who made it possible - the students and their families. Our culminating event, known as A Night of Cultural Awareness, will bring together families from both grades, members of the community, and families from other grades, to showcase the students' hard work. During this night there will be variety of activities which will include students sharing stories and presenting their display boards. Also during this event, some students will be selected to participate and perform with our certified storyteller at various points during the evening.

## **Lesson Plan Activity #1**

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The Storytelling Cycle: Navigating Our Way through the Listening and Sharing of Stories

Standards

SL5.1 - Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

## Informational Text

No text used for this activity

### Description of Tasks

Task 1: Students will activate their prior knowledge by providing input towards the completion of the classroom and their individual K-W-L charts (What they **K**now, What they **W**ant to Know, and What They **L**earned) focusing on the topic of Storytelling.

Task 2: Students will periodically update his or her individual K-W-L charts within Writing Notebooks with information highlighting their learning throughout the unit.

### Directions for Administering Activities

1. Start a classroom discussion by asking students what they know about the topic of "Storytelling."
2. Provide students the opportunity to create their own **K-W-L** chart within his or her Writing Notebook.
3. Allow students time to provide written responses for the **K** and **W** sections within his or her individual charts.
4. Provide students with the opportunity to go through a think-pair-share activity with a partner to formulate ideas to share as a whole group.
5. Randomly select students to share their ideas to be incorporated into the class **K-W-L** Chart.

### Special Education Students

Students will be provided additional time and resources, if necessary, to meet the needs of their IEP (this can include peer buddies to assist in completing his or her K-W-L Chart).

### English Language Learners

Students will be provided with access to information to assist them in their native language in order to assess their achievement of the comprehension standards.

## Lesson Plan Activity #2

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The Storytelling Cycle: Navigating Our Way through the Listening and Sharing of Stories

### Standards

RL5.2 - Determine the theme of the story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize a text.

RF5.1 – Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RF5.7 – Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.

SL5.1 – Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

#### Informational Text

- ***Yop Up Peas***, taken from the book, *Pete Seeger's Storytelling Book* by Pete Seeger and Paul DuBois Jacobs

#### Description of Tasks

Task 1: Students will identify elements of a good story.

Task 2: Students will respond to a series of questions connected to the read aloud shared by the instructor.

Task 3: Students will be encouraged to carefully listen to each story in preparation for responding and discussing each question within small groups and as a whole class.

Task 4: Students will participate in small group and whole group discussions around the questions.

#### Directions for Administering Activities

1. Discuss with students the purpose for relaxing and clearly listening to the story.
2. Allow students the opportunity to write the title of the story, text, and questions within his or her Writing Notebook. Questions: (1) What makes this story good?; and (2) What text evidence helps to come to this conclusion?
3. Provide students with time to respond to each question in his or her Writing Notebook after reading the story.
4. Allow students the opportunity to go through a think-pair-share activity with a partner to formulate ideas to share as a whole group.
5. Allow students to share his or her ideas through a whole group discussion.
6. Record student responses on a chart entitled, "Elements of a Good Story."

#### Special Education Students

Students will be provided additional time and resources, if necessary, to meet the needs of their IEP (this can include peer buddies, text read aloud more than once, or leveled text options).

#### English Language Learners

Students will be provided with access to information to assist them in their native language in order to assess their achievement of the comprehension standards.

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## Endnotes

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2. Lucille Breneman and Bren Breneman *Once Upon a Time: A Storytelling Handbook* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 14.
3. Holly Martin *Writing Between Cultures: A Study of Hybrid Narratives in Ethnic Literature of the United States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 80.
4. Cynthia Ballenger *Regarding Children's Words: Teacher Research on language and literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 23.
5. Pamela Tiedt and Iris Tiedt *Multicultural Teaching: A handbook of activities, information, and resources* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2010), 4.

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