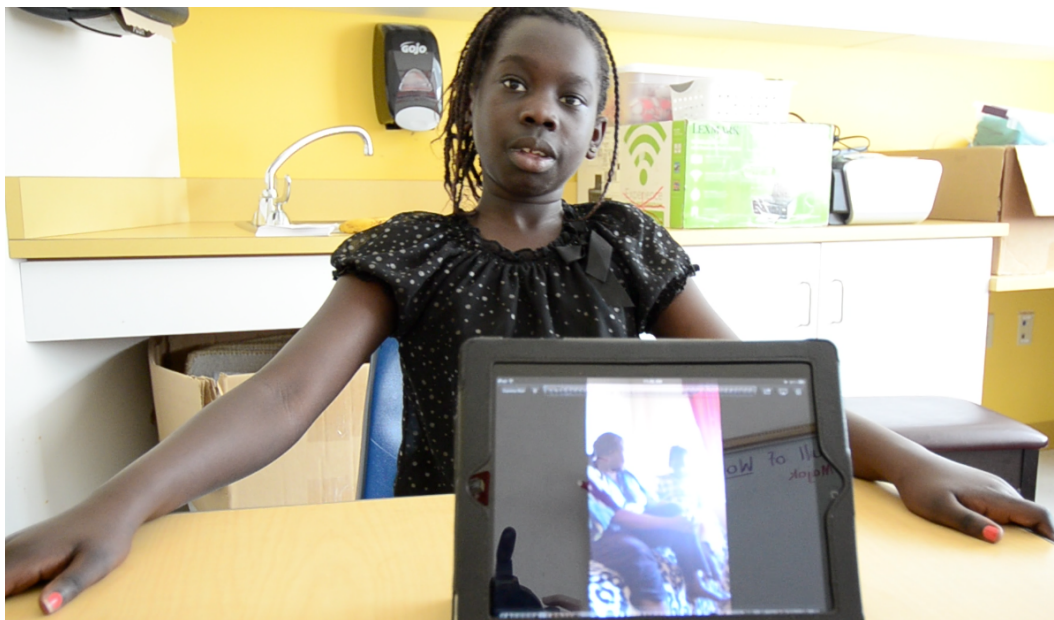


# The Many Stories Library Project

Sharing untold stories to understand who we are

By Veronica Boix Mansilla, Melissa Rivard, and the ID Global group at Project Zero.

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*"How impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children."* Chimamanda Adichie<sup>1</sup>

## Akual's Story

Akual Majok, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student at East End Community School, is in a writing conference with a volunteer writing coach from the Telling Room, a Portland non-profit that supports young writers [link to story]. Akual is sharing the latest draft of her story, *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, and describes

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<sup>1</sup> Adichie, C. (2009, July). The Danger of the Single Story [TedTalk Video]. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html).

<sup>2</sup> Students were allowed to interview the family member of their choice, provided they were at least

what she learned during an interview she conducted with her mother.

“My uncle Majok said he comes from the Lost Boys of Sudan. [After I told her that] my teacher showed us a documentary of the lost boys of Sudan,” Akual tells the volunteer. Akual picks up her iPad and plays an excerpt from the video of the interview with her mother. *“How did you know about the Lost Boys of Sudan?” She asks. “They were very young people... 7-, 9-, 12-years-old. In Sudan, everybody left. The people with the guns [took] the children away... or they ran away. I was older. I had my own son then. It started in 1983.”*

Akual pauses the video to explain, “So Majok never fled with his mom. That’s how I took it. I heard what my mom was saying and I took it from that perspective. She said ‘Kakuma,’ so I used that in the story. But I researched it more because I didn’t know what it was. I found out ‘Kakuma’ was a refugee camp. I think it is hard to come to America. This is from my mom’s perspective... I am going to tear up.”

Akual, overcome by the emotion of recalling her mother’s story, pauses for a moment before continuing. “I think the history of Sudan is a great thing to write about. Some people know the Lost Boys as a group of boys who were lost. They were not *lost*. They were *captured*. Some were tending cattle. It says here (referencing a video her teacher shared with the class when Akual had begun to research her story), *‘I got captured when I was tending cattle. They brought me to a refugee camp. I had to hide a lot of things.’* The boys had to hide things [because] they could be killed just for having a picture of their family. I included that in my story.”

When asked how Akual got the idea to write her story from three different perspectives—her mother’s, her uncle’s, and her own—she responds, “My reading teacher was talking to us about perspective. At the beginning I really didn’t know what perspective was, but when I started to understand I thought I would use multiple perspectives to write my story to make it more beautiful. I got the idea from my mother’s interview, because she says she knew these Lost Boys. I didn’t even ask my teacher! I just wrote it

at home! I love to write!” Akual also shares some of her thinking about which perspectives she decided to include, and which not, and why. *“I didn’t write from Robert and little Majok’s perspectives because I thought it would be harder. In the story... Robert has seven children [which makes it] hard to tell the story from his perspective. And, with Majok Jr., I could do it, but I think it would be harder for the reader because there are two Majoks in the story.”*

After her conference, Akual shares the newest draft of her story with her teacher, Nancy Smith. “Really beautiful writing, Akual,” Nancy tells her. “I knew you were working on something special. I would like to have another conference tomorrow when we can go over the mechanics of your writing. I will highlight all of my edits.”

## The Many Stories Project

### Learning Goals

As an interdisciplinary investigation the 5th grade Many Stories project sought to help students become more globally competent by understanding:

- How to use the ideas of “identity”, “culture” and “perspective taking” to make sense of the world.
- How to investigate these concepts through in-depth interview and analysis of the information obtained
- How literature opens a window to the world and that literature embodies perspectives.
- How to write a powerful story that excels in literacy standards and teaches readers about the world

### Why does this learning matter?

Stories make us human. Learning to tell stories matters because doing so helps us to make sense of the world and our experiences. Through stories we become knowable to others, learn and teach about histories and

cultures, connect our past and our present and transcend them to shape our future. Listening to and reading other people's stories expands our world and honors our ancestors. Stories draw us in, invite us to drop our guard and connect emotionally with others—to feel that, while perhaps we might be different in some ways, we are similar in others. When we connect to someone's story, we realize we are not alone.

Yet not all stories are unproblematic, so it matters that children learn to see how stories can illuminate and obscure our world. By doing so children gain a better appreciation for language and literature itself. Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie warns us that stories can contribute to stereotype and oversimplifications. As an avid young reader she never encountered a character like herself in the books she read, she recalls, and consequently came to believe that “books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.” It was not until she began reading books by African authors, that she realized that “people like me... could also exist in literature,” thus saving her from having “a single story of what books are”. Learning to read, write, and share many stories matters because they reveal important, even if incomplete, “truths” about the human experience.

Adichie's experience as a young reader and writer in Nigeria resonates today, particularly in cities like Portland where most classrooms reflect the diverse community in which they reside. For reading and writing to feel like a meaningful activity for all, including children from less dominant cultures, young readers must encounter stories that reflect their world, their experiences, and who and what they care about. In order to enter other people's worlds they must have opportunities to read stories of different people and places.

Finally, learning to tell rich stories matters because it gives young people voice and helps them to recognize and experience the many ways they are connected to others. A young writer's voice pivots on her capacity to understand her subject—in this case how culture and identity are expressed in the daily lives of the people children know and whose stories they chose to examine. A strong voice also stems from careful use, crafting and re-crafting of language. In this project the children learned to describe

the complexity of their cultures, the multiple dimensions of their identity. In so doing, children learn to investigate the world in which they live, to take some more globally competent and better prepared for our interconnected world.

### iii. What did students do to learn?

Throughout the project students encountered many opportunities to deepen their understanding and become more globally competent. In what follows we summarize key experiences that shaped student thinking.

#### ***Analyze literature to develop their understanding of what makes “a good story”***

The “Many Stories Library” project was designed to align with existing literacy programs, such as the Teachers College Readers and Writers Workshop that has been adopted in Portland Public Elementary Schools—and expand upon it in ways that deepen students’ global competence through writing. Throughout the year, teachers lay the foundation for this work through in-depth discussions about books they are reading. Teachers support students in thinking about literary elements and universal themes by asking questions such as, *“Who are the main characters in this story? Where do they live and what is it like there? What is compelling to you about the story? Who do you relate to it and why?”* *“What are the strategies the author uses to help connect you to the characters and the action in the story? What are “good” stories like?”*

#### ***Explore the notion of representation and stereotypes in literature and how children’s own stories could make a positive contribution***

Teachers share the “Danger of a Single Story” video—reviewing vocabulary students don’t understand and discussing their own experiences in relation to the kinds of “single stories” Adichie describes. Students engage in



conversations that allow them to explore the nature of stereotypes; the multiple facets of their own and each other's identities; their own encounters with literature; and the deeper purposes that engaging in reading and writing can serve. (Click image to view a short clip of one classroom discussion.)

Students conduct an analysis of their classroom and school libraries, asking such questions as, Is everyone here represented? What do we miss when some stories are not told? What does it feel like to read about characters whose lives resemble ours and about others whose lives do not? Students look for books about their own and their peers' countries of origin and people from these places. They find that there were no books at all about or from some countries, such as South Africa. For others, such as Somali and Sudan, there were very few and they tended to focus on very general facts, such as the country's location and population

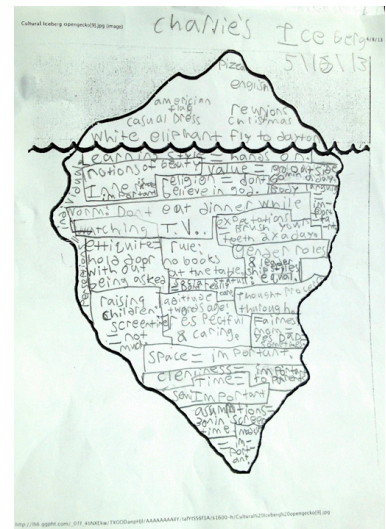
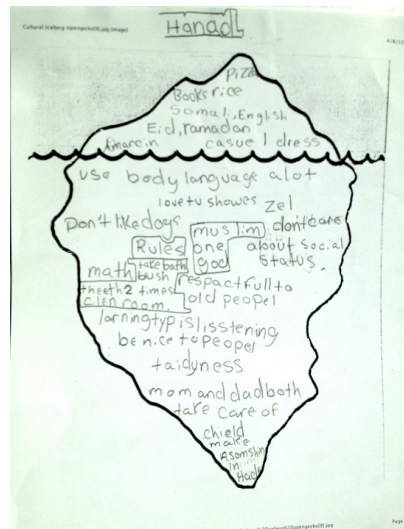
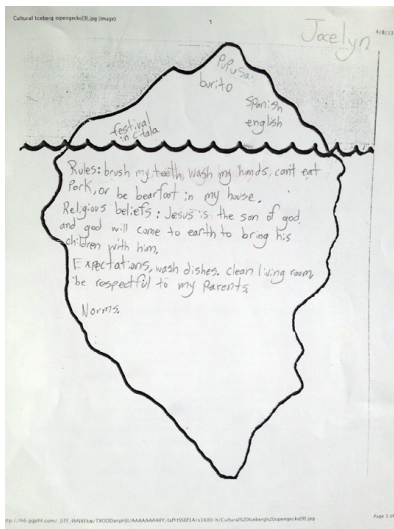
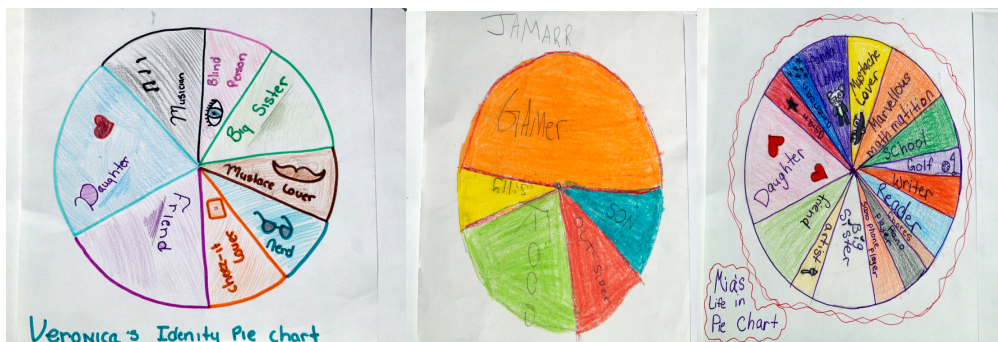
Monte, a boy from Iraq whose family had recently come to Portland knew before doing the analysis that there was only one book on Iraq in the school library. He had already checked it out three times. Teachers propose that the class explores stories as part of their big MLE project to make sure that many stories that represent the lives of all members of their community are available in the school library.

### ***Using graphics, metaphors and conversation to explore the complexity of culture and personal identity***

Recognizing students' interest in finding "many stories", teachers engage students in creating "Identity Charts". Students ask themselves the question "Who am I?" ten times, each time listing a new response. Children who don't often write a lot wrote "huge lists" that they kept returning to and appreciating the new discoveries they were making about their own and each other's identities: "Daughter, friend, sister, musician, blind person, nerd, and Cheez-it lover;" "Asian, American, daughter, big sister, artist, reader, writer, saxophone player;" "Gamer, son, food, outsider, silly." They placed their responses in pie charts, dividing the pie into pieces proportionate to the degree to which they identify with each aspect of their



identity. In discussions, students shared commonalities and differences they noticed. For each stereotype they found, they brainstormed “the other side of—part or perspective on—the story”. In pairs, students created Venn Diagrams based on different aspects of their cultural identity, exploring the similarities and differences between what it means to be Muslim or Buddhist; to celebrate Christmas in one family vs. another; or to be a daughter or son. To generate rich material for their stories, teachers asked students to unpack various aspects of their identity and write about them in great detail. Zahra chose to write a poem [\[link\]](#) about what it meant to her to be a Somalian girl “wearing a hijab to show modesty,” “waking up at 4:00 to pray,” and “reading the Quran” as a way to “kickstart” her day.



**Conduct and analyze family interviews**

The children, often along with their teachers, conducted interviews with family members and many used these interviews and the stories they were told as inspiration for the stories they wrote. The typical parent/teacher conference was replaced by home visits during which the teacher observed (and videotaped) as children interviewed a family member of their choice<sup>2</sup>. The family interviews enabled students' to talk and learn about aspects of their families lives they had never discussed while providing an opportunity for teachers to develop their own global competence—for some it was their first time in a Somali or Sudanese or Iranian home—and to get new perspectives on their students. Students designed the interview questions, received feedback and recorded their interviews for later analysis. They extracted quotes and sections of the interviews to inform their stories. They asked follow-up questions to enrich their stories and add more detail and realistic dialogue. These recorded interviews were important artifacts, not only as primary sources for students to use in the telling of their stories but in and of themselves. One student, who had initially planned to interview his grandparents, interviewed his uncle who was in hospice instead at the request of his family. The student and his family collaborated on the interview protocol and the video of the interview was later edited and shown at the uncle's memorial.



***Experiment with different genres and the different kinds of communication they afford***

Throughout the year, and as part of their English curriculum, students were exposed to a variety of kinds of texts. Informational, personal narratives, poetry, argumentative, all offered a palette of options for them to chose from once they began the project. Planning out the writing curriculum

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<sup>2</sup> Students were allowed to interview the family member of their choice, provided they were at least one generation removed. So, for example, students could interview mothers, fathers, uncles, or grandmothers but not siblings or first cousins.



along side the many stories project proved particularly helpful in supporting students. In some cases, the project invited students rework something they had written earlier in the year with attention to matters of culture, identity and voice. They discussed the relative advantage of one genre over another one (personal narratives, argumentative text) to help their audience understand their topics well and how to bring their writing to publishable form within their chosen genre.

### ***Finding Stories That Matter***

To make sense of their collected material and prepare to write their stories, students used global thinking routines—micro interventions designed to support particular kinds of globally competent thinking. Specifically, they used the “3Ys routine” geared toward distilling the significance of the story to be told. *“Why does this story matter to me? Why does it matter to people in my community? Why does it matter to the world?”* This particular approach to finding significance rendered children’s stories purposeful and their motivation to tell them high. Having a purpose for their stories—whether setting the record straight about the lost boys of Sudan or explaining the significance of Ramadan or Christmas—gave a clear direction to their writing.

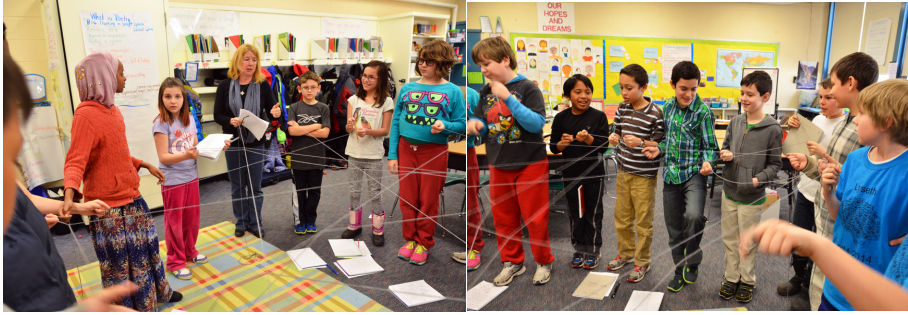
### ***Writers’ workshop and consultations***

For several weeks, students focused on the writing of their stories, preparing sections, scenes, turning points, drafting, sharing, letting go, re-writing. At key points in the process, teachers and writers from the Telling Room, an Portland based NGO focused on writing for all, held consultations with the young writers. Key to their intervention was a deep respect for the children as writers and preserving the children’s own unique voices in the stories they produced. Teachers and Telling Room staff and volunteers played the role of an intelligent reader, identifying phrases that were less clear or sharing the mental image a description produced. Coaches inquired about the young writers intention, pointed their attention to a word or phrase, or the effect of a new paragraph or punctuation choice on the reader. Especially powerful in these interactions was the opportunity they offered for students to visualize their audience and detect the effect of

language choices on their reader's interpretation of their story—a central writing competence. It was especially important for the coaches not to interfere with the children's text and to come to an agreement with the story's author before any of the text was changed.

### ***Learning from their own and each other's stories***

Students had opportunities to learn from each other's stories throughout the writing process—both from reading the stories themselves as well as through the many thinking, sharing and writing exercises that led to the final pieces. An atmosphere of intimacy and trust was established early on, and was considered essential in allowing students' to feel comfortable sharing personal stories that really matter to them. Teachers assigned "writing partners" through a process of carefully considering a variety of factors such as: shared interests, complementary dispositions and writing abilities, and established relationships of trust. These dyads, along with one-on-one consultations with teachers and Telling Room writers, became the primary context for students to share initial ideas about the stories they might tell and for receiving feedback about their writing along the way. Time and attention was given to establishing cultural norms that supported a gradual building toward sharing stories-in-progress and, eventually, reading aloud the final—often very personal—stories as a whole class. For example, on the first day of the Telling Room residency, students were asked to collectively generate a list of "Rules of Conduct"—behaviors they deemed important in writers and audience members—and to ceremoniously sign it. In an effort to help students discover that "we all share stories in common, even if they may look different on the surface," students conducted interviews in pairs about personal likes and dislikes, identified a common thread from these interviews and wrote a poem or story about it together. Each pair of writers read these initial pieces aloud, while the rest of the class was prompted to think about their own connections to the story. Those who heard something in the story that resonated with them were given one end of a piece of string, the other of which was held by the authors. By the end of the readings, these strings formed an intricate web that connected everyone in the class—visually communicating the connections we form through our stories.



Reflecting on the writing process—and on the stories themselves—was vital to the learning students took from this experience. Students were asked to “think about their thinking,” both about the choices they made as writers in the choosing and telling of their stories and about what they had learned about: the topics they wrote about, the nature of culture and stereotypes, and important dispositions the project sought to develop, such as the ability to take multiple perspectives.

### ***Becoming published authors***

A key motivation for students (and teachers) in the Many Stories Project was knowing that their writing would have an audience—inside and outside of school—and, even more importantly, would be published as a “real book.” Students recognized the need for their stories from the beginning. Their book would serve a purpose—the purpose of preventing other young readers from developing a single story about literature that did not include them, or a single story about each other. Having their writing taken seriously in this way fostered students’ own identity as writers and, as such, as agents of change. Students began to see that writing was not just the mechanical organization of words on a page. Rather it was about giving voice to their experiences and ideas and about connecting with others.

To drive this realization home, many opportunities to share and celebrate their writing and the resulting book—as a class, as a school, and as a community—were built into the experience. For example, on the last “writing day”—the day before the stories were sent to press—the whole class sat in a circle and, one by one, students read their stories aloud to the rapt attention of (and, when needed, with support from) their peers. Each reading ended with vigorous applause from group. (This audience knew exactly how much effort and care went into the writing of these stories and

that awareness was reflected in the appreciative and supportive response they received.) Each school held a “Night of Learning” where all of the students’ stories were on display for their own and each other’s families to read. (Encountering these stories, all of which reflected important aspects of their culture and intimate moments from their lives, was an obvious point of pride for the families as well and helped to forge deeper connections between home and school and across families.). And finally, at a district-wide celebration of global learning, a delegation of student authors read excerpts from their stories and presented copies of the *Our Many Stories* books to librarians from their own schools and the Portland Public Library. Knowing that their books would be available to other students across the district and to the general Portland community

In the second year of the Many Stories Library Project, some of the students who had been published the previous year—now in 6<sup>th</sup> grade—were called upon to help introduce the project to the new 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The students took pride in knowing that their stories would be used as mentor texts for the new crop of developing writers and in their role of helping to “pass the torch”. As one student, Ben Ntombwe, put it, “Last year it was us. This year it is them.”

#### IV. How did teachers assess student learning?

As the learning experiences described above suggest, teachers had multiple opportunities to monitor and support student learning. Assessment was ongoing, formal and informal, and led by teachers, writing coaches, peers and the students themselves. Teachers monitored student learning in various domains. They drew from their professional development experience with Writers Workshop, to monitor student understanding of genres, their distinctions and functions. They applied their technical understanding of literacy development to assess students’ clarity of audience, word choices, argument or narrative structure. As our opening vignette suggests, teachers recognized children’s use of language and writing norms, from having an engaging opening paragraph, to describing scenes in rich and telling detail, or building and maintaining a character’s core qualities and managing the passing of time in the story. Teachers also appreciated students’ deep connections with the story told, clarity of

purpose, motivation, and the impetus to “set the record straight.” However, what stood out about the writing students did for the Many Stories Library Project was that the mechanics of writing, while important, did not lead the process. Rather, students and teachers held focus on “what is worth writing about” and, within that context, worked on narrative structure, grammar, punctuation and other important technical aspects of writing in the service of “getting the story right.”

Teachers monitored students’ understanding of the key concepts examined by the project: *Culture* was defined appropriately as “the way we do things here” experienced by a group of people who share values, beliefs, activities and norms in a domain (religion, home, school). In conversations with students, teachers often gently challenged students’ beliefs about culture as fixed, as something that others who are different “have,” and tied solely to national origin or religion, opening up the possibility of people inhabiting multiple cultures at one given time. Teachers also followed closely students’ representation of *identity* attending particularly to the risk of stereotyping. Assessing these disciplinary understandings mattered because they constitute the foundation of globally competent work.

Learning in this project was a cognitive, emotional and civic endeavor. Teachers applauded personal courage among students who chose to share a story that had remained untold or to speak up in the face of stereotypes and oversimplifications. While assessment was typically centered on student writing, teachers also attended closely to students’ interactions in informal contexts. A classroom atmosphere of trust was key in inviting students to speak their mind and this in turn enabled teachers to celebrate learning, see their thinking and guide them further. Feeling comfortable sharing personal stories became key.

Finally some teachers attended to student research process as an area for assessment and support. They offered feedback on interview questions, supported student interpretations of the information gathered and so forth, helping students “investigate the world” and “taking perspective.”

## Milestone Learning Experience Design – the Big Ideas in action

### **BIG IDEA ONE: A focus on global competence**

The Many Stories Project exemplifies a visible focus on global competence. From the articulation of learning goals to the design of learning experiences and assessment, global competence remained at the center of student learning and teachers design. Students did not learn about the global competence framework explicitly. Rather, they engaged substantively in investigating the world, taking perspective, communicating across difference and taking action, all while rooted in learning to read and write increasingly complex texts.

**1. *Investigating the world:*** Investigating the world began at their school library, when their systematic analysis of reading offers revealed missing perspectives that needed to be considered. For most students, writing their story also involved identifying a theme that they deemed relevant, and finding rich and reliable sources of information to deepen their understanding. Students learned to state the personal and global significance of their themes, conduct interviews, extract information from video and reading materials including quotes, and integrate the information gathered into a coherent account. Oftentimes students pursued further research making sense of terms or ideas that were unfamiliar to them seeking out information in less familiar places [link to Akual’s interview with mother here]. Investigating the world enabled students like Akual to inquire more deeply into their own experiences finding new previously unexplored dimensions of it.

**2. *Taking perspective:*** Perspective taking was “the mantra” that brought this project to life. Designed as an effort to challenge stereotypes, the project invited perspective taking in multiple ways. Akual, for instance, took her mother’s perspective as she interviewed her to find the impact of her brother’s abduction. She considered her uncle’s perspective and informed it with research about children refugee camps. She took into account her readers’ perspectives, managing her communication and the complexity of her story accordingly. She saw her teachers and coaches



perspectives as friendly reviewers of her work and finally, she became able to articulate her own perspective as a learner and a young writer persuaded that her story is one worth telling.

**3. *Communicate across difference:*** If writing stories is an act of communication, writing stories about people and events whose lives are rooted in far away cultures and whose experiences are likely to surprise, upset or confuse an audience, requires communicative competence of a deeper quality. In this project students were invited to write the untold stories about who they are, to write in order to teach or change readers' minds. Whether revealing the process of morning prayer, telling the story of family Christmas ritual, remembering children games from a land long lost, or sharing the trauma of escaping from war, the stories that children chose to tell demanded that they attended to language, pace, and complexity; that they envisioned the sets of ideas, or perhaps stereotypes, their audiences might bring to their reading and that they crafted their story to express their personal point of view. Multiple iterations of the stories were necessary, polishing language at each turn.

**4. *Take action:*** It is rare that a project addresses all dimensions of global competence fully. The many stories project did so with clarity. Student's writing and publishing has a civic purpose: to enrich the diversity of stories available for others to read in the Portland and school libraries. Students surveyed the books in their school library to find a deficit in world literature. Over the last two years, fifth grade students in the district have sought to address this problem upfront. The formally presented their books to school and city librarians and their work has become a best seller of sorts among students in the fourth grades. A development they consider a marker of impact.

## **BIG IDEA TWO: Inquiry in and/or across the disciplines**

Students grounded their work in their growing understanding of language examining matters of genre, word choice, communicative intent, story structure, argumentative structure, audience, revision, editing, publishing. In social studies, students also gained a more nuanced understanding of "culture" and "identity", as well as approaches to social scientific research

such as preparing and conducting interviews and analyzing emerging data. Perhaps most interestingly, students learned to see how language can shed light or obscure our understanding of human experiences and how important it is to use language and stories as a tool to inform others and express themselves about topics that matter to them and to the world. Students had to carefully consider how word choice and other important writing strategies influenced how their stories and ideas were perceived and interpreted by others and how they might best structure their writing in order to convey their intended message or elicit the emotional reaction they were after. The process the students went through helped them to understand that writers do not do anything by accident—writing needs to be intentional and every element needs to be seen as important. Students were also able to experience the importance of sharing works in progress and getting feedback. Sharing their work alerted students to potential misunderstandings places where they needed to be more clear.

### **BIG IDEA THREE Student Choice**

In the many stories project teachers balanced choice and prescription in productive ways. All students were asked to write a piece to contribute to the publication, the piece needed to be carefully edited and ready for publication in time for the book to go to print, and the pieces needed to address less told stories that revealed something about the students' personal or familial identity or an aspect of culture that would prove instructive to others. At the same time, the project emphasized the importance of personal relevance, personal expression and a strong voice by the students. To accomplish this expressive goal, the children were encouraged to write about an aspect of their lives or of other people's lives that they deemed especially relevant. Students had freedom to choose their topics, the individuals whose life they would depict as well as their genre (from poetry to realistic fiction). Those students who conducted family interviews for potential material for a story were allowed to choose who they interviewed within parameters. (Their interview subject needed to be at least one generation removed from the student—as opposed to a peer.) To pursue their chosen path students had to name why they thought their stories mattered—a process that was supported by a repeated

scaffolded activity by which students ask themselves and others about the global, local, and personal significance of their stories.

#### **BIG IDEA FOUR The community as resource**

The Many Stories Library Project was designed to capitalize on Portland's abundant community resources for learning for global competence while also creating new resources for the community—in the form of these published anthologies that reflect and inform about Portland's diverse community members. The children's own families—and the uniqueness and commonalities of their histories and experiences—were viewed as opportunities for students, teachers and, eventually, the entire community to connect to and better understand the world—geographically, historically, politically, and culturally. Aspects of the writing process, such as the home visits in support of the family interviews, began to forge different and deeper relationships—between teachers and families, between teachers and students, between students and their families—and have the potential to go even further by helping schools to forge essential home/school connections, as well as connections across families, that have been challenging to form. While Portland is a diverse community and people from very different walks of life live side by side and share the same schools, getting to know each other on a personal level is another story. The principal of Lyseth Elementary School intends to share excerpts from the family interviews during PTO meetings as a way to help parents come to know each other better and appreciate the diverse experiences that make up the Lyseth community.

The MLE projects also benefitted from the teachers becoming familiar with and capitalizing on local NGOs and other organizations that work in connection to the discipline(s) the students are working within—in this case, writing. Partnering with others who complement teachers' areas of expertise and/or work as professionals within the field enable a higher degree of rigor and lends a sense of even greater relevance to the work. It also extends the scope of what students and teachers might otherwise be able to do. In the Many Stories Library Project, Telling Room artists offered another approach to writing than is typical in schools through intensive

exposure (for teachers and students) to professional writers, their strategies and their attitudes toward their craft. Having additional adults in the room—the teaching artists and other Telling Room volunteers—allowed for more one-on-one work, which benefitted all of the students’ writing. And the Telling Room (and other outside supporters) assisted greatly in shepherding the book through the publication phase—an intensive process of editing, formatting and laying out artwork, and communicating with the publisher—that would be difficult (but not impossible) for teachers to do on their own.

### III. Conclusion:

Moving into its third year, the Many Stories Library Project is well on its way to become the kind of signature in-depth and relevant learning experience that the “Milestones” approach aspires to advance. Successive iterations of this project with fifth grade students in different schools have yielded lessons, questions and tensions worth grappling with to inform future designs. We name some of them here in the hope that anticipating these challenges will help teacher interested in implementing this MLE in their own classrooms.

*Beginning the planning process early:* Planning for the MSLP needs to begin, ideally, well before the beginning of the school year. A carefully crafted and integrated timeline was critical for the MSLP to be effective in developing students’ global competence. For example, using a large piece of paper and post its, teachers collaborated to map the Teachers College Readers and Writers Program that the district had adopted and the Social Studies curriculum with specific MSLP learning goals. For instance, teachers needed to identify the genres (such as personal narrative, informational writing, poetry, and realistic fiction) and skills (such as conducting research and interviews) that the students would need to draw upon for their stories and be sure they were introduced before this writing began and connect their teaching to the end of year MLE throughout the year. They mapped their social studies curriculum, which did not previously focus on global competence or perspective taking, onto the MSLP timeline and searched for themes, essential questions, and texts that connected to overarching themes they would be exploring through their stories—such as the

destructive nature of prejudice and stereotypes and the importance of hearing different perspectives. In the first year of the MSLP, when teachers and researchers were creating the first iteration of the MSLP, the students were still writing their stories in early June and, after a mad dash to edit and format the stories for the final manuscript, the published books arrived on the last day of school. As a result, the project missed the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the students' and teachers' efforts and to continue building students' global competence through the study of their own stories. The second year plan took the planning and scheduling demands of the project into account and set the publication date for the middle of May and working backwards. A public celebration at which representatives from the schools' and public libraries formally received copies of the book was held in late May and teachers planned lessons and other experiences that encouraged learning from each other's stories in late May and early June.

*Honoring students' individual voices while keeping the collective purpose in mind:* What makes participation in the MSLP so appealing for students is the degree that it is seen as a departure from "business as usual" when it comes to writing in school. Students get to choose not only what story to tell, but the genre in which they want to tell it and their writing will have a real audience—inside and outside of school. Teachers found it delicate to balance these elements of student choice—that both the students and they themselves highly valued—with the need to hold focus on the deeper purpose behind the children's writing: to explore and communicate the complexities of culture and challenge assumptions and stereotypes. Most felt they met this challenge with mixed success and want to continue to strive toward this goal for all students and all stories in the future. They have learned that it is important to continually remind students to pose the questions, "*Why is this an important story for me?*" "*Why is this an important story for the people I know?*" and "*Why is this an important story for the world?*" of their own and each other's stories throughout the writing process, even if that means "ditching" a story that they have been working hard on and when the publishing date is looming. Yet, as important as this goal is, it is also important that students have a positive writing experience and that everyone is included in the book. When students are asked to write about personal topics that are deeply meaningful to them, teachers

must constantly be making decisions about when to push for a stronger adherence to a collective goal and when to work to make the students' stories "fit".

*Holding focus on the medium **and** the message:* With so much emphasis on teaching writing skills, it is easy for the mechanics of writing to overwhelm teachers' (and, consequently, students') attention and overshadow the deeper purpose of writing as a form of communication and the importance of finding a topic that's worth writing about. The MSLP invites teachers and students to develop and hone their skill as writers within the context of writing stories of substance—"stories that matter" to the student, to the community and to the world. It is more likely that children will enjoy—or even develop a passion for—writing when they are given the freedom to choose a topic that is meaningful to them. In designing a MSLP, it is important for teachers to keep both of these goals in mind—inviting children to select a meaningful and worthwhile topic for their story as well as preparing them to tell that story as well as they can. Year after year, classroom by classroom the overarching theme for the stories may vary. Themes such as "how people change places and places change people" framed stories of migration while a focus on "how music tells stories about who we are" framed a the production of a multimedia piece. In each case, students were encouraged to find meaning in their work and contribute to the learning of others.

*The importance of allowing for time for relationships and the creative process:* The "art" of listening, conferring, and choosing moments to "teach"—which proved essential in creating the atmosphere and conditions that allowed students to tell intensely personal stories—starts by developing a relationship with the child and a real desire for their story to be told. Teaching in the context of the MSLP becomes a dialogue in which teachers help students find their voice and are encouraged to discover who they are and their own personal writing style. Once this atmosphere is truly established, the students help each other in this process as well. This takes time and must also be factored into the overall timeline of the MSLP. While some teachers would have preferred to do the project earlier in the year, others felt it would be detrimental to try to do it before a real classroom community had formed. Tensions around timing came up in other ways as



well. Teachers working with Telling Room artists admitted to feeling uncomfortable with the amount of time spent on activities that were not directly geared toward producing the final piece. In retrospect, teachers recognize that free writing activities, as well as other strategies employed by “real writers” are important for idea generation and getting comfortable with the writing and sharing process.

In sum, the Many Stories Library Project embodies multiple qualities that render it a powerful milestone learning experience. It nurtures children’s global competence, it deepens their expertise as writers, it encourages their voice and choice, and prepares them to draw on the cultural wealth of the community to do their work. Above all, this in-depth exploration of themselves and their community and their newly acquired identity as published authors may stay with them over the years, as a moment in which learning in school acquired a distinctive relevance. It is this memorable and intrinsically valuable form of learning that makes this a Milestone Learning Experience of quality.