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# **CREATING CULTURALLY RELEVANT INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: A SWAZILAND CASE STUDY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the field of English language learning, research proves that culturally relevant reading materials improve students' language acquisition, learning motivation, self-esteem, and identity formation. Since English is the language of instruction in many distant countries, such as Swaziland, even when English is not the native language of those countries, how can native English speakers most easily produce and expand the reach of culturally relevant materials for foreign settings that require English materials? In a study involving undergraduate university students, the researchers investigate the extent to which individuals recognize and demonstrate the importance of cultural context and relevance when creating their own books for Swaziland students. From the study, it is clear that the focus must shift from simple book production and donation to first gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between the learners' lived realities and the cultural content depicted in the materials. The researchers conclude that five distinct characteristics should be present in instructional material in order to increase the engagement, language acquisition, and self-worth of the English Language Learner.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The direct link between the relevance of instructional materials and a learner's successful educational experience has long been documented within educational research (Brown, 2003; Curtin, 2005; Floyd & Hebert, 2010; Ma'ayan, 2010; Perrone, 1991) and continues to be investigated by researchers within the field

of English Language Learning (ELL) (Grassi & Barker, 2010; Ormrod, 2011). As a global language and the first, second, or only language of many developing countries' formal instruction, the entire world needs instructional materials written in English. The USAID government website (2008), in their Africa Education Initiative, states that the US alone has sent more than 2.2 million donated books, valued at \$25 million, to approximately twenty-nine African countries, including Ethiopia, Uganda, and Senegal, since 2003. Assuming that one wants the materials to have the greatest impact possible, one must consider carefully what type and content of English language materials we should be contributing to the world's children. The purpose of giving must shift back from material production to a prior step which seeks to understand the relationship between the cultures lived by the students utilizing the materials and the cultural content depicted in those materials (Grassi & Barker, 2010; Ormrod, 2011). In order to better promote the academic achievement and language acquisition of the learner, the materials must also attend to the children's feelings of security and self-worth (Brown, 2003, p. 279).

## **BACKGROUND**

One of the authors gained important insight into these vast and complicated concerns during a 2010 volunteer experience within the country of Swaziland, at the orphanage at Cabrini Ministries in St. Philips. The teachers at the Mission's after-school program are originally from Swaziland and, with few exceptions, are largely untrained as professional educators. Only one of the teachers has attended school beyond the U.S. equivalent of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Even though these Swazi teachers showed the visitor many hundreds of beautiful, high-quality, English language books donated from the United States and other developed nations, the materials remained unused, unpacked, stacked seven feet high and tucked away in a large storeroom at one end of the girls' dormitory. When humbly asked why the teachers were not using these materials, the lead teacher repeated a few times that the materials were not practical. This puzzled the researcher, and she began to surmise that one obvious reason was that the North American culture represented in all of the books became a challenge that these Swazi teachers neither had the time, nor the willingness, nor the wherewithal to overcome.

The country of Swaziland is the smallest country in Africa, located in the southeastern part of the continent bordering South Africa and Mozambique. Although the capital city is Mbabane, Manzini is the cultural and industrial center of the kingdom. Swaziland is considered the only absolute monarchy left on the continent, and King Mswati III is the Head of State. As an absolute monarchy, the people of Swaziland practice many ancient traditions such as ceremonial rituals which often include dancing, singing, chanting, drumming, and other performances as one way of honoring the Royal family (Forrester, 2009). The Swazi educational system in most parts of the kingdom is a pay-to-go model.<sup>1</sup> Its struc-

ture is based on a British framework and provides for young people from the ages of four to twenty-two. The native language in Swaziland is siSwati, but after form 2 (our equivalent of 4<sup>th</sup> grade in U.S. schools), all instruction in schools is offered in English (Forrester, 2009).

The population of Swaziland at the end of 2009 was approximately 1.2 million people (Fleminger, 2009). The people suffer tragically from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has resulted in 80% of its children having lost one parent and 50% having lost both (U.S. Government, Center for Disease Control, 2010). Available data suggests that half of the eligible children enter into the educational system at large, and only about one-half of those complete the 7-year primary school education. In 2010, the number of orphans and vulnerable children in Swaziland was approximately 210,000 (World Data on Education, [UNESCO] 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 2010/11). The pay-to-go model that Swaziland has based its current educational system on provides for children beginning at the age of four, whereas the hostel or orphanage at St. Philips houses and educates over 150 students between the ages of three and twenty-two. According to the teachers, the circumstances of the children's lives have deeply affected their feelings of self-worth and hopefulness. In addition to teaching academic subjects, one of the hostel's greatest challenges is to help children find the hope to live meaningful lives.

Prior to the initial visit to the St. Philips Mission, the author created a short children's picture book entitled *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* as a gift for teachers and learners. The cultural information honored and presented in the book was taken from a video entitled *Today the Hawk Takes One Chick* shot in the vicinity near St. Philips Mission. The head teacher embraced and immediately used this simple, fifteen-page book. The hypothesis is that the gift was not only received by the teacher as an act of kindness and generosity, but more importantly the book's cultural relevance meets the needs of early English language learners in Swaziland. When a book is culturally relevant, the content is true to the lives of the children reading it. It reflects their everyday reality and is therefore immediately accessible to them.

After visiting the country, talking to the people, and experiencing Swazi culture for approximately ten days, a second, much longer reader, *Road Trip to Manzini*, was created by the author. According to the Swazi teachers, this reader was also immediately taught to and enjoyed by the Swazi children. From the narrative story to the themes of the books and the illustrations, the Swazi people can see themselves, their landscape, and their values in these two readers. Sleeter (2008) states, "Evidence suggests that students learn more, attend more regularly, and participate more actively when they can relate to curriculum by seeing themselves and their communities mirrored in it than when they do not" (p. 151). A founding principle of successful ELL education mandates that the learner be able to see him or herself in the educational materials (Grassi & Barker, 2010). These two books increased the practicality of using the ELL materials and enhanced the students' interactions with the English language by providing content which reflects Swazi

culture.

Other works have been written in the last several decades about working in international sites with children. In 1963, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, a New Zealander, for example, published her book, *Teacher*, about her work in a Maori school in New Zealand from the innovative perspective of a teacher who finds a way to bridge the gap between native and European cultures by working directly with the young people in their community over many years. Her philosophy of education and her focus on what she calls “organic teaching” resulted in the children’s creations of their own texts for reading lessons which captured their experiences and their lives while simultaneously increasing their desire to read.

Unlike Warner’s work, this project seeks to find ways to create and provide reading materials from afar which reflect the lives of the Swazi children and their teachers. In fact, we seek to create works which the Swazi children and/or their teachers might create themselves if they had the skill in writing and in English. What is quite different in this case as compared to the Ashton-Warner case is that there is no educator on the ground in Swaziland proficient enough in English to create such materials, and, unfortunately, the content of the donated materials is completely alien to their culture.

In the next sections of this article, the reader will find a brief review of relevant literature on materials proven useful in the field of ELL and cultural context, particularly the formation of culturally relevant educational materials. Following this literature review, the article will then provide an in-depth discussion of each of the author’s readers, attending to how they meet the needs of English Language Learners, the extent to which they demonstrate an awareness of the Swazi culture, and their eventual reception by those in Swaziland. The authors will also present an analysis of additional readers created by United States university students after they heard a presentation on Swaziland, did their own independent research, and read the author’s readers. These students also filled out a survey in which they discussed their perceptions of the significance of culture in their creations. Both their survey responses and their readers reveal the challenges of creating materials which will be practical to teachers and students in distant English learning populations. The researchers conclude that five distinct characteristics should be present in instructional material in order to increase the engagement, language acquisition, and self-worth of the English Language Learner. This project opens possibilities for future research on service and how to increase the impact of giving through acting on specified needs rather than more generalized and perceived lack, acknowledging the other’s cultures and lived realities, and above all, establishing caring relationships. It also suggests the need to create bilingual readers in siSwati and English.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English Language Learners

Teaching content to a young person in the process of learning English presents a complex set of challenges for any teacher. The significance of the cultural shaping and lens that underlies instructional materials takes on heightened importance, as reflected throughout educational literature. This literature is largely dominated by explicit calls for the creation and implementation of culturally relevant instructional materials and content. Grassi and Barker (2010) discuss the necessity of “mak[ing] linkages between home and school knowledge” when instructing students for whom English is a second language. Offering as an example the use of a young woman’s quinceañera<sup>2</sup> as the context for a mathematics word problem (p. 190), Grassi and Barker (2010) further assert that student motivation increases through connections to a student’s cultural background and home life. Not only are learners more likely to be more motivated to learn when their cultural contexts are included in the curriculum, but the authors also detail students’ sharpened abilities to both retain and apply their learning. Moreover, it is not only the words in a text which convey meaning and make links between curriculum and real life, but it is also the images in that text. Novels with graphics have proven effective when working with ELLs in part because students can identify with the illustrations which “privilege certain perspectives” (Boatright, 2010, p. 469) especially those reflecting the ELL’s home culture.

The need to include culturally relevant materials in effective ELL instruction is echoed throughout the research literature. Floyd and Hebert (2010) argue the necessity of utilizing picture book biographies that feature the lives of noteworthy African American individuals when teaching young African American students so that they may identify with these successful people, perhaps further realize their own potential, and feel connected to the curriculum at hand. Ormrod (2011) similarly asserts the relevance of instructional materials to the ELL’s experience. She contends, “Incorporating children’s culture as well as their native language into the classroom curriculum can further promote their academic success” (Ormrod, 2011, p. 57). Perrone (1991), teacher educator, makes a comparable reference to the idea of relevance in instruction: “...what is taught takes on greater significance if it is related whenever possible to the lives of the students, if it can be seen as making connections physically, spiritually, morally, and historically” (p. 16).

Culturally relevant materials in the classroom not only enhance ELL students’ abilities and motivations to learn but further positively impact ELL students’ perceptions of self-worth. Sumaryono and Ortiz (2004) speak to the affirmative relationship between cultural relevance in ELL instruction, students’ self-esteem, and students’ learning:

Recognizing and validating multiple cultural identities in the classroom community . . . strengthen the individuals’ sense of worth, and, ultimately their

academic performance. Similarly, understanding and supporting the cultural norms of diverse learners help to create a safe and nurturing environment, which motivates students to take the necessary risks to be successful. (p. 16-17)

Culturally relevant instructional materials allow ELL students to feel secure and self-confident in their academic capabilities. Sumaryono and Ortiz (2004) further articulate specific ways in which instructional materials and teacher instruction can be created and delivered to enhance ELL students' self-esteem, most significantly including the learners' native language; they assert that, "When teachers support students' primary language in meaningful ways, students feel recognized and validated in the mainstream classroom, which results in a strong sense of self" (p. 17).

Psychologists traditionally define identity as the "self-constructed definition of who one is and what things are important in life" (Ormrod, 2011, p. 75). However, Reeves (2009) presents the sociocultural perspective that interactions and relationships also affect identity formation, where ELLs may experience conflict, coercion, and subsequent low self-esteem as they attempt to accommodate their identity with the dominant group's culture, norms, or even the academic classroom. Ajayi (2006) suggests pedagogy to increase an ELL's academic success, self worth, and identity: "Instructional practices and language learning curriculum in ...schools must be grounded in the diverse experiences of the learners in such a way that their multiple viewpoints, diverse cultures, languages and personalities serve as resources for English language learning" (p. 472).

### **Cultural Context**

The necessity of culturally relevant materials when teaching ELLs requires the understanding of the all-encompassing nature of culture. Anthropologist Hall (1967) asserts in his foundational book *Beyond Culture*, "Culture is man's medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not altered and touched by it" (p. 14). An examination of the literature on the topic of cultural context furthers the understanding of the relationship between cultural relevance and the perceived practicality of such materials.

In their work *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French, and Americans*, anthropologists Hall and Hall (1990) characterize a culture by the context, with the cultures of the world situated on a scale ranging from high context to low context, as characterized by their predominant communication styles. High context cultures are typified by high context communication; low context cultures are typified by low context communication. Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur, and Griffiths (2004) precisely sum up the distinctions between these communication styles in their article "Adjusting Teaching Style and Practice to Accommodate the Needs of International Students;" ". . . low context communication tends to be direct and verbal whereas high context communication tends to be indirect and nonverbal" (p. 3). These basic characterizations identify the United

States as a low context culture and Swaziland as a high context culture.

Within this understanding of cultures as high context or low context lies the important related notion of cultures as collectivistic or individualistic. High context cultures, such as that within Swaziland, are collectivistic; low context cultures, such as that within the United States, are individualistic. Prasad, et al. (2004) describe this characterization, “Low context, individualistic culture tends to rely more on the explicit verbal content of messages whilst people from a high context, collectivistic culture rely heavily on the overall situation and nonverbal cues to interpret meaning” (p. 3). In order to better understand the connectedness of these classifications of cultures, Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia (2009) offer detailed descriptions of the terms individualistic and collectivistic:

Cultures that give priority to the needs of the individual—such as independence, freedom of choice, self-expression, and private property—can be described as “individualistic.” Those that give priority to the needs of the family or group, such as social relationships, group success, group consensus, respect, and shared property can be described as “collectivistic.” (p. 475)

High context, collectivistic cultures, such as Swaziland, emphasize personal relationships and group dynamics while engaging in more nonverbal communication; low context, individualistic cultures, such as the United States, emphasize the individual and independence while engaging in direct, verbal communication.

## **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

Based on this review of the research literature as well as the information gained from the initial Swaziland experience, cultural relevance obviously holds tremendous importance for the successful creation, practicality, and use of reading materials for English language learners in foreign settings. What the literature does not include is the answers to two important questions which have guided this research project: 1) How can people in the U.S. most easily produce and expand the reach of culturally relevant materials for foreign settings that need instructional materials in English? 2) Can American university students with little specific training and skill, but with an innate desire to assist others in need, create practical reading materials for ELLs?

## **THE AUTHOR’S READERS**

The two readers produced by the author will serve as our starting point for analysis. Swazi teachers have received and used the readers with their students, and they have provided their own analysis in interviews as to why these materials were practical in their classrooms. These readers embody the culture of Swaziland on many different levels, from the literal dimension of everyday activities,

to an artistic representation of culture through the books' illustrations, to a symbolic representation of Swazi traditions and values. The readers also communicate respect for the culture and for the Swazi people. *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* depicts the everyday life for gogos<sup>3</sup> and children living on homesteads: gogo does all the cooking for the family and provides most of the care for the children. The children gather wild fruit and play soccer, and everyone participates in song and dance. For the Swazi child who is learning English, *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* portrays authentic life experiences.

As one reads *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead*, the actual surroundings of the people and landscape of Swaziland are conveyed to the readers through the beautiful illustrations by Robert Duggan. When the narrator says, "When it gets dark we say goodnight to the stars and moon" (Titone, 2010a, p. 12), an illustration of the star constellation, Andromeda, "The Queen," accompanies the text. This specific star constellation is visible in the sky above Swaziland; thus, the reader sees this familiar image of nature in the book. Therefore, the author directly incorporates the Swazi's natural surroundings into the reader.

In *Road Trip to Manzini*, the children, teacher, and Auntie embark on a road trip to see how artisans make candles and other crafts in Manzini. A Swazi person reading the book can relate to the experiences of the characters, can envision the Lubombo Mountains, the Mhzutuze River, the Usutfu River, and the Mdzimba Mountains in the book and, perhaps, also in real life. *Road Trip to Manzini* depicts sites that an individual in Swaziland would see on a journey from St. Philips to Manzini--the beauty salons, irrigation systems on the farmlands, people walking on the roads, animals one might see, including the crocodiles in the Usutfu River. In contrast, a donated book from America, combining relevant content with language instruction, may describe a road trip from the Appalachian Mountains to the Grand Canyon, with deer and bison along the way. This content would obviously have fewer possibilities of engaging the young Swazi. It may even alienate them and slow the pace of the language acquisition process. However, *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* and *Road Trip to Manzini* depict the actual surroundings of the intended audience. They increase reader accessibility and language learning by allowing students to see their world, acknowledge their realities, and have positive feelings about that reality.

Not only do the books illustrate the daily life of the Swazi people, the readers also capture the values, traditions, and spirit of Swazi culture. In *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead*, as the children listen to gogo, a deep respect for and honoring of family is reflected in their obedience. Rituals and traditions of the Swazi people represent another theme that is central to the reader. *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* shows the costumes from Swazi rituals. *Road Trip to Manzini* portrays the King of Swaziland as the children journey through the Ezulwini Valley on their road trip to see the crafts. In addition to the book's reflection of culture, the reader includes some traces of the native language in the illustration of the King in his traditional garb: "On our way, we drive through the Ezulwini Valley where His

Majesty, the King of Swaziland, lives. Ezulwini means ‘heaven’ in siSwati; this is the Valley of Heaven” (Titone, 2010b, p. 19). Furthermore, the arts play an important role in the readers, as in Swazi culture. The entire purpose of the road trip lies in the children’s desire to see the handicrafts made in their homeland: candles, woven baskets, dyed cloth called batik, and Swaziland’s beautiful, blown glass. Although the country experiences great tragedy due to the AIDS epidemic, both readers close with positive, hopeful images of a better future and a warm, enveloping, Swazi love: *Gogo’s Swaziland Homestead* ends as the children reflect that they will always remember the good things Gogo teaches them, while *Road Trip to Manzini*’s journey ends back at home with the children drifting off to sleep, as they say, “The soft glow of candlelight fills our room with warmth, and we feel hugged by a tender, unmistakable Swazi love” (Titone, 2010b, p. 25).

In addition to the visual recognition and spirit of their culture, made possible through the inclusion of Swaziland-specific content and accompanying illustrations, the author’s readers also embody the natural communication style and reflect the high context, collectivistic culture of Swaziland. The following page from within *Roadtrip to Manzini* exemplifies a number of characteristics regarded and practiced within Swaziland’s high context, collectivistic culture—namely the emphasis on group interaction and mutual achievement as well as nonverbal forms of communication, including smiling in this particular example:

We begin to compose a song about our trip, and we sing it several times together. We like to find just the right harmonies that blend well and produce a heavenly sound. When we practice, we put a lot of soul into it. We can’t help but smile. (Titone, 2010b, p. 6)

These instructional materials make frequent use of the pronoun “we” and refer both indirectly and directly to family and other familial group memberships and activities such as composing songs, singing and dancing, and traveling and exploring together. The book indirectly praises those aspects of the Swazi culture, giving the reader a sense of acceptance, approval and well-being.

The author deliberately places aspects of daily life, the landscape, traditions and values, and the collectivist mode of communication, into the readers to capture and reflect the culture of Swaziland, to ease the language barrier and enhance learning. Carlsen (2001) states, “Every time we select a piece of literature to read, we are exposing ourselves to a vision: a vision of people and places and things; a vision of relationship and feelings and strivings” (p. 220). For an individual learning a new language, a positive view of his or her culture must be included in that vision, which the author achieves in *Gogo’s Swaziland Homestead* and *Road Trip to Manzini*. Creating these readers for one small country in Africa was labor-intensive and quite time-consuming; therefore, after returning to the U.S., the authors began to explore how they might leverage their discoveries to increase the scale of practical materials produced.

## UNDERGRADUATE PEACE AND JUSTICE STUDENTS

We were invited to give a short report on the Swazi project to a group of twenty-four undergraduate students, who were enrolled in a class entitled Education for Social Justice. One of the purposes of this course, according to the syllabus, is to explore the current tensions of the U.S. educational system as a liberating potential, while unequal access to education simultaneously reproduces and sustains societal inequalities, based on issues of race, class, gender, and socioeconomics. While we were unsure as to the level of interaction we may have with the students, we hoped to involve them in collaborative efforts. In that initial meeting, we engaged the students through a variety of mediums to see, hear, and understand the culture of Swaziland. We provided historical information, the video, *Today the Hawk Takes one Chick*, and photographs of the site, the children, and the community surrounding the Mission. We spoke about the problems with Swaziland's educational system. The purpose of the presentation was to share an experience of education and culture from the perspective of individuals who traveled to the country and connected with the people. We also showed the two books which we had already created and which had been well-received by the Swazis. After this fairly extensive information session, followed by a detailed question and answer period, the students came up with the idea to write their own books to send to the Swazi children as a service project.

When we realized that the students were going to write books of their own, we strongly encouraged them to look further into the culture of Swaziland. We provided websites and other resources which the students could use to begin their research. The class of twenty-four students divided into six groups, each of which would take responsibility for writing one book for the six age groups represented at the hostel at St. Philips (ages 3-4, 5-6, 6-7, 8-9, 10-12, and high school). The researchers returned twice during the next six weeks to discuss the groups' specific ideas, review book drafts, and offer feedback and guidance on the work. By the end of the semester, after several revisions, the students had completed six children's readers: *A to Z Animals*, *The King who Loves to Sing*, *Gogos Around the World*, *Letters from America*, *A Day in the Life of a University Student*, and *School Day*. The students' creations and responses to a three-question, open-ended survey reveal an innate and culturally ingrained desire "to give" and "to broaden" the visions of the Swazi people. Some students include aspects of Swazi culture in their books, but an analysis of their readers illustrates that students require a greater understanding of the significance of cultural context and the need to respect Swazi culture when attempting to create the most engaging and practical books for Swazi children who are English learners.

### Readers Created by University Students

Three of the students' readers, *The King Who Loves to Sing*, *Gogos Around the World*, and *A to Z Animals* succeed in varying degrees in contextualizing the

reading content in relation to the culture of Swaziland. However, the other three books display a clear lack of attention to Swazi culture, with an intrinsic goal of “broadening” the minds of the students in Swaziland. Brief descriptions of the readers follow.

### ***The King Who Loves to Sing***

The students’ most culturally relevant reader for the young Swazi is *The King Who Loves to Sing*. This reader directly reflects the culture of Swaziland from the plot of the rhyming story to the illustrations. Traditional song and dance remain a defining element of Swaziland culture, which plays a crucial role in the storyline, as the song comes from the King’s heart, capturing his spirit and revealing the importance of song to the Swazi people. The colors of the drawings capture the traditional clothing of the king and people of Swaziland. The student authors incorporate other aspects of Swazi culture into the illustrations; for example, the king kicks a soccer ball to the school children, and animals and nature possess a significant role in the story. The student authors rhyme their story, embodying a song-like quality. The notion of a king, of singing, of playing soccer, and of living in what look like traditional Swazi homesteads would be innately familiar to the Swazi students and teachers. Moreover, the work addresses aspects of cultural context by its directions that students will repeat the indicated portions of the song. The student writers have thus made the assumption that this book will be read and enjoyed by a group of Swaziland students, which is in line with the collectivistic nature of their culture. Drawings throughout the book similarly highlight pairs and groups of individuals.

### ***Gogos Around the World***

*Gogos Around the World* reflects different cultures while also discussing the similarities and interconnectivity of people around the world. The reader opens with gogos from Swaziland and then compares the Swazi gogo with gogos in other parts of the world. When specifically addressing the country of Swaziland in the book’s beginning pages, the word “we” is used frequently, which speaks to the collectivistic and group-oriented Swazi culture. The student authors incorporate many different cultures; however, the story describes the differences amongst cultures through a predominant focus on food, which may reflect how these American students define or view culture. The student authors also integrate more abstract aspects of culture such as religion and dress, as illustrated through the Egyptian gogo’s Muslim hijab or the Indian gogo’s sari. The last page of the book captures a goal of connecting with other cultures. The students write “We learned a lot about the world and how much we have in common even though the world is so big...Gogos around the world love their children and their children love their Gogos just like in Swaziland” (p. 17). The student authors bring the storyline full circle with a discussion of Swaziland and the importance of familial love.

### ***A to Z Animals***

*A to Z Animals* takes the youngest reader through the alphabet by associating an animal to the letter with which the word begins. The student authors use simple, short sentences, and large illustrations for those just beginning to learn English. The animal depicted on each page has a dialogue bubble, stating in first person what the creature eats or does. Although the student authors describe many of the animals' natural habitats, they continually point out which animals (antelope, lion, and zebra) are native to Africa. Other animals, such as the koala bear which is indigenous to Australia, are not identified by country of origin. *A to Z Animals* reflects Swazi culture through the incorporation of many animals that live in Swaziland.

Although the next three readers we discuss attempt to connect and create a relationship with the students in Swaziland, *Letters from America*, *Day in the Life of a University Student*, and *School Day*, these books fail to include the cultural context and native language of the Swazi learner. Clearly, the student authors' most pressing purpose was to broaden the minds of the Swazi students, rather than making the content accessible to the Swazi learner by centering it on his or her reality.

### ***Letters from America***

Although this reader reveals different aspects of American culture and portrays the natural wonders of America as well as its most cherished values, such as freedom and hard work, *Letters from America* does not include the culture of Swaziland. The student writers are careful to offer additional descriptions and information about aspects of U.S. culture that appear in the reader, such as "subway," "ferry," and "aquarium," but clarity of language does not translate into accessibility when the culture of the ELL remains completely absent. The letters seek only to tell the Swazi students about life in different parts of America. The reader's greatest strength, however, lies in the student authors' desire to connect with the students in Swaziland. At the close of each of the letters, the student writer includes a picture of him or herself and warmly signs his or her name, which demonstrates the aim of forming a relationship with the Swazi student.

### ***A Day in the Life of a University Student***

Similarly, while *A Day in the Life of a University Student* succeeds in making connections, this book does not provide context and cultural relevancy for the ELL in Swaziland. *A Day in the Life of a University Student*, a compilation of letters from fictitious university students around the world, seeks to increase connectivity amongst different cultures, as the letters describe the students' day-to-day experiences as well as aspects unique to each culture. Direct forms of address as well as requests for relationship-building with the students in Swaziland are found throughout. The student authors' decision to include the greetings and farewells in different languages manifests an ELL approach by acknowledging a

country's native language. However, one glaring omission is a letter about life for an individual at the University of Swaziland. On both occasions when the authors interacted with the undergraduate students, we strongly recommended including such a letter, but the students rejected this idea. The student authors' failure to include this letter further illustrates the importance of the student authors' goal: to show the Swazi students a possible life path beyond their immediate experiences in Swaziland. It also fails to show respect or acknowledgment for the university just 100 kilometers from the Mission at St. Philips.

### *School Day*

*School Day* is more successful than *A Day in the Life of a University Student* and *Letters from America* in establishing connection, particularly as the student creators open their book with a collectively written letter that closes with, “[Middle schools] students drew the pictures in the book for you. We hope you enjoyed learning about some parts of our school day; we like learning about Swaziland” (p. 2). However, cultural context and cultural relevance are again non-existent. While having U.S. middle school students provide the illustrations, and assuming that Swazi students would likely be attracted to this approach, the illustrations pertain only to elements of the U.S. school day, nearly all of which are culturally foreign to the students of Swaziland. Additional drawings pertaining to what the creators learned of the Swazi school experience could have been included and would have offered a more culturally relevant reader as well as further capitalizing on the goal of reciprocal connection.

## INTERVIEWS WITH THE SWAZI TEACHERS AND ANALYSIS OF THE READERS

In January of 2011, two of the Swazi teachers made a trip to the U.S. and stayed for two weeks. During that time, we had the opportunity to show them the new books created by the university students and had them assess all of the readers' practicality. It should be stated at the outset that the teachers exhibited an overall positive evaluation of the student readers, and they were extremely grateful for all of the efforts. Nonetheless, the report of Swazi teachers reveals the challenges of creating culturally accurate and relevant—practical—instructional materials.

As discussed previously, the teachers had a positive reaction and immediately put to use *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* and *Roadtrip to Manzini*. In describing the reasons that these were so easily and promptly utilized, the teachers reiterated a number of very specific points which the literature reveal as important: clear and beautiful illustrations of the children's own homeland, accurate representations of their cultural habits and interactions, and an ongoing sense of reciprocity and connection with the creators of the readers. In a succinct but telling summation, one of the teachers articulated: “It's all in there, and they [the students] can identify

with it (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 20, 2011). Mr. Mamba also said, “When we have a connection to you, to the author, we can ask you to change things or to write other stories that we might like to teach, and we know you will do it” (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 18, 2011).

When prompted to further comment on the university-student created readers, the teachers echoed some of these same positive sentiments. Reflecting on *The King Who Loves to Sing*, the teachers shared excitement about the possibility to “role-play” the reader with the students, indicating a level of success in connecting with the collectivistic aspect of Swaziland’s cultural context. With the story’s closing line of “. . . They praised all the gifts of this beautiful day” (p. 13), the teachers further indicated a wider potential for cultural relevance through a student discussion of what constitutes a beautiful day. If a Swazi student were to comment, for example, that a rainy day is not a beautiful day, the teacher could educate about the importance of rain for the country’s vegetation. And while the reader’s depiction of the King as going to the market himself is one that the teachers indicated was not fully in touch with the reality of his position, the building of a story around a figure whom they recognize was appreciated. Overall, the teachers described *The King Who Loves to Sing* as “beautiful” and “ideal,” asserting, “We’re going to do this [use it with the students]” (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 20, 2011).

In reference to the reader *Gogos Around the World*, the teachers seemed most impressed by the work’s ability to build connections across countries and cultures. One teacher described this reader: “It is just talking about different grannies . . . it gives the different names, and what I think is a gogo is a gogo whichever country or continent. A gogo is a gogo” (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 20, 2011). Both teachers agreed that their students would enjoy reading and learning about the information in *Gogos Around the World*, and it would be very helpful to begin with a Swazi gogo, someone who requires no explanation to their students, before introducing new information in a second language.

When the conversation moved to the *A to Z Animals* reader, the teachers pointed out a greater number of problems despite agreeing upon its general practicality. A number of the animals were not known to the teachers. They suggested that changes be made to better reflect creatures that the Swazi students would know or might see in their environment. The teachers offered useful alterations involving pronunciation, so that the book could better be used for students just learning to read through decoding word sounds. They suggested that Giraffe, for example, should not be used for the letter “G” because giraffe does not begin with a hard “G” sound. They also suggested that their students might be interested in learning the words for the babies of each species. Despite these issues, the teachers thought that the reader, as a whole, was “special” and held practical potential as a first introduction to reading.

Even recognizing the potential limitations of or changes needed within these

three readers, the teachers felt that each would be useful to their teaching efforts. The conversations with the Swazi teachers also reveal other valuable ideas about English instruction that could assist countries or individuals seeking to donate. One teacher discussed the initial problems with the unused donated reading materials as compared to the educational success of the culturally relevant readers:

What we did with those books [unused donations], we'd say to the groups [of children], go and choose a book you like, and they would choose a book, but most of the books were lots of words, lots of words, and new words, and they'll be only one of each [book]. So it's not easy for us to sit and help this child. But when we have one of a number, ...we all go through it together. And that worked out, I found that made my job easier. And the excitement of we're all reading the same book, we're all understanding the same book. It worked out. (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 20, 2011)

These insights illuminate another fundamental problem with developed nations simply donating random books in the hopes of filling a gap without determining the specific need at hand. Singleton reflects that reading instruction improves when the class has a set of at least fifteen copies of any reader. This creates the possibility for students to learn together and increases the practicality of the teacher being able to help all of the students with language acquisition. In addition to lacking class sets of books, the teachers also remarked upon the difficulty of the unused, donated books: not only do they contain too many words and too few culturally relevant illustrations, these books are too advanced for the early learner of English. In fact, these donated materials are not written with the English Language Learner in mind. The teachers need simple, culturally relevant readers that enhance the quality of English instruction for individuals beginning to learn the language. Then, series of readers should increase in difficulty of language and of content.

The experience of working with the university students and discussing the books with the Singleton and Mamba provide more insight into how people can create materials which actually meet the need of the recipient. Although the students' intentions were valiant and their efforts were conscientious, several of the student readers and survey responses reveal a lack of understanding of the importance of cultural relevance and ELL educational principles. After the presentation and creation of the readers, the students completed a short three question open-ended survey, which assesses the extent to which they recognize the importance of creating culturally relevant reading materials for the ELL. The first question asks, "Beyond socioeconomic disparities, what do you see as the most significant differences between U.S. culture and what you know of Swaziland culture?" The second question reads, "Both the teachers and the students in Swaziland are considered English Language Learners, or ELLs. Although all Swaziland education

is taught in English, the country's native language is siSwati. How does this fact prove important to your creations?" The third question asks, "What was/is your ultimate goal in creating these projects for Swaziland?"

Of the class of twenty-four undergraduate students, nineteen responded to the above survey questions. The first two responses were then independently scored on a scale of 1, 0.5, and 0 by the researchers. The value of 1 indicates the respondent accurately addressed the importance of each idea in his or her response. As an example of a response that was scored at this value of 1, consider the following responses to the first question of the survey, which asks about significant cultural differences between Swaziland the U.S.: "I see a difference in the culture and mindset of the people in Swaziland in comparison to American culture that entails the value that each places on families and individuals." This response reflects an understanding of the importance of cultural context. One-half is given to responses that indirectly mention the importance of the question's concepts. The following serves as an example of a response scored at this one-half value, again in response to the first question, which asks about significant cultural differences between Swaziland and the U.S.: "The difference in the family structure is very significant. They have extended families in contrast to U.S.'s dominant nuclear family." Although this response is not precisely in line with the discussion of cultural context offered in this article, the respondent seems to understand that family and group dynamics are of greater cultural importance in Swaziland. Zero applies to responses that fail to mention the importance of culture, and ELL in each respective question. An example of a response scored at this zero value follows, again in response to the first survey question: "The differences that are critical in my eyes are the housing, shelter, and many differences. Basically, they cannot indulge in many things besides what they do in school. The food they receive are not delicious like we experience and our houses, even the poor people in America are much bigger and cleaner." This respondent focuses solely on socioeconomic, rather than broader and more culturally based, differences between the U.S. and Swaziland.

The researcher's independent coding efforts were then compared, with definitive scores for each survey response ultimately agreed upon. The results of the survey were compiled into the data table below in the form of percentages, reflecting the percentage of the nineteen responding students whose expressed answers to the first two survey questions reflected each above described value.

**Undergraduate Student Survey Results**

	Student demonstrates full understanding	Student indirectly mentions the importance	Student shows no recognition
Question 1 Significance of Cultural Relevance	52.6%	5.3%	42.1%
Question 2 Importance of Cultural Relevance to an ELL	15.8%	5.3%	79.9%

While a majority of the students seem to understand the significance of cultural relevance, this knowledge did not translate into the importance of cultural relevance to an English Language Learner. In fact nearly 85% of the students showed no recognition of this fact.

The third survey question, which asked about the students' ultimate goals in creating their service projects, was used as a tool in analyzing each individual work, as reflected in the Readers Created by University Students section of this article. When asked about their ultimate goal in creating the projects for Swaziland, half of the respondents centered on their notion of service especially as it relates to what he or she imagines the people of Swaziland need, rather than seeking first to understand what the recipients say they need. The responses include a desire, for example, to broaden the Swazi's mind: "To give them a glimpse of other things and places outside of their world," to "broaden their horizons," or to simply "teach them of what they do not know." One could say that the undergraduate students attempt to reach out and help the people of Swaziland on their own culturally defined terms, rather than viewing the world through the eyes of the people of Swaziland and understanding their feelings of hopelessness and suffering. Addressing this conundrum, Kirby (2009), a Service Learning scholar states:

How, then, can I ever know what is good for the Other, what she needs, and how I might help alleviate her suffering? I am not able to acquire such understanding on my own, for I can only ever know my own suffering and need. Who, then, is the most reliable source of information regarding the Other's need? Only the Other herself can be such an authority on her own suffering. (p. 158)

A simple continuum of the ways an individual can gain knowledge to enact culturally relevant and culturally sensitive service exists. On one end of the spectrum one might simply employ the internet or other technological source in order to gain information about another culture. At the other end, one must actively work alongside the indigenous population developing strategies for successful collaboration as well as creating culturally relevant books and other materials. Obviously, other effective possibilities exist within this pedagogical model. Al-

though Kirby (2009) articulates that individuals should ultimately seek opportunities for face to face encounters with those in need, any attempt to increase one's understanding and knowledge of the other's perspective, culture, and specific need holds the promise of greatly enhancing the creation of useful materials.

## CONCLUSION

Although the US government statistics reveal that the US alone donated reading materials valued at 25 million dollars to improve the educational opportunities in Africa since 2003, and Swaziland is the recipient of donated educational materials, the interviews with the Swazi teachers provide direct evidence that needs are still not being met in their setting. The research literature indicates that the success of an English Language Learner improves when the educational materials reflect cultural relevance. However, the university students' final creations reveal the challenges inherent in creating this kind of work.

The researchers conclude that five distinct characteristics should be present in instructional material in order to increase the engagement, language acquisition, and self-worth of the English Language Learner:

- Content that is true to the students' lived experiences (reflects everyday experience and is therefore completely accessible to the learner);
- Illustrations in which learners can see themselves, their surroundings, and their values--as if looking into a mirror;
- Use or mention of learners' first language even if only minimally;
- Content, illustrations, and language which directly communicate respect for the students' native/home culture; and
- Content, illustrations, and language which explicitly communicate hope, care and/or positive regard of the learner to the learner.

Transformative change begins with the donor's willingness to consider another individual's perspective. One must both appreciate another's culture as well as devote the time to learn about it. Finally one must seek clear knowledge of the other's need. When authors create instructional materials for children who live the same reality as they do, this is tacitly understood, but when we desire to provide helpful and practical materials in English for children living outside our cultural reality, a different understanding is required of the giver—a different kind of caring must be enacted. Educational philosopher Noddings (2005) describes caring for distant others:

. . . we often fail to treat the recipients of our care as individuals. We may also mistakenly suppose that they want to live exactly as we do—that they want the same knowledge, the same kinds of work, the same forms of worship, the same daily customs . . . Because we are not in relation, our acts can easily degenerate into acts of false generosity. (p. 116)

For the beginning learner of English at any age, it is best to create materials which embed the culture of the learner within the content. This type of material is not only more practical for the teacher, but it has the added advantage of instilling a love of oneself, an appreciation for one's culture, and a love of reading. It builds a culture of reading as it builds self-esteem.

In a country like Swaziland, deeply affected by the AIDS epidemic and other harsh realities, the children at Cabrini Ministries in St. Philips were deeply moved by *Gogo's Swaziland Homestead* and *Roadtrip to Manzini*. They were astonished to see materials created especially for and about them, in part, because, as their teachers tell us, they have little sense of their own worth. The way in which the students expressed such surprise and emotion at the notion that books would be created about their own culture and for their enjoyment and education is illustrative of the low regard they hold of themselves and of their culture. Thus, to truly attempt to serve those who have life experiences and needs far different from our own requires an underlying desire to connect and results in an impact far deeper than mere material fulfillment or language acquisition. Consider the following powerful statement from one of the Swaziland teachers when she speaks about the dedication in *Road Trip to Manzini*: "And to know each time we read this, what the cover had. 'This book is dedicated to the spirit of each student at the hostel at Cabrini Ministries in St. Philips.' Oh, the excitement, the excitement of those children. I explained that, yes, this book is written for you. That means for you, to help you improve, and for who you are, the beautiful person you are" (Singleton & Mamba, personal communication, January 20, 2011). This heart-felt statement illustrates the profound impact of the readers on the Swaziland students' views of themselves and their culture as precious, valuable, and unique. While the creation of culturally relevant educational materials for all the countries of Africa is certainly a daunting challenge, three groups (out of six) of minimally-trained undergraduates were able to succeed at this task for a group of Swazi children. Certainly, well-endowed, non-profit organizations and trained educators have the resources to provide children around the world with effective educational tools. We argue that this work is more than worth the effort when one imagines the Swazi child's sense of pride and exhilaration to join the community of readers, who embrace English as their second language, and who begin to realize some measure of their own worth and potential.

## NOTES

1. Currently the Swazi government has decided to offer public schooling free of charge. They will begin with the lowest grades and add one grade per year.
2. The quinceañera is a traditional Hispanic celebration on the occasion of a girl's fifteenth birthday in parts of Latin America and elsewhere in communities of immigrants from Latin America. This birthday is celebrated differently from any other birthday, as it marks the transition from childhood to young womanhood. The celebration varies significantly across countries.
3. "Gogo" is siSwati for grandmother.

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