

Going Beyond Maps and Globes: Exploring Children’s Literature Using the Five Geographic Themes

Ellen Ballock and Ashley Lucas

This article (with its accompanying PULLOUT) focuses specifically on ways to use the concepts and relationships articulated in the five fundamental themes of geography (location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and regions)¹ to add depth to children’s experiences in reading and writing. Embedded within these themes are specific vocabulary, concepts, and skills that are helpful for students to learn; but these themes also reveal a rich web of relationships between geography and life that can support students in making meaning, whether considering a fictional world or our real world.

Although curriculum integration holds potential for deeper and more meaningful learning, scholars warn that curriculum integration in practice may lead to forced content connections and superficial coverage of social studies topics.² For curriculum integration to yield its desired results, it is important to ask: Where are the places that the big ideas and standards in one discipline complement the other and enhance students’ learning and understanding of each? Educators have long recognized the natural connections between geography and literature, as literature can provide a means of “traveling” to geographically distant places.³ In these classroom activities, we build on this work and explore the ways that the pairing of geography and literacy can promote deep levels of thinking and meaning—thus supporting elementary students’ learning in both disciplines.

Strategy 1: Using Geography to Support Student Thinking and Analysis of Children’s Literature

The questions provided in column two of FIGURE 1 highlight the key concepts addressed by each of the five themes and demonstrate how those concepts might be used to guide discussion of children’s literature. The third column suggests possible follow-up activities corresponding to each theme. These questions and activities can be used easily within reading groups or literature circles, along with whole class read-alouds, or within any content area reading. The fourth column provides examples of well-known children’s books that demonstrate some of the key concepts within each theme. Although the books are sorted

by theme here, there is no reason why one would have to draw from ideas from only one theme at a time. Often several of these

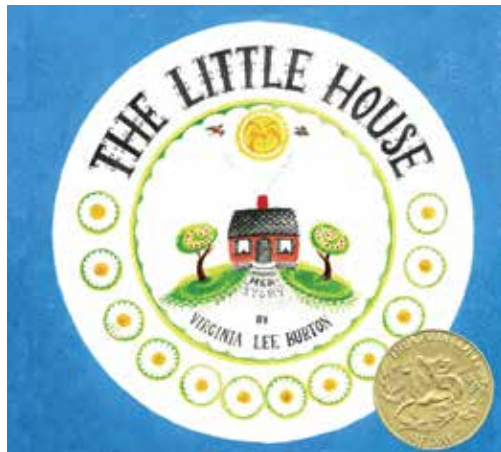
five themes are applicable to discussions of a single book. For example, when reading the classic Caldecott Award winner, *The Little House*,⁴ one might contrast the physical and human characteristics of the country and the city to connect with the theme of Place while also examining the ways that humans modify the environment around the little house to connect with the theme Human-Environment Interaction.

As teachers and students grow in their awareness of the presence of geography within literature, it’s likely that they will also find that there are

many natural connections for bringing these concepts into discussions that simultaneously support important language arts goals. For example, considering Location or Movement may help students better develop a mental map of places in the story or support them in visualizing the setting of the story within a broader context. Discussions of Place and Region can provide opportunity to foster the development of a rich descriptive vocabulary useful both for reading comprehension and writing, as well as allowing students to practice the thinking skills involved with classification and comparing and contrasting.

Strategy 2: Looking for Geographic Connections

The BINGO template provided in HANDOUT A can serve as an easy entry point for both teachers and students to begin attending to how the ideas contained within the five themes of



geography connect with the books or other texts they read on a daily basis. This template could be used in several different ways to support this goal. First, this template might be used as an individual or class reading log over time. Each time the class reads a book together, they could identify the geographic theme(s) to which that book best connects and record the book title in that square. For example, after reading the book *Madeline*,⁵ the class might search for Paris on a world map and then record the title of the book in a square labeled “absolute location” since Paris is a precise spot one can find on the map. After reading *This is My House*,⁶ the class can record this title in the square labeled “adaptation” because the book shows how people around the world and throughout history have made different kinds of choices about the homes they build based on available resources, climate, and other environmental factors.

Second, the template can be used for a literature scavenger hunt after students have been introduced to each of the five themes. Students can search their classroom library, the school library, a basal reader, or their homes for picture books that incorporate the ideas included in each box on the template, recording one title per box. Both of these activities can promote a growing awareness of the relevance of geography by helping students to intentionally look for geography connections.

Strategy 3: Developing Stories That Fully Integrate Geography and Literature

When we taught Alice McLerran’s *Roxaboxen*, we saw an opportunity to highlight all five geographic themes, and also to have students consider how community relates to geography. After reading the book and charting the distinctive regional aspects of the story in their Five Themes of Geography chart (HANDOUT B, e.g., in the column titled “Place”), students can record the unique physical and human characteristics of Yuma, Arizona, listing descriptive adjectives specific to this setting. Then students can describe how Yuma is different from the place in which they live. Finally they can then create their own fictional “Roxaboxen” (community) in cooperative groups. Whereas the setting in the book *Roxaboxen* is in the southwest region, a student group’s “Roxaboxen” will be situated in the region where the students live. For us in Maryland, this might mean selecting the Chesapeake Bay Region.

The Five themes chart supports students as they begin to think through the aspects of their own regions and the effects that geographic features might have on the story. After students create their own story based on their region, they can create a shoebox model that shows their own “Roxaboxen.” Tell students that their model should “include” the five geographic themes in some way or another. Invite students to think creatively about this challenge. How could each theme be shown, suggested, or alluded to in the design of the shoebox model? For example, students can cover the outside of the shoebox with a photocopy of a map of the region in order to show the Location of the story. When presenting their models to the class, students can explain how their model shows (or

represents in some way) each of the five geographic themes.

Conclusion

The strategies presented in this article and the accompanying Pullout can scaffold understandings for students with different levels of experience with geographic concepts, and, given the predominance of language arts at the elementary level,⁷ these understandings can be incorporated through the vehicle of literature, enriching learning in both subject areas for all students. 🌍

Notes

1. The National Geography Standards provide the most current framework for geography education. They are available online at www.ncge.org/publications/tutorial/standards. The five fundamental themes of geography were originally published in 1984 by the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers. To read a more detailed description of the knowledge and skills associated with each theme, see Richard G. Boehm and James F. Petersen, “An Elaboration of the Fundamental Themes in Geography,” *Social Education* 58, no. 4 (April/May, 1994): 211-218. We choose to use the five themes of geography instead of the standards in this article because many elementary schools still use these themes in their social studies curriculum and because they are more immediately accessible to teachers and elementary students who are just beginning to consider how geography connects with other subject areas.
2. Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Barbara Knighton, *Inside the Social Studies Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Leah H. Kinniburgh and Ruth S. Busby, “No Social Studies Left Behind: Integrating Social Studies During the Elementary Literacy Block,” *Journal of Content Area Reading* 7, no. 1(2008): 55–85; Margaret E. McGuire, “What Happened to Social Studies? The disappearing curriculum,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 8(2007): 620–624; Elizabeth R. Hinde, “Revisiting Curriculum Integration: A Fresh Look at an Old Idea,” *The Social Studies* 96, no. 3(2005): 105–111.
3. Stephanie Wasta, “Be My Neighbor: Exploring Sense of Place through Children’s Literature,” *The Social Studies* 101, no. 5(2010): 189-193; Mary Anne Zeitler Hannibal, Ren Vasiliev, and Qiuyun Lin, “Teaching Young Children Basic Concepts of Geography: A literature-based Approach,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 30, no. 2(2002): 81-86; Michael Berson, Dan T. Ouzts, and Lisa Walsh, “Connecting Literature with K-8 National Geography Standards,” *The Social Studies* 90, no.2(1999): 85-92; Pat Oden, “Books, Places, Regions: A natural blend,” *Journal of Geography* 94, no. 4(1995): 466–470.
4. Virginia Burton, *The Little House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942).
5. Ludwig Bemelmans, *Madeline* (New York: Scholastic, 1967).
6. Arthur Dorros, *This is My House* (New York: Scholastic, 1992).
7. Tina Heafner, George Lipscomb, and Tracy Rock, “To Test or Not to Test? The Role of Testing in Elementary Social Studies: A Collaborative Study Conducted by NCPSSSE and SCPSSSE,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 1, no. 2(2006): 145-64; Tracy Rock, Tina Heafner, Katherine O’Connor, Jeff Passe, Sandra Oldendorf, Amy Good, and Sandra Byrd, “One State Closer to a National Crisis: A Report on Elementary Social Studies Education in North Carolina Schools,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4(2006): 455-83; Lynette Erickson, Judith Neufeld, and Katie Sorensen, “Must We Sacrifice Citizenship for AYP?” Paper presented at the College and University Faculty Association Conference, Houston, TX, 2008.

The authors would like to thank Pinewood Elementary and Cockeysville Middle School in Maryland.

ELLEN BALLOCK is an associate professor in the Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Special Education at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts

ASHLEY LUCAS is associate professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Towson University, Towson, Maryland