

LEARNING TO READ NATURE'S BOOK

An Interdisciplinary Curriculum for Young Children in an Urban Setting

by Alicia Carroll & Bisse Bowman

In this reflective contribution, Alicia Carroll and Bisse Bowman describe the curriculum they are continuing to develop at Young Achievers Science and Math Pilot School in Jamaica Plain, an urban area close to Boston, Massachusetts. Among other discoveries, they reflect on the many ways in which art can enhance children's understanding of nature, math and science, and how it contributes to growth in literacy. Alicia and Bisse collaborated on this piece during a Reflection Writing Retreat at Shelburne Farms, cosponsored by Community Works Journal.

Golden leaves rustle gently as the breeze moves through the trees in our urban forest. The children are squatting in the deep green star moss, poking their small trowels underneath the moss with great care. Suddenly, a voice is raised in excitement, "Look Ms. Alicia! Look what I found! What is it?" The excitement was catching, and the rest of the Kindergarten children gathered around Amir, looking into his cupped hand. Lots of theories were shared.

"It looks like it's something that's dead."

"It could be a dead bug."

"It might not be dead you know. I think it could be sleeping."

"You know, it's that time of year when animals... go to sleep?"

"You mean when animals hibernate, like bears?"

"Ms. Alicia, what is it?"

"I don't know. How could we find out?"

This vignette from a visit to our 10-foot-square study site on the "wild" fringes of the Forest Hills Cemetery highlights some of the important aspects of the curriculum we call "Learning to Read Nature's Book," now in its second year of development at our urban school. Founded on the belief that outstanding curricula and competence in math and science, supported by a strong literacy program, are vital for our urban, culturally and ethnically diverse student population, our school is committed to social justice. The experiences in the most formative school years (four- and five-year-olds) are crucial in laying the foundations for learning scientific methods through firsthand experiences, an introduction to inquiry-based research, data gathering, recording, interpreting and drawing conclusions.

Children in urban settings often do not have access to firsthand experiences to regional flora and fauna in natural settings, and therefore find it difficult to feel truly connected to nature, to be able to analyze and understand the natural



and scientific world in which they live, and to understand their place in it. Our visits to the field study site provide our students access to all of this.

Learning to Investigate

We first brought the children to the field study site in early September. As we arrived at the site, the children sat down on a big slab of puddingstone, and reflected quietly upon the following questions:

What do you see?

What do you hear?

What does it feel like when you touch it?

We recorded their observations, and then used the record back in the classroom to help the students produce a large poster filled with drawings, new vocabulary (i.e. moss, puddingstone, pine tree, acorn, hemlock cone, path, fern, daddy-long-legs, rustle and observe). The new words were then used to introduce the Word Wall, one aspect of Readers' Workshop (a systemwide curriculum in Boston).



Building Vocabulary, Incorporating Literacy

Typically, Word Walls contain the first names of the children in a class, common sight words, and a list of words considered necessary for students to know at a particular grade level. We have taken this concept a step further by developing separate, smaller, Word Walls that reflect

different aspects of the students' learning. For example, there might be a Word Wall with words related to a particular unit of the school's math curriculum, featuring words such as identify, shape, pattern, repeat, predict and names of shapes.

In preparation for the second visit to the field study site, we introduced *I Went Walking*, a Big Book by Sue Williams, to the students. The book's focus is about a little girl taking a walk and encountering a range of animals (cat, duck, dog) as she is walking. Alicia then created a book for the students, based on the format of the Big Book, in which to record their own experiences at the chosen site, using their science notebooks and the poster mentioned above as references. Each page in the children's version had space for a picture at the top, and a partial sentence at the bottom to which they could add their own words. For instance, "I went walking, what did I see? I saw _____ looking back at me."

The next book we introduced to the class was *Under One Rock: Bugs, Slugs and Other Ughs* by Anthony D. Fredricks. It explores what a little boy finds when he lifts up a rock: organisms such as centipedes, millipedes, spiders,

earthworms, beetles, and ants. We introduced new vocabulary and the students began working on a predictable book that they would be able to read themselves later. They illustrated the book, and "wrote" the text in developmentally appropriate manners.

Investigation Leads to Curiosity

On a beautiful, crisp, sunny fall day we returned to the study site. We talked about disturbing the environment as little as possible, about the concepts of turf and soil—layers—and then dug in the soil after having removed the turf where the digging would take place. The students found a plethora of centipedes, earth worms, tiny spiders, pupated beetles, and placed them in "collector terraria" with a bit of the dirt for the trip back to school. We returned the excess soil to the holes and replaced the turf.

It was during this visit to our study area that Amir found a pupa in the soil and Alicia's response to the students, "I don't know. How could we find out?" was the springboard for a two-and-a-half-month-long research project. One of the topics in the curriculum chosen by the school for the Kindergarten classes, "Discovering Nature with Young Children" (Education Development Center) is to learn about the life cycle of insects, and now here was a child-inspired "way in" to a topic that was required, rather than having it introduced by a teacher!

Immediately upon returning to the classroom, the students shared their observations from the study site. They made comparisons to what they had read and seen in the book, and their findings were recorded on an interactive writing chart. This was also helpful when they began to write their own books. Alicia brought up Amir's "find," and again posed the question, "How can we find out what this is?"

"We can look at books?"

"How about a dictionary? There are pictures in the dictionary, so maybe we can find a picture of one."

"We can ask other people."

"We can watch a TV show or a movie about bugs."

"We can look in books about bugs, creepy-crawly things, like worms, insects..."

Alicia responded, "That's called *research*. It's a 'big' word that's used to describe what you do when you are trying to find out about something." "That means we need to go to the library to find some books," volunteered one of the girls.

Setting Up a Research Center

This was the beginning of a very exciting phase of the study! A learning center, labeled “The Research Center,” was set up in the classroom. In the center of the table were the small plastic, terraria that contained Amir’s pupa and a few other specimens. We set up a bin of different books containing nonfiction for a range of readers, ranging from books with



large pictures and almost no text, to Science Rookie Readers and insect guides. We supplied magnifying glasses, paper, pencils and modeling clay. Suddenly, Rosa called out, “I found it! I found it! What does it say in the book? What does it say? I found it!”

And, indeed she had. The pupa was in a book about mealworms, which was promptly read aloud

to a very excited class. It is not really surprising that the students then began asking if it would be possible to have mealworms in the classroom.

The research center now became “The Mealworm Research Center.” Each student learned what a meal worm would need to survive, and set up small mealworm habitats in plastic Petri dishes. They poked holes in the lids since the insects needed air to breathe, fed them small amounts of oats and apples, checking every day to see that there was neither too little food (which would inhibit the development of the larva) or too much (which would result in rotting and molding nutrients). The students named their mealworms, after a few days of caring for, and bonding with, the small creatures under their care. As the mealworms progressed through their life cycle, the students not only made careful observational drawings of them, but also learned yet another substantial group of new words and concepts, including larva, pupa, exoskeleton, grain, beetle, habitat, emerge, Petri dish, and life cycle.

The Importance of Drawing

The “Writer’s Workshop”—a systemwide literacy curriculum for Boston Public Schools—uses sketching as a tool.

We have found that this is an important skill to develop in Kindergarten. It has connections to all areas of the curriculum:

- **Art:** Obviously, there is a lot of sketching in art. A sketch can be a “rough draft” for a final art project, or the art project itself!
- **Literacy:** Sketching encourages students to look at shapes and positions of an object, which in turn strengthens their ability to distinguish between the shapes of letters and words.
- **Science:** Being able to sketch something requires that the students notice subtle or tiny elements of an object, which is also important while making observations for science work. For example, when sketching a salamander, they might notice that there are tiny dots on its back.
- **Math:** When a student strengthens her/his ability to pay closer attention to detail, it will help strengthen her/his ability to notice patterns, which is one aspect of the Kindergarten math curriculum.

Each student has a science notebook in which to record observations. There is space for the children to draw/sketch, and space for writing, which can be done through dictation, sounding out and writing words, and looking for clues from the Word Wall.



Investigating Art

One of the inspirations for our yearlong curriculum was a sculpture by a Boston area artist, Fern Cunningham, “Step on Board.” Ms. Cunningham is African American, like the majority of the students at YA. Alicia had already established a partnership with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston called Artful Adventures, and she was looking for a way to incorporate an artist who belonged to the children’s community, someone whom they would recognize as one of theirs. So,

how do you go about infusing a curriculum, already determined to a large extent by the school, with something that at first glance does not seem to fit? In fact, there seemed to be some rather large obstacles in the way.

The other two science units designed by the Education Development Center and assigned by the school are “Water” and “Structures.”

While these units need to be implemented within the school building to a large extent, there are obvious connections to the Discovering Nature program (the importance of water, snow and ice; how flora and fauna depend on water; the effects of erosion on the land; building with stones, sticks and other natural objects; and so forth).

The collections of chestnuts, pine cones, hemlock cones, sticks, acorns, stones were easy to incorporate into the Investigations math units; for instance, shapes, sorting, counting, number sense, graphing, patterns and story problems. The language of math is also part of building the everyday vocabulary of the students, such as estimate, all the words that mean “big” and “small,” predict, and tally. It began to appear that there were some very natural links not just to the three science units, but also between science, math and literacy! So where could Ms. Cunningham and her sculptures fit?

“The Sculpture Path.” a sculpture exhibit at the Forest Hills Cemetery, opened in August, 2004. One of the sculptures was “The Sentinel” by Fern Cunningham! As Kindergarten team staff members walked along the exhibit path, they discovered several sculptures constructed of natural materials, such as sticks and pine needles. Cecily Miller, the Director of the Education Department at Forest Hills, was the guide for the opening tour, and soon engaged in conversation with Alicia. Together, they began planning a partnership between the school and the Forest Hills Educational



Trust and Cemetery. This was the “aha” moment: Sculptures made from natural materials fit with Discovering Nature, and those sculptures, in turn, could make Ms. Cunningham’s sculptures “fit in,” as well.

We brainstormed and planned together before school started in the fall. Ideas flew. Bisse, who had been a classroom teacher for more than 30 years before she founded the Visual Arts program at YA, was excited to be part of the planning and to help look for ways to construct a truly integrated curriculum. Alicia felt it was important to work with someone who not only understood the possibilities of project-based integrated learning, but had also practiced it.

Learning about the Environment and Social Justice

The sculptures made of natural materials at Forest Hills seemed inspired by the works of Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy, who has recorded his work and how it changes over time in photos and richly illustrated books, seemed to be a natural “companion artist” to Fern Cunningham. The documentary film about Goldsworthy, *Rivers and Tides*, gave beautiful examples of how this artist feels at one with his natural surroundings, and how deeply they have influenced both his art and his life. His art makes a natural connection with the “Learning to Read Nature’s Book” curriculum.

Maya Lin, like Goldsworthy, feels a strong connection to the natural world. She speaks eloquently about this in the documentary *A Strong, Clear Vision*. She mentions how she spent hours exploring the forests around her childhood home and came to know it intimately. Similarly, our aim is to encourage our urban students to come to know their urban green spaces—in our case the Forest Hills area of Jamaica Plain. Lin was inspired by Japanese gardens—another opportunity for investigation, learning cultural history, and engaging in creative activities. Maya Lin’s work on the Vietnam War Memorial met with opposition, some markedly centered on her ethnicity. Her work on the Civil Rights Monument in Montgomery, AL, is beautifully depicted in the documentary, and would be a good base for a beginning study of the continuing work for Social Justice.

Cunningham’s work has been deeply influenced by the history of her people; for example, the sculpture of Harriet Tubman (“Step on Board”) in South Boston, the “Black Golfer” in Boston’s Franklin Park, and “The Sentinel”—a West African seer and griot—in the Forest Hills Cemetery. Her most current work to be displayed in Mattapan focuses on immigration and the different cultures represented in the history of the area. Her work—both visually and technically—is inspired by West African works of art. Cunningham

has been a Social Justice Activist since her youth, inspired by her parents. She has, like Goldsworthy and Lin, persevered in the face of substantial obstacles, held true to her vision and grounded her work in her own passions and convictions.

Young Achievers' teachers meet for a couple of days before the students arrive at school. During these planning sessions, we shared our enthusiasm for our new, interdisciplinary curriculum with Liana Bond, the other Kindergarten teacher at YA. At first, Liana felt a bit overwhelmed and wanted to be sure that this curriculum would in fact "cover all that needs to be covered in Kindergarten." She said she had some trouble visualizing how it would look on a day-to-day basis in the classroom, how it would meet the standards, and how it would all connect. This is not an unusual reaction when one begins to grapple with interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Two things that really helped us was to lay out the curriculum in a web format, to plan for the first couple of weeks (the opening of the school year), and for the two of us, Alicia and Bisse, to s-l-o-w down.

Partnering with CO-SEED

We were fortunate, in this first year of developing the curriculum, in that Bisse had a "window" in her schedule that enabled both of us to accompany the students on the weekly study site visits and/or to work with the Forest Hills staff. It meant two sets of eyes and ears observing the students as they explored their "forest," studied the sculptures and engaged with the staff of Forest Hills. Being partnered with CO-SEED was of great help to us as well. We not only felt supported in developing a project-based, place-based curriculum, but it also allowed for some extra planning time during a CO-SEED study group one afternoon a month. Liana continued to ask questions that helped us see the need to be very specific as we planned and to make sure that all curricular expectations were being met. As the school year progressed, Liana grew increasingly excited about this way of teaching and began contributing ideas. The study of sculptures and sculptors became thread that bound disparate aspects of the academic curricula together. We see "Learning to Read Nature's Book" as a whole, one investigation leading to another.

Habits of Mind

Young Achievers is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Our work is framed around their Common Principles, (Habits of Mind, Equity, Creativity, Investigation, Connections, Responsibility, and Perseverance). The three artists we chose each have works that provide not only links to the sciences, but also to exploring cultural influences and social justice. The students investigated, among other things:

"Who are the artists?"

"Who and what has influenced their work?"

"What do they 'say' with their work?"

"What obstacles have they encountered in reaching their goals?"

"Whose 'stories' are they 'telling' through their work?"



Making Connections

We integrated the work in science and the sculptors Andy Goldsworthy, Maya Lin and Fern Cunningham (a white European male, an Asian American woman and an African American woman) all of whose work is intimately connected to cultural history and the environment. The students visited their "areas" many times, learning about the natural world in an urban setting. They recorded some of their observations, collected some natural materials (which were well cared for and returned after a brief period to their "place of origin"), and made connections to literacy through interactive writing, reading Big Books, building vocabulary and representing their newfound knowledge in visual art forms. They are also looking for patterns in nature—a math connection.

The great majority of the art classes begin with a "read-aloud," focusing on author illustrators that highlight topics pursued in the classrooms. In this case, we read and closely studied the illustrations of the book *Children of the Forest* by Elsa Beskow. She was a Swedish artist, naturalist, educator, illustrator, and author of children's fiction as well as of a "reader" that was used for decades in Swedish schools. The children not only enjoyed their explorations of the book, but have referred to it many times during their visits to their study area when looking at plants.

The children began studying the work of Andy Goldsworthy by looking at photos found in his books *Wood*,

Time and *A Collaboration with Nature*. Every morning, the children congregated around the books, making and sharing wonderful observations. They began constructing their own sculptures using manipulative math materials, recycled materials, blocks, things they collected on their site visits such as acorns and pine cones. Through the visits the children discovered parallels with the work of two other Forest Hills sculptors who also use natural materials, Jeanne Drevas and Frank Vasello. Both works include the spiral shape, which gave rise to looking at shapes and to finding spirals in nature, such as snail shells and shells from the beach.

The children collected pine needles of the forest floor, and then visited the Drevas sculpture, a spiral made of pine needles. A couple of days later they collaboratively created a large spiral sculpture in a “quiet” corner of an adjacent park. Before constructing the pine needle sculpture, the children created a spiral using their own bodies, standing next to each other making a long line turning into a spiral.

They then began constructing the pine needle spiral, approximately 12 feet across. They added acorns and pine cones to their sculpture, wanting to make it *theirs* and not a direct copy of what they had seen. After finishing the sculpture, the children made “Predictions” about what they thought might happen to their sculpture over the next several days, for example:

“They’re gonna blow away and go back into nature.”

“The squirrels are going to come and get the acorns and put them up in a tree to eat in the winter.”

The children began creating spirals in the classroom, drawing and arranging manipulative materials into spiral shapes.



The very next day we went back to look at the sculpture. We found two squirrels eating the acorns, and later, upon closer examination, found several with teeth marks in them. The spiral was photographed. When asked what might have caused the changes, one of the children said, “Maybe Andy Goldsworthy came and moved some of the pine needles!” We made plans to revisit the spiral periodically to observe changes over time.

Later, the same morning, the students collected horse chestnuts during their visit to the cemetery. We began speaking about differences in texture between the different natural materials the children have handled. They were amazed at the difference between the smoothness of the chestnuts and the rough, prickly chestnut burrs. “I found something porky,” said one of the children, explaining it was “porky like a porcupine.” They observed ducks in the pond, and somebody remembered the duck in the “I Went Walking” book.

The spiral sculpture was visited again, after a stormy fall day. The spiral was still discernible, but much reduced. Squirrels were still collecting acorns from the spiral. The children were surprised that the spiral was still there, and that not all of the pine needles had blown away. Two days later, the pine needle spiral sculpture the children constructed had disappeared. They observed, “It is becoming part of the earth.”

Bisse brought plant samples (collected, with permission, from a large, privately own parcel of forest) that matched what can be found at the study area. In small groups, the students studied the plants closely and made observational drawings that were labeled with the plant names. A small photo album is available in the classroom with pictures of the plants from the study site.

The plant samples were used to create a classroom terrarium, along with small bits of puddingstone. The students created a miniature version of their study area. (Later, it was interesting to compare what was happening in the terrarium and in the outside study area as time went by and the seasons changed!) The students had already raised many questions that helped drive and inspire the development of the curriculum. “Where is the water on the inside of the glass of the terrarium coming from?”

In the classroom, the children helped generate words for a “Predictable Chart” (from Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop) through interactive writing. All the words collected this way reflected what the children had observed, studied, read and written about since the beginning of the school year, for ex-

ample “A is for acorn, ant, animals...” “E is for exoskeleton, egg...” “M is for moss, mud, moisture, mealworm...” In the art room, the students chose words from the “Predictable Chart” to illustrate each letter in the alphabet, producing wonderful alphabet posters for their classroom. The alphabet grew out of newly acquired knowledge, was intimately connected to firsthand experiences of the children, and communicated some of what they had learned to the “world.”

Another day, the students went to see Cunningham’s sculpture, *The Sentinel*, for the first time. They noticed how very different her sculpture was from the others they had observed. “She looks real!” They noted that *The Sentinel*, a woman, was seated on a large outcropping of pudding stone, and that she was made of bronze, a metal, as opposed to the natural materials they had observed earlier. Cunningham was introduced as an artist who lives in the community, who is African American, and that other sculptures of hers can be found around the city.

The children were also told that several of the adults know Cunningham, and in some cases have worked with her and visited her studio. The children were very interested in learning more about her. We told them about the inspiration for the sculpture of *The Sentinel*, and that although she is an African woman, she reminded the sculptor of her grandmother, her mother, and all the strong, wise women in her family who inspired her.

The children made observational drawings at the cemetery, and later, in the classroom, came back to the drawings to complete details and write/dictate about the sculpture. They began speaking about wanting to make their own sculptures!

These are but a few examples from the first five months of our new curriculum. We decided we needed a “check point” in how the curriculum was affecting the learning and achievement of the students. One way to assess this informally was to prepare a presentation of the students’ work to the adult family members, our community partners and the school community.

The classroom was set up as a “museum”—the students had learned that museum exhibits display treasured cultural artifacts, and to set up their own classroom in a similar manner would show how their learning and work is treasured. The children were the “museum guides” speaking to family members, community partners and other visitors about what they had learned. It was a wonderful event!

Assessment

In addition to requisite Boston Public School assessments in math, science and literacy, we do informal assessment based

on observations of students at work, while drawing, in conversation, during formal presentations to adult family members during Family Presentations and to the school during Community Meetings.

Perhaps the most “telling” informal assessment appears when students explain what they have learned; students talk about what can be seen inside a terrarium; students explain the different components of a model they have built to an “outside” visitor to the classroom, i.e. a person who does not really know much about what the curriculum has been, and therefore is not likely to “prompt” the answer.

We hear from adult family members how their children are sharing what they have learned, and sometimes even *teach* new things to their families! Our Student Portfolios include work samples from different points of the year plus assessments. And, of course, we analyze student sketch books and journals.



The Sentinel.

Our Findings

At the end of the first year of “Learning to Read Nature’s Book,” the students were all at grade level or above according to the assessments—a significant improvement over the previous school year.

In researching, developing curriculum, writing and publishing, we become better teachers. Teachers must continue to be learners for several important reasons: This is how we stay fresh in our profession, rejuvenated and energized. We are reminded about obstacles, emotions and coping strategies when we are attempting to learn something, or experience something, for the first time. It reminds us of what our students are experiencing in school every day when we are presenting them with new, unfamiliar information.

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Sustainability, cont'd. from p. 5

They collected water samples and water quality data on local streams and learned about the force of water. Because they followed sound scientific practices and procedures, their water quality monitoring data was useful to the larger scientific community. Most students took their work seriously, knowing that their research mattered.

On one visit, I watched as a diverse group of students used their urban school yard to study the impact of water on a degraded bare slope. They noted the deep ravines and the pools of sediment that formed at the base of the hill. “This is a wonderful opportunity for them to compare what happens here on a small scale to larger watershed erosion issues,” Merle told me. Putting their knowledge and skills into practice was an obvious follow-up to learning about erosion and sedimentation in the watershed. Students collectively developed a service-learning project to plant the slope with native plants to hold the soil in place, provide habitat for some urban animal life, and improve the beauty of the school grounds. At each step – from research to digging in the soil – every student had an opportunity to do their best work and contribute to the learning community.

By the end of my journey through Southern California, I was struck by the ability of young students to address complex community issues. They were employing critical thinking skills, acting as involved citizens and environmental stewards. They had come away with a better understanding of their place—their local natural and human communities. In California’s semi-arid land, students are addressing a growing population’s needs for fresh water. They will be able to better plan urban development in a water-scarce environment. They can make these decisions knowing that preserving the coastal wetlands will prevent flooding and improve water quality in their beaches. They did this all without some “expert” standing in front of the classroom lecturing about water quality, rights, and policy and how important it is for them to know this information. Through authentic engagement around a community issue, their learning came alive. □

Nature’s Book, cont'd. from p. 25

As teachers we must remember that we are never finished as students. We need to model the process of researching and learning for our own students, and help them see that learning is a life-long endeavor, not limited to the classroom or by age or gender.

As educators, we need to translate the standards and frameworks from paper to actual change in classroom practices. We believe that if we combine good teaching, using the guidelines of the frameworks and standards with material through which students can construct meaning for themselves from previously untold stories, we will naturally meet the frameworks and the state standards. Paulo Friere, the Brazilian educator, said that authentic knowledge transforms reality. Knowledge of the word is not the privilege of the few but the right of everyone.

We want to broaden our students’ scope of the world. Our students—Black, Asian, Latino and White, should have the right and freedom to know the world, beginning with themselves. When this is so, they will be able to step into the shoes of others, begin to construct knowledge that is authentic, and thereby a new reality. This is the real standard we should meet. □

Discovering, cont'd. from p. 6

tion became, if you will, an important act of cultural self-representation. His level of engagement was evident in every aspect of his presentation, from body affect to tone of voice. You couldn’t miss the fact that he was sharing—in the best possible sense of the word—an aspect of his own experience about which he cared very deeply, and this serious sense of purpose transformed a shy, soft-spoken student into a dynamic presenter.

All of this took me entirely by surprise. I was a beginning teacher and a long way from articulating the curriculum of place which I now espouse. This was a first, eye-opening experience. Later in my teaching career I learned to draw on family-as-resource in a variety of ways. Through food, of course—one of my favorite projects was a book of family recipes that we “published” as a class—but also through projects and programs that brought people into the school or took us out into the community. One year, for example, we initiated a schoolwide Friday Activities program that drew on parents and community members as local “experts.” They came to school to share their particular knowledge and expertise with small groups of students over a period of weeks. We put together a broad menu of elective offerings and every student in the school participated.

But I want to return for a moment to the issue of diversity. Recently the Vermont Folklife Center began a modest outreach program to refugees from Tibet, Bosnia, and several Africa nations. A Bosnian family I’ve come to know well has three children, two of whom are students in the public school. The son, who is a senior, reports being repeatedly taunted because he is a “foreigner,” and although his younger sister appears to have had an easier time of it in school, no teacher has ever shown any curiosity about the Bosnian culture that shapes the fabric of her family’s life. These people have been eager to collaborate with me on a variety of projects—including a public cooking demonstration—and I’m sure they would jump at the opportunity to present their heritage in a school. They know the effects of prejudice firsthand and they welcome the opportunity to confront this prejudice by sharing their culture and talking publicly about who they are—with pride.

I’m sure that not all Bosnian families would be so eager to go public with their culture. They might view their family life as private and not available for public consumption. There is also the very real danger of putting a student in the position of becoming a specimen. Imagine a teacher inviting a student with same-sex parents to talk about what it’s like growing up in a gay or lesbian household. Under exactly the right circumstances this might work very well. But a teacher’s interest could also feel like an unwelcome intrusion into a private sphere, for both the student and his or her family.

We can talk generally about the culture of northern New England and identify patterns that are in a sense defining characteristics of this place, which, in one way or another, are reflected in the lives of the people who live here. But every community, every locale, is also an aggregation of the people who actually live there. Lewiston, Maine, is home to an historic Franco American community, and Nashua, New Hampshire, has a long-established Greek-

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