



## **Seeing Themselves in Books: An Exploration of Student Identities**

by Johnna Hauck, 2022 CTI Fellow  
Shamrock Gardens Elementary School

This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
5th Grade Literacy

**Keywords:** Identity, Immigration, Racism, Discrimination, Stereotypes, Literacy, Elementary

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

### **Synopsis:**

In this unit, students will learn about identity and explore their own identities through a series of literacy-based lessons in order to answer the question: *How can our identities shape our lives?*

*Front Desk* will be the text used throughout these lessons. This will allow for students to engage with 5th grade literacy standards, but also lend itself to conversations and activities about identity. Students learn about identity and other concepts that intertwine with identity from a fiction text. This learning will then be applied to students exploring their own identities and experiences. Questions about identity are embedded throughout the unit in order to spark interest, engagement, and reflection on the part of students. Conversations drive most lessons forward, and encourage students to question their beliefs as well as events taking place in the world today. These content areas are integrated throughout the unit with one overarching goal - to encourage students to critically examine how identity shapes our lives including our relationships, our choices, and the way we think and act.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 75 students in 5th grade English Language Arts.*

*I give permission for Charlotte Teachers Institute to publish my curriculum unit in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.*

## Introduction

### Rationale

The demographics of my class during my first year of teaching consisted entirely of students of color. In my first four years of teaching, I have taught no more than five white, non-hispanic students. Yet when I looked around my library at the texts provided to me that first year, I saw few books that reflected the identities of my students. The books that did feature characters that looked like my students were often stories of hardship - tales that focused predominantly on oppression rather than simply featuring people of color. I don't recall any texts about characters who were immigrants, people with disabilities, or part of the LGBTQ community.

I set out to change my classroom library both to reflect the identities of my students and to expose them to identities and experiences that are different from their own. I created a Donors Choose project that requested books like El Deafo and One Crazy Summer. With these books, I separated my students into different book clubs.

Each group was assigned a book and we met once a week to discuss a different standard (setting, point of view, characterization, plot, mood, text structure) as well as social implications. From these books stemmed conversations about racism, culture, disabilities/abilities, acceptance, immigration, and family structure. We were able to connect with these books on a personal level, and were often very vulnerable with each other, sharing parts of ourselves that wouldn't normally come up when you talk about a book. One student shared about his father's deportation that had happened only weeks prior. Another student opened up about living with a single mother and became emotional in front of her peers as she questioned why her father hadn't stayed with her family. This gave me the opportunity to connect with her by opening up about my own experiences with an absent father and how I navigated that as a child.

Reading books that allowed students to reflect on their own experiences and identities led to higher levels of engagement, an excitement for reading, and the formation of a classroom culture built on vulnerability, trust, and acceptance.

The following year, *Front Desk* became part of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) 5th grade literacy curriculum. As we read the book, conversations emerged about immigration, racism, discrimination, class, culture, and activism. These conversations emerged as we read through the book, sparked by events happening to the main character, Mia Tang. I was proud of my students for asking questions about what was happening in the book and for boldly sharing their thoughts on events that took place, but was disappointed in the lack of guidance there was in the curriculum in regard to these events and conversations.

I feel confident in my ability to have "hard conversations" with students - conversations that have to do with race, matters of discrimination, etc. and in my ability to answer their questions or guide them to forming their own opinions. I heard about other teachers around the district, though, who would read about these topics in the book and then move on with the lesson without creating space for discussion. Many times I heard that it was because they didn't know how to approach the conversation with students.

Front Desk is no longer in the curriculum for CMS schools, but it is still a great book for kids. With this curriculum unit, I want to develop what I wish would've been rolled out to all 5th grade teachers in our district - literacy lesson plans that include talking points to guide those "hard conversations". I don't believe that a teacher's discomfort means that students shouldn't be able to dive deeper into the themes, ideas, and identities presented in this book.

## Demographics

Shamrock Gardens is a PreK-5 Title 1 School located in the East Learning Community in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district. Of the 464 students currently enrolled at Shamrock Gardens, 22% of students are Hispanic, 23% of students are Black, 47% of students are White, and 8% identified as Asian, Native, or two or more races. English Language Learners make up 11% of our student population, 9% qualify for EC services, 20% of students qualify for gifted services, and 40% of students qualify for free lunch.

This academic year, Shamrock Gardens has one principal, one assistant principal, two Multi-Classroom Leaders, and a facilitator. I am teaching 5th grade ELA (English Language Arts) to three different classes, each with 24-25 students. Shamrock Gardens is a Learning Immersion/Talent Development (LI/TD) magnet school. As a result, 22 of my students are certified TD.

## Unit Goals

This unit is not intended to be taught as one continuous unit, but rather is a compilation of activities and discussions that can be had with students (in small groups) throughout the novel as seen fit. The structure of my small groups will be expounded upon in the "Teaching Strategies" section below. I plan on teaching these lessons and having these conversations with students in all three of my literacy blocks. I think it's important that all of the 5th graders I teach have access to this content.

Throughout this unit, my goal is to encourage students to explore their own identities and experiences through reading *Front Desk*. My plan is to allow conversations about identity to stem from events that happen in the book, and then to create the space for students to dive deeper through activities and extended conversations. I am currently leaning toward whole-group read alouds and then breaking students up into smaller groups for discussions and activities. This will allow about 15-20 minutes per lesson. Keeping this in mind, I will prioritize encouraging discussions about identity over staying on track with pacing. I plan on teaching each part of each lesson, but will allow space for student conversation and questioning throughout the unit. This may lead lessons or lesson parts to be pushed back, affecting the pacing laid out for the lesson.

Students will be able to:

- Communicate the identities that are salient to them
- Contribute to discussions surrounding identity, asking questions and providing their own insight.

- Gain an understanding of how different identities impact our decisions and experiences
- Make connections between *Front Desk* and their own lived experiences
- Demonstrate an understanding of how characters in *Front Desk* are impacted by their identities
- Analyze how others' interpretations of identity shape an individual's experiences

## Content Research

### Culturally Responsive Education

The idea that students should have access to books and other curricular materials that reflect their identities, experiences, and cultures is not new. For decades, educators and researchers have pushed for what is called “Culturally Responsive Education” (CRE). According to (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice 2019), “Culturally responsive education (CRE) is a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple forms of diversity are recognized as indispensable sources of knowledge for teaching and learning, and assets that contribute to positive academic outcomes.”

I think it's important to acknowledge both parts of that definition - that multiple forms of diversity are recognized as *indispensable sources of knowledge* and *assets*. CRE addresses diversity and student differences in culture and experiences from an asset-based perspective, rather than a deficit-based one. Done right, CRE is a way for students to learn from and through each other in order to gain a richer understanding of not only the curriculum, but the world around them.

In the article “Bridging the Cultural Divide Through Multicultural Children's Literature” the claim is made that “The deeply rooted, liberal-humanist ideology stressing that ‘we are all the same’ has added barriers to acknowledging and exploring issues of diversity” (Hseu & Hetzel 2000). By refusing to acknowledge the different identities of students, we are robbing all of them of the opportunity to learn from each other in deep and meaningful ways. Oftentimes teachers find it hard to navigate acknowledging that all students are not “all the same” while also providing an equitable classroom environment. But equity is not giving all students the same exact thing or treating all students the same exact way. Instead, equity in the classroom looks like making sure each student has what they need to be successful. I would argue that this idea adds to the argument in favor of CRE.

Incorporating multicultural children's books into the classroom curriculum is a way for teachers to practice culturally responsive education and provide opportunities for students to explore and learn about and from the diversity in their classroom. Additionally, “Multicultural children's literature is one way teachers can aid students at an early age in cultural understanding and constructive social problem-solving, promoting acceptance of a pluralistic society.” (Hseu & Hetzel 2000)

### Analysis of Curriculum Through a CRE Lens

In a report from the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) it was reported that “While only 15% of NYC public school students are white, the authors of books in commonly-used elementary school curriculum are, on average, 84% white” (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice 2019). The analysis also found that from Kindergarten to 5th grade, NYC public school students read more books with animals as main characters than main characters who are Latinx, Black, or Asian (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice 2019).

With these findings, the CEJ formed teams of about 90 parents, teachers, community members, and researchers to analyze seven NYC public school curricula and score elements from “The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard”, developed by the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC) (Peoples, Islam & Davis 2021). These elements included Representation, Social Justice, and Teacher Materials, outlined below (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice 2019).

### Representation

- Characters of color are main characters and not just sidekicks
- Gender is not central to the storyline. Female characters are in a variety of roles that could also be filled by a male character
- Problems faced by people of color or females are not resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person or a male

### Social Justice

- The curriculum communicates an assetbased perspective by representing people of diverse races, classes, genders, abilities, and sexual orientations through their strengths, talents, and knowledge rather than their perceived flaws or deficiencies
- The curriculum presents different points of view on the same event or experience, especially points of view from marginalized people/communities
- The curriculum provides avenues for students to connect learning to social, political, or environmental concerns that affect them and their lives and help them consider how to contribute to change

### Teacher Materials

- Diverse student identities are seen as assets and strengths that can advance individual and group learning, rather than seen as challenges or difficulties to be overcome
- Guidance is provided on giving students opportunities to contribute their prior knowledge and experience with a topic

## Teaching Strategies

### Teaching in Small Groups

Due to the implementation of the EL curriculum, this curriculum unit will be taught in small groups during ELA time. These small groups will consist of about 6-7 students each. Knowledge of identity and opportunities for students to interrogate their own identities are central to this unit, and ultimately will be taught through activities that are based on fifth grade ELA standards. Though my literacy small groups are usually determined based on literacy data collected in class, these small groups will not be homogeneous based on data, but rather heterogeneous. I think this will provide a range of opinions, insights, and perspectives within each small group.

Teaching in small groups will also allow students to have more intimate conversations wherein each student has the opportunity to share their ideas and ask questions during discussions. My hope is that this will also allow students to feel comfortable sharing with others.

### Whole-group Read Alouds

Despite the fact that our lessons and discussions will be held in a small-group format, read-alouds of the book will be done whole-group for each lesson. This serves to ensure that all students have access to the content of the book, including students who are not considered on grade level for reading.

Unit Guiding Question: <i>How can our identities shape our lives?</i>	
Activity:  Exploring Student Identities	Standards Addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Discuss with students that they are a compilation of many different identities. These identities can be based on race, gender, ethnicity, ability etc.</li><li>● Pass out several sticky notes to each student. Tell them that they are going to have the opportunity to think about the identities that come to mind when they think about themselves.</li><li>● Model for students what this activity could look like, using yourself as an example. (Teacher example &amp; template can be found under Teacher Resources)</li><li>● Have students combine all of their sticky notes and place them on a circle map (located under Teacher Resources) with the word “Identity” in the center</li></ul>	

- Encourage students to look at all of the identities they put on their circle thinking map and to organize them into two to three categories (examples: seen/unseen, physical/personal/relationships) using a tree thinking map, with the word “Identity” at the top
- If students don’t discuss it without guidance, bring up the concept of seen & unseen identities. Which of our identities are something that other people can see without us telling them? Which are identities we can choose to share or not share?

Activity:

Identifying Theme

Standards Addressed:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2

*This activity should be done as a whole class - not in small groups*

- Explain to students that theme is the subject or underlying meaning that a literary text directly or indirectly explains, develops, and/or explores, but do not yet explain that texts can have multiple themes
- Provide students with 4 “potential” themes (listed below) for *Front Desk*. Assign a theme to the 4 corners of the room.
  - Kindness
  - Identity
  - Racism/Discrimination
  - The American Dream
- Tell students that they are to go to the corner that they think is the theme of *Front Desk*
- When all students are in the corner that they think is the theme, have them work with the other students in that corner to explain why that is the theme. They can recall events from the text and use the books to find specific evidence or quotes.
- Student groups will then share their reasoning with the whole class in an attempt to sway people to their side. Students can leave the groups they went to originally in favor of a group that makes them change their mind. Explain to students that having an open mind to learning more information and being willing to change your opinion is a good thing.
- When all student groups have shared their ideas and students have moved around (or stayed where they were originally), explain that books can actually have more than one theme, and that all four of these are themes of *Front Desk*.

Activity:

Standards Addressed:

Character Reflection & Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1</li> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Discuss with students that there are a lot of characters with differing identities in the book <i>Front Desk</i></li> <li>● Have students choose two characters &amp; list out identities that they know about that character.</li> <li>● With students, complete the double bubble thinking map (located under Teacher Resources) to compare and contrast the identities of the two chosen characters</li> <li>● Ask students how the identities discussed influence our characters? Do characters experience different things because of their identities, or do they have the same or similar experiences? Encourage students to go back into the book and find evidence to support their ideas.</li> </ul>	
Activity:  Rewriting a Scene	Standards Addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6</li> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask students what point of view this book is written in. Students should share that the book is written in first person and is narrated by Mia Tang.</li> <li>● Tell students that because we only hear about everything from Mia's point of view, we have a limited understanding of every other character's thoughts and feelings. We can only understand as much as Mia does.</li> <li>● Have students choose a scene from the book that either interested them or resonated with them and have them rewrite that scene from the point of view of a different character. Remind students to keep in mind how their identities and experiences might impact how their character might react or what they were thinking.</li> </ul>	
Activity:  Interpreting Metaphors	Standards Addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5.5</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Remind students that a metaphor is a comparison of two things that is not literally true and tell them that throughout the book, Kelly Yang utilizes figurative language to help readers understand different situations.</li> <li>● Ask students if they can think of any recurring metaphors in the book</li> </ul>	



- If students haven't brought it up, ask students what the metaphor of the roller coaster means. (Mia and Lupe talk about how people can be on either a good or bad roller coaster as a metaphor for the trajectory of their life. This metaphor compares people's lives to a roller coaster")
  - Ask students what their roller coaster feels like and allow them to share with their peers. Have students consider the following questions and share if they feel comfortable
    - If you feel that your "roller coaster" is positive, what steps can you take to stay "on" your roller coaster?
    - If you feel that your "roller coaster" is negative, what steps can you take to get "off" of your roller coaster?
    - Do you think it would be easy to get "off" of a bad roller coaster? Why or why not?
- If students haven't brought it up, ask students what the metaphor of being a bicycle means. (Mia's mother compares her English to a bicycle and her classmates' English to a car, essentially telling Mia that her English cannot keep up with that of her peers.)
- Ask students why authors sometimes use metaphors instead of just saying exactly what they mean. (Responses will vary, but students should get to the idea that metaphors often allow us to make connections that might help us understand a concept more than if the author didn't compare)

Activity:  
Stereotypes  
Conversation

Standards Addressed:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1

- Tell students that people often make stereotypes about groups of people. Explain to students that a stereotype is a generalization made about a group of people that based on identity
- Ask students to share some stereotypes they may have heard before.
  - Example: Blue is for boys/Pink is for girls, Boys don't paint their nails, etc.
- Ask students to brainstorm stereotypes that have come up in *Front Desk*
  - Examples: Lupe telling Mia that it would make sense that she likes Jason because they're both Asian, the Principal talking slow to Mia because she thinks she doesn't speak English, Mr. Yao telling Mia that Black people are bad.
- Ask students how or why they think stereotypes develop and have them share their ideas

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask students “Are any stereotypes true?” and allow them to discuss amongst themselves. Students may all have the same opinion, or this question may lead to some dialogue. I would allow students to explore this question without much teacher direction as long as students are being respectful.</li> <li>● Ask students “Are any stereotypes positive?” and allow them to discuss amongst themselves. Students may all have the same opinion, or this question may lead to some dialogue. I would allow students to explore this question without much teacher direction as long as students are being respectful. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If students all agree that a stereotype can be positive, probe with follow up questions like “How do you think someone might feel if they shared that identity but that stereotype didn’t apply to them?”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
Activity:  Changing Identities	Standards Addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1</li> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ask students “Can identities change over time? Why or why not?” and allow them to discuss amongst themselves. Students may all have the same opinion, or this question may lead to some dialogue. I would allow students to explore this question without much teacher direction as long as students are being respectful.</li> <li>● Ask students if there are characters in <i>Front Desk</i> whose identities change over time. If so, what caused them to change? Students should support their ideas with examples and evidence from the text.</li> <li>● Ask students if their identities have changed over time. If so, ask them to share examples of how their identities have changed.</li> </ul>	
Activity:  Writing Prompt	Standards Addressed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1</li> <li>● CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.10</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students will work independently to answer the guiding question, using the prompt: <i>How can our identities shape our lives? Think about the relationships you have, the choices you make, and the way you think and act when answering this question. You can use your own life examples or examples from Front Desk to support your answer.</i></li> </ul> <p>Complete opinion writing rubric (<i>Appendix 2</i>) for each student’s writing.</p>	

## Appendix 1: Implementing Teaching Standards

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1

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

- All discussion questions require students to understand the text and be able to explain what is happening (explicitly or by drawing inferences).

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2

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

- Students will use details from the text to determine the themes of the novel and support their reasoning.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3

Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

- Students will choose two characters from the novel and think about similarities and differences between their identities.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6

Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

- Students will write a narrative from a character's perspective, taking into account how their identities and experiences shape how that character would describe events.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 4-5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

- Students will use the on-grade level text in order to answer the guiding question.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1

Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information

- Students will write an opinion piece focusing on how they believe our identities shape our lives using reasons and information from their own experiences and *Front Desk*

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

- In their point of view narratives, students develop a character's experience with details and a clear sequence of events.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1

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

- Students will have multiple opportunities to engage in collaborative discussions about both the text and about identity.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5.5

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

- Students will explore the meanings of extended metaphors used in the text.

## Appendix 2: Opinion Writing Rubric

Category	4	3	2	1
Response to Prompt	Student responds thoughtfully to all aspects of the prompt.	Student addresses all parts of the prompt, but responses are not thorough.	Student responds to some parts of the prompt.	Student does not respond to the prompt.
Personal Ideas	Student forms a focused and well-developed personal opinion and shares that opinion clearly.	Student forms a personal opinion that is somewhat unclear or under-developed and shares that opinion.	Student attempts a response, but lacks an opinion that relates to the prompt.	Response is inappropriate for the given prompt.
Elaboration	Student elaborates on their personal opinion, providing clear and relevant reasons and explaining their thoughts.	Student somewhat elaborates on their personal opinion. Reasons and explanations are limited and/or somewhat relevant.	Student attempts to elaborate on their opinion, but reasons and explanations are irrelevant to their ideas.	Student does not elaborate on their opinion.

## List of Materials for Classroom Use

### *Pencil & Paper*

Students will need pencil and paper to complete all writing assignments.

### *“Front Desk”* by Kelly Yang

Each student will need a copy of the book in order to complete curriculum unit activities, which include going back into the text to find evidence and support ideas.

## Resources for Students

### *“Front Desk”* series by Kelly Yang

If students feel particularly connected to *Front Desk*, Kelly Yang has continued the series. Students may benefit from access to these novels.

## Resources for Teachers

### Text

### *“Front Desk”* by Kelly Yang

This fiction book will be the basis of all curriculum unit activities.

### Activities

*Exploring Student Identities - Teacher Example:* <https://bit.ly/exploreidentity>



*Circle Thinking Map:* <https://bit.ly/circlemapgo>

*Tree Thinking Map:* <https://bit.ly/treemapgo>

*Double Bubble Thinking Map:* <https://bit.ly/doublebubblego>

## Bibliography

- Dong, Yu Ren. "Bridging the Cultural Gap by Teaching Multicultural Literature." *The Educational Forum* 69, no. 4 (2005): 367–82.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720508984709>.
- Hseu, Marie, and June Hetzel. "Bridging the Cultural Divide Through Multicultural Children's Literature." Buddies.org, 2000. <http://buddies.org/articles/Literature.html>.
- Peoples, L.Q., Islam, T., & Davis, T. "The culturally responsive-sustaining STEAM curriculum scorecard." New York: Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University. 2021.  
[https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/CRSE-STEAMScorecard\\_FIN\\_optimized%20%281%29.pdf](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/CRSE-STEAMScorecard_FIN_optimized%20%281%29.pdf).
- Petrich, Nathaniel. "Book Clubs: Conversations Inspiring Community." *inquiry in education* 7 (2015).
- Rep. *Chronically Absent The Exclusion of People of Color from NYC Elementary School Curricula*. NYC Coalition for Educational Justice , 2019. <http://www.nyccej.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/reportCEJ-Chronically-Absent-FINAL.pdf>.