

ORIGINAL PAPER

Learning Others' Point of View: Teaching Students Perspective

Authors: Eric Groce, Margaret N. Gregor, Robin Groce

Abstract: Middle school students are confronted with social media and news posts on socio-political issues that reflect multiple perspectives every day. They often lack the ability to analyze the points of view presented. Becoming informed, engaged, and compassionate citizens, the goal of many school districts across our nation, begins by learning to view the world through multiple lenses, working toward empathy, compromise and collective decision making, and placing problems in context. Researchers note that there are benefits to teaching students the skills used to recognize, analyze, and develop perspectives on the variety of information presented. This article presents multiple non-threatening and time conscious activities that teachers can use to help their students recognize different points of view, analyze them, recognize bias and propaganda, and develop critical information literacy skills. After engaging in these lessons students may see that there are many ways to interpret a situation and develop an appreciation for multiple points of view.

Keywords: perspective, points of view, problem solving, information literacy

It's not what you look at that matters; it's what
you see.

- Henry David Thoreau

Contemporary headlines are filled with socio-political issues incorporating multiple perspectives. Are vaccines safe? What effect will tariffs have on our economy and international trade partners? Can the effects of climate change be slowed or reversed? These topics, and many more, are complex multidimensional subjects which require contextual understanding and cultural competencies. If our students are to be equipped to comprehend, analyze, and address these and other issues, they must be able to recognize and incorporate multiple points of view into solutions. Specifically, they must listen and seek to understand differing viewpoints, engage in civil discourse, be adept at identifying bias and propaganda, and exercise critical literacy skills. Becoming informed, engaged, and compassionate citizens, the goal of many school

districts across our nation, begins by learning to view the world through multiple lenses, working toward compromise and collective decision making, and placing problems in their proper context.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have recognized multiple benefits to teaching the processes associated with recognizing and developing multiple perspectives. Burchinal et al. (2020) posited that perspective-taking as well as empathy could be linked to academic achievement and strong emotional health. Cigala et al. (2015) concluded that young children with greater abilities in perspective taking exhibited more prosocial behaviors during peer interactions, including helping and sharing. Caldwell (2024) noted that students who can examine multiple perspectives can “grapple with the concepts of incomplete stories, multiple viewpoints, stereotypes, social pressure, and power” (p. 5). Finally, Endacott

and Brooks (2013), researchers on historical empathy, theorize that perspective taking in historical contexts facilitates understanding of the principles, attitudes, and beliefs about the lived experiences of others and how they may have interpreted a situation.

Perspective is an inherent trait in multiple subjects, including literature, social studies, and art, and is also present in many daily interactions and events. Before progressing to more complex or nuanced topics, students may benefit from short introductions where they can gradually learn to recognize and investigate various perspectives. Initially, it is not imperative to dedicate an entire class period or lesson to the topic. The activities listed below can be used to initiate discussions around perspectives and can be accomplished with a minimal time commitment.

Art

Figure-Ground Perception

Students will likely have encountered the types of images where they must distinguish between objects and a background. A review of a few of these images (e.g., The Rubin Vase, My Wife and My Mother-in-Law) is easily located and will allow students to visually recognize several perspectives within an image. Students may also remember the picture book *Duck! Rabbit!* (Rosenthal, 2009) from primary grades, which uses the same concept.

Artistic Interpretation

Even to the most casual art observer, several prominent artists have a style that is distinct and recognizable (e.g., Picasso, Dali, Kahlo). On Instagram, the account @thenonmuseum frequently posts famous paintings (e.g., Nighthawks, American Gothic, Café Terrace at Night) that are recreated in several artists' unique styles. A discussion about identifying elements of signature styles and how the paintings changed (mood, coloring, emotive elements) after being recreated in another style

could be accomplished within a few minutes. This could serve as a placeholder to revisit when discussing more in depth matters in-depth on the topic. Another Instagram account from Thomas Deininger (@tdeininger) features birds and other animals from nature constructed from beach trash and other found objects. From one visual perspective, the creations appear to resemble the animals in color, size, and shape. As the viewer moves around the space surrounding the art, the realistic creatures transform into a miscellaneous collection of discarded objects assembled together in a seemingly random configuration. A writing prompt could follow the viewing and analysis of some of Deininger's work, asking students to recall an instance where a spatial shift in perspective revealed an alternate understanding, insight, or image. Teachers should preview this Instagram post to ensure that the reader comments are appropriate for student viewing.

Perspective in Art

Multiple types of perspective are used in art to provide a sense of depth and distance. This allows the artist to make the image more realistic and appear to be three-dimensional when it is painted or sketched on a flat surface. Comparing examples of art that contain linear or aerial/atmospheric perspectives with two-dimensional works will allow students to recognize the difference when they are in close juxtaposition. Incorporating the art teacher to co-teach a mini lesson or provide content knowledge on the topic could serve as a fruitful collaboration across disciplines.

Literature

Picture books are a logical choice to explore perspective. The reading level will be within the majority of middle grade students' ability, and the accompanying illustrations that complement the text will support understanding. Several books can be examined in a short time to establish multiple aspects of perspective due to

their brief length (40 pages or less). A few examples are provided below.

The Fishing Lesson

The story begins with a fisherman napping in his small rowboat in the harbor. He is awakened by a tourist who interrupts his slumber with multiple clicks of his camera. As the fisherman wakes up and tries to get his bearings, the tourist immediately asks a series of questions about why the fisherman is napping instead of fishing. In response to the inquiry, “So...why aren’t you going out to sea?” (Böll, 2018, n.p.) the fisherman explains he has already taken his boat and caught enough to sustain him for that day and the two following days. Undeterred, the tourist responds, “I don’t mean to interfere in your business, but...” (Böll, 2018, n.p.) and then begins to detail a plan where the fisherman could go out multiple times in a day and increase his catch and profit so that he could purchase a motorboat. He continues to explain the scheme where the fisherman would continue to fish multiple times daily, which would allow him to progressively build his business by adding a larger fishing boat, a refrigerated warehouse, a smokehouse, and a canning factory. Without giving a chance for the fisherman to interject, he continues by

expounding how the expanding business could include a helicopter, exclusive fishing rights, and a restaurant, which would conceivably allow the fisherman the financial security to “...come relax here in the harbor, take a nap in the sunshine, or just enjoy the magnificent view!” (Böll, 2018, n.p.).

The fisherman, finally given the opportunity to respond to the tourist’s ambitious business model, remarks, “But that’s exactly what I was doing just now. I was relaxing in my boat, taking a nap until you woke me up with the annoying *click click click* of your camera!” (Böll, 2018, n.p.). The story ends without any further dialogue, just the tourist standing at one end of the rowboat with a perplexed look on his face and the fisherman settling back into his nap. This example of perspective asks readers to reconsider preconceptions of ideals such as happiness and success. Classroom discussions could begin with an examination of each perspective within the story and then extend into topics such as contemporary material culture, identifying “successful” people, and varied conceptions of happiness. An exemplar is provided below to model how teachers can use picture books to teach the concept of perspective.

Lesson/Activity Sequence for *The Fishing Lesson* (to be completed over multiple days)

1. Read the book aloud, pausing often to ensure the students can view and interpret the illustrations. Next, ask students to write down their initial perceptions of the book as well as answer this prompt: Do you identify more with the tourist or the fisherman? Explain why. Next, lead a class discussion on the range of responses as well as the rationale.
2. Using the whiteboard or projector, display the following terms: Success, contentment, wealth, ambition, happiness.
In small groups, ask students to define/explain the terms verbally based on their own perceptions/perspectives and then complete the T chart (below) based on how the tourist and the fisherman would have defined the terms based on their actions in the text.

Tourist	Fisherman
success	
contentment	
wealth	
ambition	
happiness	

- Review the illustrations from the section of the story where the tourist explains the possible expansion of the fisherman's business from buying a motorboat to exporting his lobster catch to Parisian restaurants. Pay particular attention to the evolution of the fisherman's clothing and grooming (e.g., blue jeans, tank top, & unkempt beard to suit/tuxedo, styled hair, and a trimmed beard) then discuss how the changes in attire and personal appearance supports the tourist's perspective of a successful fishing business.
- Share the following quote from Dolly Parton: "Never act so busy making a living that you forget to make a life." and lead a discussion analyzing the quote as well as making the connection to the author's message in *The Fishing Lesson*.

Voices in the Park

The author, Anthony Browne, presents a simple story of several people taking their dogs to the park in a complex and multi-layered format. The narrative is presented in four distinct perspectives from a domineering mother, her reserved son Charles, a despondent and unemployed father, and his spirited daughter Smudge. The story requires close examination to recognize the embedded elements of perspective exemplified by each narrator. The mother, dressed quite formally for a visit to the park, leaves her stately home and manicured yard with her pedigreed dog. Upon reaching the park and unleashing her labrador, Victoria, she notices another dog she describes as a "scruffy mongrel" and a "horrible thing" that was "bothering" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) Victoria and chasing her around the park. Next, she directs Charles to sit on a bench. Although they are

only a few inches apart, they appear disconnected and are facing opposite directions from each other. The mother's red formal hat is prominent within each illustration. She notices Smudge's father and remarks, "You get some frightful types in the park these days!" (Browne, 1998, n.p.). She then notices Charles playing with a "very rough-looking child" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and commands him and Victoria to come back to her so they can walk home in silence. The second voice belongs to the father, who decides he must "get out of the house" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and decides to take his dog and Smudge to the park. The reader is greeted with a new font as well as a gloomy view of their apartment in a multi-storied public housing project. Upon releasing their dog to run around the park, they settle onto a bench and begin to scan the newspaper for employment opportunities. On the walk home, Smudge

chatted with him and raised his spirits as they walked past the same scene, now filled with light and happiness. Charles, the third voice, begins his story by explaining that he was often left alone and experienced boredom when his mother said it was time for a walk. As they reach the park, readers will notice the shadow of his mother and her symbolic hat looming over Charles, as well as hats adorning the top of each lamppost and in the shape of the clouds and a tree, indicating her overbearing presence. His spirits are lifted when Smudge asks him to play on the slide. He and Victoria are enjoying themselves when his mother “caught us talking together” (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and halted the interaction. His depiction of the events ends with a silent walk home. Smudge’s version opens with her walking alongside her father and Albert (the first time her dog is named) into a sun-filled park. She then describes the customary greeting between dogs involving the sniffing of backsides. The dogs didn’t mind, but Charles’ mom is depicted as heated with piercing eyes and her trademark hat lifted above her head, and is described as a “silly twit” (Browne, 1998, n.p.). Smudge notices Charles and begins a conversation with him that evolves into playing on the seesaw and laughing heartily when they see Albert swimming in the park fountain. Just as Charles gives her the flower he picked for her, he is escorted away by his mother with a sad look. Her rendition ends as she places her flower in a cup with water and makes her dad some cocoa. This book could easily serve as a seminal text for exploring perspective due to its many layers of symbolism and easily recognizable perspectives. In addition to the changing font representing each protagonist, readers are presented with varied vocabulary, different interpretations of interactions between Victoria and Albert, and two distinctly different depictions of a parent and child relationship. Anthony Browne’s illustrations also frame each character telling the story uniquely and are filled with nuance and subtlety that parallel the accompanying text.

The prominent aspect of perspective in *Voices in the Park* is identity, meaning the identity, personality, and character of each narrator is revealed through their telling of the story in text and illustrations.

The Catawampus Cat

J.C. Eaton’s story features a cat who walks into a busy town just slightly askew. The first to notice him was the grocer, Mr. Grouse, who tried to straighten him. The cat resisted and continued walking with a slight tilt, leaving the grocer and his wife to also tilt their heads in order to see the cat’s perspective. Their new perspective allowed them to find Mrs. Grouse’s wedding ring under a produce stand where it had been lost for years. As the cat walked through the town in his tilted style, he encountered a barber, house painter, librarian, and teacher along his way, and in each case, they began to view their job differently after being influenced by the catawampus feline. The mayor decided to hold a Catawampus Cat Day where all things were altered to be uneven, lopsided, and off-kilter. When the mayor proclaimed, “We’re all different now, just like you” (Eaton, 2017, n.p.), and asked the cat for his reaction, he blinked, stretched, and proceeded to straighten himself before walking back out of the town, once again catawampus. The message in *The Catawampus Cat* asks readers to consider looking at situations through a new lens or a different visual perspective in hopes of gaining new insights.

Interdisciplinary Connections: Literature/Social Studies

Historical events analyzed in retrospect often reveal perspectives and motives that were unknown or suppressed during the time they occurred. Social studies and ELA classes are an opportune time to introduce and study perspective through the lens of past events. Listed at the beginning of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, social studies

standards for grades 6-8 are content-neutral inquiry indicators that "... can and should be applied within all content in the course" in an effort to develop "...critical thinking in social

studies." (<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/social-studies-6th-grade-standards-fall-2021-implementation/open>) Several of the most germane indicators are listed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 *Selected Inquiry Indicators - NCSCOS Grades 6-8 Social Studies Standards*

- I.1.4 Assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources using the origin, authority, structure, credibility, reliability, and context of the sources to guide the selection
- I.1.5 Identify evidence that draws information from multiple perspectives.
- I.1.6 Construct claims and counterclaims using evidence while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both based on multiple sources.
- I.1.7 Construct arguments consisting of multiple claims with evidence from sources and attention to disciplinary detail.
- I.1.8 Construct responses to supporting and opposing perspectives supported by evidence.
- I.1.10 Identify challenges and opportunities created in addressing local, state, tribal, regional, national, and/or global issues.

As previously mentioned, picture books can be an effective and efficient curricular resource to quickly introduce and engage learners on a topic.

Colonial Voices: Hear Them Speak

Winters' story details the events of the days leading to the Boston Tea Party through the perspectives of over a dozen inhabitants of the city. The first point of view comes from Ethan, the orphaned errand boy who works for a printer. Readers will be able to deduce his allegiance based on simple textual analysis. He reveals that the Sons of Liberty are counting on him to share a notice about the meeting at Old South Meeting House, and also characterizes the dialogue from Loyalists as tittle-tattle. Next, the printer, a widow who details significant elements of the story such as the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, and the occupation of Boston by British soldiers, introduces the viewpoints of the Patriots, the Loyalists, and "those who are in-between" (Winters, 2015, n.p.). The shoemaker, serving multiple patrons with differing views on the ships in the harbor filled with tea, notes, "I do not share my views. Don't want to lose my customers who differ" (Winters, 2015, n.p.), revealing a balance between profits and personal allegiances. Another merchant serving the

public, the milliner, declares the patriots should "...come to their senses" (Winters, 2015, n.p.), pay the tiny tax, and count their blessings. The basket trader, an indigenous individual, explains, "We will not fight their battle" (Winters, 2015, n.p.). She focuses on broken promises from colonists and the loss of hunting and fishing grounds. The slave from the blacksmith's shop comments on the hypocritical dilemma facing the enslaved; masters who plan for and fight for liberty while keeping others in bondage. The story concludes with the gathering at Old South Meeting House and the subsequent dumping of the tea into the harbor. Although Ethan and the other inhabitants are fictional, they represent a handful of the myriad perspectives regarding the American Revolution, providing students a chance to examine how different people were affected by the events of the period based on their occupation, citizenship status, and life experiences.

Activities

Self-Evaluation of Personal Factors

Definitions of perspective often state that it is the process of how someone perceives an event, situation, or person. The perceptions of

individuals are an accumulation of their environmental experiences, genetics, social interactions, and other variables. One avenue to reveal the elements of students' identity that influence perceptions and perspectives is to identify and self-evaluate factors that may influence how they envision the world. Teachers may direct this activity through an initial brainstorming session where learners identify factors and subsequently categorize them (e.g., genetics - being tall or red-headed; environmental factors - raised in an urban setting/born into a wealthy family; other – birth order, religious upbringing, exposure to other cultures). Next, the teacher could ask students to rank these factors in terms of most to least impactful on a few topics. Students could then be asked to interview a fellow student on the reasons for their stance and seek to understand how different life experiences determine perspective on a given topic, event, or situation.

Language Bias in Internet Searches

An article on the topic, *A Perspectival Mirror of the Elephant: Investigating language bias on Google, ChatGPT, YouTube, and Wikipedia*, asks readers to consider how internet searches on topics (e.g. Buddhism, liberalism, colonization) can “yield results focused on a narrow set of culturally dominant views, and these views are correlated with the language used in the search phrase” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 23). Instead of assigning this as a reading, teachers can synthesize the article and share key points to infuse in a discussion about internet searches. The authors contend that popular internet searches on popular platforms, including Google, YouTube, and Wikipedia, when submitted in English, can serve as a “...cultural filter to perpetuate ethnocentric views, in which a person evaluates other people or ideas based on their own cultural norms” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 25). Additionally, they warn that searches using ChatGPT in English present Anglo-American perspectives as the norm. “Without critical examination, non-

English perspectives are silently dismissed, leading one to think that they are unimportant, irrelevant, or wrong” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 25). An engaging activity utilizing the commonplace technology skills of middle school learners could include entering the same search term or phrase into platforms such as Google or Wikipedia in different languages to determine how the search results vary depending on the language used for the search. Translating the results back into English would allow students to compare results and identify discrepancies. Additionally, an explanation of Google's search essentials contains several key points regarding search results, including meaning, relevance, quality, usability, and context. Another link on automatically generating and ranking results (<https://www.google.com/search/howsearchworks/how-search-works/ranking-results/>) under the heading *How Search Determines Context* revealed “The language of your query determines how most results will be displayed - for example, a search in French returns French-language results.” and “Our systems can also recognize many queries have a local intent. So, when you search for “pizza,” you get results about nearby businesses that deliver.” Allowing students time to search for contemporary or historical figures, events, or periods in different languages will provide an abundance of data to review and analyze with respect to search results and their tendency to direct searchers to websites based on cultural, linguistic, or geographic indicators. Students who recognize that their searches done in English may contain bias or only a segment of the contextual information on a subject are more likely to seek other interpretations and strive to understand varied perspectives while abandoning an ethnocentric viewpoint.

ELA Lesson Outline - Perspective and Person vs. Person Conflict:

Students will *analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different*

characters in a text using the picture book *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* by Jo Hoestlandt and illustrated by Johanna Kang. While the predominant conflict of this historical time period (the Holocaust) is person vs. society, students will be investigating a person vs. person conflict from this specific story and analyzing the individuals' unique perspectives.

In the story, Helen is a young girl living in Nazi-occupied France during the time of the Holocaust. She is not Jewish, as is her best friend, Lydia. At the start of the story, Helen is trying to understand the implications of the Jewish experience, such as the (involuntary) wearing of the yellow Star of David by Jewish people. As the story progresses, Helen is having a party and has invited Lydia to attend. At the last minute, Lydia can't attend because she is taken into hiding just prior to a mass roundup of Jewish people to be deported to the concentration camps. Helen never hears from Lydia again and remains confused and personally hurt by Lydia throughout the story. She deals with some internal feelings of guilt at the end of the story.

Students are challenged to approach this initially as a person vs. person conflict. At the culmination of this activity, students will apply this analytical process to another chapter book - either the class novel or an independent reading selection.

1. After providing appropriate and relevant background for text-sets regarding the Holocaust, read *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* aloud to the class.
2. Divide the class into groups of four and assign them: Group A: Helen, and Group B: Lydia.

3. Students in Group A will identify and analyze Helen's actions, thoughts, and dialogue in an effort to make an argument for her feelings of betrayal by Lydia.
4. Students in Group B will identify and analyze Lydia's actions, thoughts, and dialogue in an effort to justify her lack of attendance at Helen's birthday party.
5. Students will make notes on the graphic organizer below - including quotes from the book.
6. The teacher will engage students in a friendly debate/discussion from both perspectives.
7. Direct students to their own independent reading selections. Ask students to journal about one character's unique perspective regarding a person vs. person conflict and its impact on the plot of the book. Have them consider:
 1. How might the plot change if the perspective of the character were different?
 2. How would you feel if you were in the story? How might your personal perspective change the plot?
 3. How might the conflict change or come to a resolution if your perspective prevailed?
 4. Reflect on a time you have had a person-to-person conflict. Can you now consider the perspective of the other person? How might you react differently in consideration of their perspective?

Figure 2 *Associated Standards*

RL.7.6	Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different characters in a text .	Students examine how an author constructs and depicts differences between each character’s perspective in a text. <i>In the Classroom:</i> Students look for attitudes toward and interpretations of events and other characters in a story. Students analyze what different characters do, say, and think throughout a text in order to determine how the author has developed and communicated his/her unique perspective.	analyze – to critically examine the components of a subject to understand its meaning and/or nature as a whole perspective – an attitude toward or outlook on something text – anything that students can read, write, view, listen to, or explore, including books, photographs, films, articles, music, art, and more
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Figure 3 *Perspective and person vs. person conflict*

	Actions	Thoughts	Dialogue
Helen			
Lydia			

Don’t Eat the Last Cookie!

Snack Attack, a short, animated movie on YouTube, is another chance to develop perspective in a medium that most middle school students enjoy. The movie begins with an elderly lady in an empty train station who decides to eat something from the vending machine while she waits for her train. After inserting her coin and selecting the last package of Cookie Swirls, the machine activates and begins to extract the cookies from the row, then the machine stops, leaving her snack dangling between the end of the row and the glass. After pounding it with her fists, kicking it, and finally launching herself into the machine, the cookies drop. Once outside, she settles onto a bench alongside a young man with a spiked haircut who is listening to his music and texting. She

opens the package of cookies, begins to eat one, and settles into reading the newspaper. As she reaches for another cookie, she is startled as the man on the bench is also reaching for one of the three remaining cookies. Perturbed with his poor social etiquette, she huffs and moves the cookies to her lap. Undeterred, he reaches over, grabs a cookie, and then proceeds to flick the crumbs from her lap. She responds by standing on the bench, yelling at the cookie thief, and shaking her finger in his face. The young man seems unmoved by her tantrum and continues to enjoy his music as the earbuds shelter him from her incensed tirade. Next, he takes notice of the last cookie and takes it from the container. She grabs for it as well, and a see-saw struggle ensues for the last Cookie Swirl. He wins and is about to eat his prize when she makes a last plea

for the cookie. He ponders briefly and decides to split the cookie in half. He pops his half in his mouth as the train arrives at the station. She appears exasperated at this behavior and responds by crumbling her half in her fist and dropping it alongside the cookie container on the bench. She then makes her way over to the train, takes her seat, and takes a final look at the man responsible for ruining her snack time. As he waves goodbye to her, the porter stops to punch her ticket. As she returns her validated ticket to her purse, she is startled to find her package of Cookie Swirls just where she placed them after buying them inside the station. As the train begins to pull away from the station, she takes another look out her window and sees him collect the cookie package, drop it in the trash can, and walk away.

Teachers may decide to pause the video and ask students to take the elderly lady's perspective just before she gets on the train, and then again after she discovers she was pilfering cookies from a stranger, not the young man who remained calm and shared his cookies. Additionally, a writing prompt could ask students how she could have handled the misunderstanding instead of yelling at him while standing on the bench or might involve writing an apology letter.

Conclusion

Activities such as those suggested in this article give teachers non-threatening and time-conscious opportunities to teach the importance of introducing and analyzing perspective within art, literature, social studies, and websites. Building a foundation for the remainder of their academic career and into adulthood in identifying, considering, and seeking to understand multiple perspectives will allow learners to refine many skills necessary for navigating contemporary society, including conflict resolution, critical thinking, making informed decisions, and building an appreciation for alternative viewpoints.

Considering and understanding the beliefs and positions of others also reduces bias, heightens empathy, strengthens communication skills, and allows for a deeper understanding of complex issues.

The discussion opportunities presented in this article can be expanded to explore how the analytical skills taught are applicable to understanding disagreements, interpersonal relations, and historical and current events. After engaging in these lessons, students may see that there are many ways to interpret a situation and begin to recognize and respect multiple points of view.

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Dr. Eric Groce is a Professor in the Department of Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum at Appalachian State University. His primary research interest is the teaching of social studies in K-8 classrooms. He can be reached at groceec@appstate.edu

Dr. Margaret N. Gregor retired as the Instructional Materials Center Coordinator for University Libraries at Appalachian State University.

Dr. Robin Groce is a Professor in the Department of Child Development, Literacy & Special Education at Appalachian State University. Her primary research interest is the integration of children's and young adult literature in the classroom.