



Guest Columnist: Maggie P. Chang

I am thrilled to welcome Maggie P. Chang as the guest columnist for this issue. Her work is inspiring and fun, and I hope you appreciate her writing as much as I do! Maggie outlines specific ways in which not just her books can help children and teachers, but also ways in which the very aspects that make *Geraldine Pu and Her Lunch Box, Too!* important can be turned into “action items” for teaching, and can even be generalized to other aspects of the classroom. Thank you so much for sharing your wonderful work with us, Maggie!

## THE POWER OF PICTURES AND STORYTELLING IN ART EDUCATION AND BEYOND

I'm a former art teacher who has recently written and illustrated a children's book series sparked by my own childhood experiences. The series is part of Simon & Schuster's new Ready-to-Read Graphics line. The first book, *Geraldine Pu and Her Lunch Box, Too!*, tells the story of a Taiwanese American girl who is teased at lunch, even though she's proud of the traditional food her grandmother packs her. The story touches on cultural identity, school bullying, and social-emotional learning skills. Oh, and there's also an imaginary sidekick—Geraldine's lunch box! Together, their predicaments and adventures are captured by pairing simple storytelling with rich, expressive illustrations—all in a modern graphic novel format.

When creating the book, I thought about how children of various ages would engage with it, either as an early reader or at a read-aloud, and how I as an art educator would have used it in the classroom. Since the debut of the series earlier this summer, the positive responses have affirmed what I know about the power of visuals and storytelling for children. **They have the power to...**

**...foster social and emotional development.** Graphic novels depict a range of facial expressions and body language, and many kids as young as 3 have been able to identify how Geraldine feels based on the way I drew her eyebrows. Then, of course, there's Geraldine's angry outburst! Parents have already shared that reading the book with their children led to rich discussions about self-regulation. This is all beneficial, as research shows that nurturing emotional and social awareness in early childhood powerfully impacts kids' futures—their attitudes and behaviors, academic and career successes, and health as adults (Jones et al., 2015).

**...help make meaning in a deep, child-centered way.** When brainstorming concepts for the book, it felt similar to using themes while curriculum planning, specifically thematic nouns like *food* and

*friendship*. But as I recently heard Heather Jackson, director of the Reggio Emilia-inspired Sunflower School, ponder—what happens if we think of themes beyond nouns and find the verbs, the actions that interest kids? Here's the example Jackson gives: Instead of a unit (or book) on vehicles, think through the lens of *moving* (Morgan, 2020, 12:50). Just imagine how our kids' art and conversations about their art would come alive! Children who've met Geraldine Pu are already doing this. Instead of saying the book is about *food*, they'll tell you it's about *sharing* new foods and *showing respect* for other cultures. Instead of *friendship*, they'll say it's about *standing up* for classmates. And inevitably, they can't help but share stories from their lives. One child even drew me pictures of her own experiences with lunchtime teasing. These are great reminders that whether I'm designing a book, art project, or discussion questions, to dig deeper and find the actions and narratives that matter to kids.

**...provide windows into a different world.** Young kids who have explored Geraldine's world are excited about images and words that are different from what they see and hear day-to-day, as well as images from cultures they may not have otherwise observed, like Geraldine's big family dinner spread. English words like “hollers” and “clutches,” along with Mandarin Chinese words like “biandang” and “bao,” are defined in an illustrated glossary. Immersing children in cultural diversity provides chances to become more comfortable with differences in race, religion, language, and lifestyle (Mann, 2014).

**...serve as validating mirrors.** Seeing diverse protagonists like Geraldine can help children of those backgrounds and cultures feel seen. Responses from Asian American children, both girls and boys, include emphatic exclamations of “Hey! Geraldine looks like me!” Moreover, the book validates kids' imaginative thinking as well as the capacity for young people to



solve their own problems. While writing, I occasionally received feedback from adults to edit out the imaginary lunch box or have the grandmother or teacher characters step in to manage Geraldine's dilemmas. But my own teaching experiences cautioned me against both. And sure enough, the lunch box gets the most delicious giggles, and Geraldine is a courageous, confident character that kids adore because deep down, children want to be perceived as the strong, capable people they are.

Now, as an art teacher *and* creator of books, I can say more confidently than ever that we have so much to learn from our kids! ■

### References

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