Multicultural Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom

By Mei-Yu Lu
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"When I was a child the teacher read, 'Once upon a time, there were five Chinese brothers and they all looked exactly alike'... Cautiously the pairs of eyes stole a quick glance back. I, the child, looked down to the floor... The teacher turned the book our away: bilious yellow skin, slanted slit eyes. Not only were the brothers look-alikes, but so were all the other characters!... Quickly again all eyes flashed back at me... I sank into my seat." (Aoki, 1981, p. 382)

The vignette above reveals how a minority child felt growing up in a time when cultural and linguistic diversity was neither valued in American society nor adequately portrayed in children's literature, an important channel for transmitting societal values and beliefs. The situation, however, has undergone changes in the past twenty years. With the increasing number of linguistic and cultural minorities in the United States, the American society today looks very different than that of Aoki's childhood. These changes in demographic trends impact the education system. Not only do schools need to prepare all children to become competent citizens, but also to create an environment that fosters mutual understanding.

IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Jenkins and Austin (1987) suggest that cultural understanding can be reached in many ways, such as by making friends with people from different cultures, and by traveling to other countries. They also emphasize the value of good literature, for it can reflect many aspects of a culture—its values, beliefs, ways of life, and patterns of thinking. A good book for children can transcend time, space, and language, and help readers to "learn about an individual or a group of people whose stories take place in a specific historical and physical setting" (p. 6). In addition, exposure to quality multicultural literature also helps children appreciate the idiosyncrasies of other ethnic groups, eliminate cultural ethnocentrism, and develop multiple perspectives. Dowd (1992) also argues that "...from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness." (p. 220)

Finally, quality literature about a particular ethnic group benefits cultural and linguistic minority children as well. From reading multicultural books about their own culture, children have opportunities to see how others go through experiences similar to theirs, develop strategies to cope with issues in their life, and identify themselves with their inherited culture. It is, therefore important that educators incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum and make it part of children's everyday life. The following sections will provide guidelines and resources for selecting multicultural literature in the elementary classroom.

GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The following guidelines for material selection were developed by adopting recommendations from various language arts and multicultural
educators: Beilke (1986), Harada (1995), Harris (1991), and Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Yang (1992). They recommend that multicultural literature contain:

1. Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors, to avoid stereotypes of a particular cultural group.

2. Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text, since illustrations can have a strong impact on children.

3. Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset as well as reflect the changing nature of this country's population.

4. Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America.

5. High literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization.

6. Historical accuracy when appropriate.

7. Reflections of the cultural values of the characters.

8. Settings in the United States that help readers build an accurate conception of the culturally diverse nature of this country and the legacy of various minority groups.

The guidelines above are by no means an exhaustive list. They are meant to provide a starting point from which teachers can explore the many aspects of multicultural children's literature. In addition, teachers may wish to consult with colleagues, parents, and the local ethnic community, drawing upon their specialized knowledge and unique perspectives.

RESOURCES FOR MATERIAL SELECTION

In addition to the guidelines for material selection, it is also imperative that teachers have access to resources for selecting a collection of materials. A useful resource often contains critical reviews, bibliographic information, and an abstract of each work. It may also provide guidelines for using a particular book, and suggest materials for further reading on issues and trends in multicultural literature. Some of these resources are general, covering a variety of cultural groups, while others may focus on a specific category, such as African-Americans. Used appropriately they can help teachers locate the materials in a timely and cost-effective manner. In the following section are just a few resources which can aid the collection-building process.

Specialized Selection Sources


REVIEW JOURNALS

1. The ALAN Review
2. Book Links
3. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books
4. Children's Literature in Education
5. Horn Book Guide to Children's and Young Adults' Books
6. Horn Book Magazine
7. Interracial Books for Children Bulletin
8. Kirkus Review
9. MultiCultural Review
10. School Library Journal can help teachers to develop their multicultural literature collection.

In addition, human resources—librarians in local or school libraries, as well as professors in the field of education and library science—can be valuable resources in the collection-building process. Finally, materials from minority children's household, such as photo albums and books written in their inherited language, are also rich resources.

REFERENCES


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Beyond Good Intentions: Selecting Multicultural Literature

By Joy Shioshita
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In today's ethnically diverse classrooms, it's "essential that books reflect students' cultural backgrounds," says Mary-Louise Newling, curriculum specialist for Alameda County's Multilingual/Multicultural Children's Literature Center. "It makes all the difference to have positive images of children's heritage. Sometimes teachers will say, 'We're doing a unit on slavery now, and my African American students aren't interested.' If that's the only image of African American people used in the classroom, children feel singled out and upset," says Newling. "You need to reflect the realities of the children in your class and expose them to other people's experiences. It has to be done respectfully."

Recently, more materials have become available to "speak to the multiplicity of experience," says Newling. "It's more important to have many choices representing a group's experiences. There is no generic Mexican American or African American..."

Newling suggests that people choose children's books based on guidelines from Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism, from The Council on Interracial Books for Children, and How to Tell the Difference, by Beverly Slapin and Doris Searle. Important points include:

**General Accuracy**
Books should contain current, correct information. Consider how old the photos and pictures are. Modern stories should acknowledge recent events. For example, a book about South Africa should reflect changes in the apartheid system. While considering students' ages, stories should not force artificially happy endings.

**Stereotypes**
Beware of reinforcing stereotypes. Books should reflect individual people's lives, rather than assigning general personality traits or behaviors to an entire group of people. Writers should weave information about a culture into the flow of a story. A misleading book might discuss "the Mexican American experience" without considering the variety of experiences within a group. Workbooks particularly present a danger of caricaturing members of a culture, Newling says. Also, consider who holds powerful positions. Who has problems? Who solves problems? Men and people of European descent should not provide all the solutions. What types of roles do girls, women, and people of color have?

**Setting**
Books should include accurate settings. Again, watch out for stereotypes. A stereotyped image might represent all Native American peoples in tepees, but Native Americans historically have lived in various types of homes and Native Americans are part of present society.

**Language**
Be careful of books that separate characters into two groups: those who speak standard English and those who don't. This division can reinforce stereotypes that all people in a group speak in a particular way. If a book includes the language of a specific culture, the actual language should appear, not nonsense words or an invented language that mimics the authentic one. Translated works should convey the original content and not sound like awkward, word-by-
word interpretations.

**Epithets**
Some books may contain epithets insulting people of a particular race or ethnicity. "There's a thin line between censorship and protecting children from what is really going to hurt them," Newling says. "I would tend to err on the side of protecting children."

**Illustrations**
Illustrations should convey the reality that members of any ethnic group look different from one another. The pictures in a common version of *The Five Chinese Brothers* are "downright insulting," says Newling. "They're caricatures—all depicted to look alike. It's demeaning to Chinese people." With photographs, captions should indicate a specific location and situation, not a general statement like, "In Africa..."

**Author's Perspective**
Newling describes this as a controversial point. Some people believe that writers should belong to the cultures they describe; others believe that it's enough if writers empathize with members of a culture even though writing from an outsider's point of view. Writers should avoid treating cultural practices as exotic.

**Appealing Stories**
To receive feedback, Newling lends books to teachers and asks for students' reactions. Themes like friendship, family, and school appeal to children within and outside of a given culture, she says.

**Tough Issues**
In handling difficult topics, authors should present the complexity of issues and offer multiple perspectives. Michael Lacapa's picture book, *Less Than Half, More Than Whole*, does a good job portraying biracial issues, Newling says. "The book deals with a child's real confusion about being neither all white nor all Native American. There's no 'pie in the sky' resolution."

Joy Shioshita is a the author of this article, which originally appeared in the September-October 1997 *Children's Advocate* news magazine published by Action Alliance for Children.