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Evaluating Multicultural Literature for Use in the Classroom

Julia Wilkins and Robert J. Gamble

Introduction

In a country as culturally diverse as the United States, it is important that classroom educators teach children about the multicultural composition of the land they inhabit. One way this can be achieved is through literature, which when used properly, can help children accept and be sensitive to the diversity of others. Reading about racial or ethnic groups helps children realize that other people have feelings, emotions, and needs similar to theirs. Through such exposure, children discover that while not all people may look the same, or share their personal beliefs and values, they all deserve equal respect. At the same time, children who are members of racial or ethnic minorities come to realize that their culture also makes important contributions to the world, thereby improving their own self-concepts, while nurturing pride in their heritage.

There are many enlightening, educational multicultural books available today, targeted toward readers of all ages. The challenge for classroom teachers is knowing how to recognize "good" multicultural books and select them for use in their classrooms. The first thing teachers should do when choosing books is to question how children will respond to reading them: Will children feel that they share commonalities with people in other cultures? Will stories build up self-esteem for children who are members of the racial and ethnic groups being described? In addition to these questions, there are many other important issues to consider in the selection process. This article examines these issues and provides specific criteria that should be used in evaluating multicultural literature so that books chosen truly represent diverse cultures and do not perpetuate stereotypes common in literature of the past.

The History of Multicultural Literature

Historically, much of the literature used by teachers presented minorities stereotypically, or else made them invisible by omitting them entirely. Books that included minorities marginalized them, putting them in roles that were not central to the story and the roles they had were generally stereotyped. While African Americans were often shown as agreeable and compliant, this was depicted in a way which was belittling, showing them to be less sophisticated than their white counterparts. A 1965 survey found that only 47 of the 349 books examined included African Americans in the text, and the majority of these characters were depicted in menial positions, while the main characters were almost always Caucasian (Larrick, 1965).

With few exceptions, Caucasians have dominated children's literature and have invariably been the heroes. They have been portrayed in both the themes and the illustrations as intelligent, attractive, physically strong, and flawless. Native Americans, however, until recently were often depicted as loathsome savages, with illustrations showing them shirtless, spear throwing, and dancing around teepees. Hispanic people have generally been stereotyped as lazy and subservient. When shown in job situations they have typically been relegated to the kitchen or garden. Asians have been stereotyped as compliant, simplistic and meek. As with other minorities, their roles in literature have consistently put them in situations subordinate to Caucasians.

Why Use Multicultural Literature?

One of the primary reasons for using multicultural literature is to help children develop positive attitudes and respect for individuals in all cultures. Literature is one way of transmitting these values to children. In developing an understanding of different lifestyles, multicultural literature encourages a broad range of social relationships, openness, and interest in others.

Multicultural books should also be used to engender racial pride. Literature affects not only how students view people from other cultures, but also influences how children view themselves and their own culture. It has been found that limited availability of quality books with minority characters can negatively affect children's reading, language development, and self-esteem (Costello, 1991; Meyer-Reimer, 1992).

Problems in Selecting and Evaluating Appropriate Literature

There has been a proliferation of children's books over the past decade, giving teachers a wide and varied selection of multicultural books to choose from. However, given the skyrocketing costs of books, and the fact that not every multicultural book is a "good" multicultural book, educators must be very discerning and critical when selecting literature for use in the classroom.

Portraying minorities in a positive light is not enough to make a good book—the contents must also be evaluated in terms of the quality of writing. The same standards apply as in all good literature: the literary elements of plot, characterization, setting, theme, and style should be well developed and should coexist with cultural accuracy.

A problem teachers will undoubtedly face in the selection process is whether to eliminate classics of the past because they are racist by today's standards. Indeed, "Injun Joe" and "Sambo" type characters do perpetuate the worst kind of derogatory stereotypes if read without guidance or explanation. However, books such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1876) can be used to teach children about the social climate of the era in which they were written. With sufficient background knowledge, children can be enlightened not only through positive story lines, but also from learning about the narrow-mindedness of others. If such books are used, teachers should preface them by discussing when the books were written and the attitudes of the times. Children can then explore how attitudes and behaviors of the past are different from those of today.

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How to Evaluate Multicultural Literature

Many classroom teachers have limited experiences using books written from the perspective of, or about racial and ethnic minorities. As there are numerous issues to consider when choosing multicultural literature, teachers must learn how to assess books as appropriate for use in the classroom. Below are outlined specific criteria that should be used when selecting multicultural reading material so that books chosen truly represent a particular culture and present accurate and respectful images of minority races and ethnicities. Suggested books with outstanding illustrations and text are also provided.

Illustrations

If books with illustrations are chosen, the pictures should be examined to see if characters are easily recognizable as people of color. Children should be able to identify characters as black, Hispanic, Asians, and natives, without them being shown as caricatures. There should be physical diversity within the groups themselves, so avoid books that show all black or Asian characters with the same exaggerated facial features that make them all look alike. For example, if all Asian characters have round faces, straight black hair, slanted eyes and a yellowish tint to their skin coloring, it is recommended that another book that displays diversity within the racial group is chosen.

There are many books that have excellent true-to-life pictures of people of different races. One example is the African fable, *The Market Lady and the Mango Tree* (Watson and Watson, 1994). This book contains realistic pictures of black children which make them immediately recognizable as Africans. Another well illustrated book which realistically portrays black characters is *WOOD-HOOPOE Willie* (Kroll and Roundtree, 1992). The illustrations show a boy and his parents in everyday situations wearing both African and Western clothing, with hair braided and straightened, as it is worn by many African Americans today. Another outstandingly illustrated book is *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (Jeffers, 1991). The pictures illuminate the words and wisdom of Native Americans in their belief of a natural and beautiful world. These illustrations help teach children about the exemplary relationship Native Americans have with the earth and shows the world through their eyes. Another noteworthy book, ideal for the Christmas season, is *Christmas Carol* (Teasdale and Gottlieb, 1996). This book portrays the three wise men with different skin colors, and also shows the angels and shepherds in varying shades of pink, yellow, and brown.

Text

Once it has been established that a book's illustrations transcend any stereotypes, the text should be examined to identify how the characters are portrayed as a racial or ethnic group. Is it suggested that all members of the group live in poverty? If not, are they shown as being from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels and occupations? Minority groups should be culturally diverse, with individuals portrayed as having their own unique thoughts, emotions and philosophies. It is important that the characters of any one cultural group are as disparate as characters would be in stories based on mainstream culture. Diversity among African Americans is illustrated in *Back Home* (Pinkney, 1992) in which a young woman returns to her North Carolina home after living up North. Even though she is now a "city girl", she finds great pleasure in returning to farm life. *Masai ana I* (Kroll, 1992) tells the story of a little girl who learns

about East Africa and the Masai in school and imagines what her life might be like if she were Masai. Such stories show the different lives black people lead in the same country and in different parts of the world.

The text should also be studied carefully to see if minority characters are respected for themselves, or whether they only achieve success by giving up the distinctive values and lifestyles of their culture and adopting those of mainstream white society. Minority characters should be able to find ways to succeed without losing sight of their heritage, and their achievements should be noteworthy for the acts themselves, not because they are valued by white society, or represent some sort of weakening of their own culture and adoption of mainstream culture. *The Fortune Tellers* (Alexander, 1992) is a wonderful story of a carpenter in Cameroon, West Africa, who goes to a fortune teller to see if he will become rich and famous, and whether he will marry and be happy. After the fortune teller disappears, the carpenter finds all the predictions come true due to a humorous twist in the story. The carpenter is successful in achieving his dreams of wealth, fame, marriage and happiness, all within the context of his West African life, without any outside intervention. This type of story shows that white intervention is not necessary for success in the lives of characters of color.

In a similar vein, if minority characters in the book have personal problems, they should be shown as being able to solve them themselves, without the intervention of whites. Beware of books which portray the "White Man" as some sort of savior, protecting minorities from hardships and providing the way to a better life. One noteworthy book for showing black solidarity and the ability to solve problems for themselves is *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996). This tells the story of a little girl in Mississippi who, because of a sign saying "Whites Only", takes off her shoes to step up to a water fountain in her clean white socks. When a large white man abuses her for drinking at the fountain, the black community rallies around to support the girl, and the "Whites Only" sign is removed from the fountain forever. This book is important in showing the strength and ability of minorities to stick together to fight oppression and prejudice.

Once it has been established that individuals within racial or ethnic groups are represented as diverse characters, capable of achieving success and solving problems for themselves, the text should be checked to see whether minority cultures are treated with respect, or whether they are depicted as inferior to the dominant white culture. At the other end of the spectrum, are minority lifestyles shown in an overly romanticized way, instead of being placed within the context of everyday activities familiar to all people? Often in trying to show the positive elements of other cultures, they are depicted in their traditional form and romanticized in a way which is degrading and distorting of the culture. For example, Native Americans are often seen happily huddled around camp fires, wearing traditional costumes, living close to nature and in harmony with each other. How close is this to the reality that most Native Americans now live in the United States? Although it is important to learn about the traditions of other cultural groups, it is also necessary to learn about the true-to-life, every day situations that members of the group experience. An authentic view of Native Americans is portrayed in *Toughboy and Sister* (Hill, 1990), the story of a young native Alaskan brother and sister who must survive after their father dies in an alcoholic seizure on a fishing trip.

Lastly, while still examining the text, check to make sure that cultures are not lumped into cultural conglomerates with umbrella labels such as "Native American", "Asian American", or "Hispanic American". Hispanic American literature includes the cultural traditions of Spain, Cuba, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. However, in literature they are all treated as if they are the same. The differences among the many cultures within each "cultural conglomerate" must not be overlooked. For example, although both Asian, the life of the South Korean mother fleeing from war with her children in *Peacebound Trains* (Balgassi, 1996) is very different from the life of Pakistani Shabanu living with her husband from an arranged marriage in *Haveli* (Staples, 1993). *Aekyung's Dream* (Paek, 1988) also illustrates the fact that not all people from Asia look alike, talk alike, or have the same culture.

How to Evaluate Authors

Because racism sometimes manifests itself in subtle ways, it is not always easy to identify in literature. It is therefore important to examine very carefully the text of authors who are not themselves members of the racial or ethnic group of their characters. For example, white middle class people may well be able to write about life in the inner cities, but are unlikely to be able to do so from the point of view of a black person. Although black people may be present in the book and realistically portrayed, theirs is not the voice we are really hearing. Take for example, the award-winning *The Slave Dancer* (Fox, 1973) about life on a slave ship. The story is told from the point of view of a white adolescent, who himself is captured on the ship. The readers experience the story from his point of view. They identify with the sympathy he has for the black slaves and feel badly about the pain he has to endure by watching their suffering. His emotions therefore become more important to us than those of the black slaves who are being mistreated on the ship. Although it is the slaves' story, they are not given a voice with which to tell it. They do not tell us about their suffering, but instead have a white male tell it for them. Such books which portray the lives of minorities from someone else's point of view should be chosen with caution.

There are a wide variety of quality books about different cultures written by members of the cultural groups on which they are based. Only these books can give a truly authentic view of how members of the cultural group see their lives. *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans* (Hirschfelder and Singer, 1992) is a collection of poems and essays in which young Native Americans speak of their identity, and the harsh realities of their lives. This book offers a true representation of the feelings and experiences of Native Americans as they see their lives. Also, *Pass It On: African American Poetry for Children* (Hudson and Cooper, 1993) is a book of poetry by African American poets. The collection captures the joys and discoveries of childhood within the specific context of the African American experience.

Developing an Appropriate Selection of Books

A good selection of books should reflect diversity of content. Teachers must be careful of using only certain types of books to expose children to the lifestyles of minorities, such as books about the hardships of assimilation. It is important that children see the world in its many dimensions and they should therefore be exposed to a variety of books depicting minority life in multifarious situations. There are numerous books which show both the pleasures and

hardships of being a minority in America. A good book for illustrating the problems African Americans may experience in being a minority in a white society is *Where Do I Go From Here?* (Wesley, 1993). This tells the story of Nia who, after being suspended from school for fighting, looks at what her old friends are doing at home. Realizing that she wants more out of life, the story exemplifies a young African American's struggle to find a place in the world. On quite a different note are *Grandmother and I* and *Grandfather and I* (Buckley and Omerod, 1994) which are beautifully illustrated books showing the warmth and closeness of African American families, particularly the bond between children and their grandparents. Much Hispanic fiction also focuses on the bonds and importance of family, such as *Family Pictures* (Garza, 1990) which portrays warm family relationships, and *Abuela* (Dorros, 1991) which describes the friendship between a girl and her grandmother. At the other end of the spectrum, are books that describe the feelings of isolation and frustration that many Hispanic Americans experience because they speak a different language from that of mainstream society. *Felita* (Mohr, 1979) shows the lack of understanding experienced by Felita's American neighbors about the heritage which her family brought with them from Puerto Rico. Many different aspects of minority life are presented in multicultural literature and it is important that books chosen for the classroom represent the wide range of lifestyles and experiences of each culture.

Recommended Books

There is an abundance of quality books about African Americans written by African Americans, many of them based on real-life events. An excellent example of such a book is *Why Do You Call Me Chocolate Boy?* (Parker, 1993). This is based on the real experiences of the author's son who was frustrated by the name he was called by other boys. This story helps children understand the ignorance inherent in racism and the pride people can feel in their ethnic heritage. Another highly recommended biographical book is *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (Beals, 1995). This is an autobiographical story about a sixteen year old girl chosen to help integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Readers get a first-hand account of the prejudice experienced by the author and the story sheds some light on the intensity of racism in the South during the Civil Rights Movement.

There are many books which help children from multicultural backgrounds understand how they are part of different cultures and how to reconcile possible conflicts between them. In *Children of the River* (Crew, 1989) seventeen year old Sundara comes to terms with being an American, while remaining faithful to her own people after fleeing Cambodia. Another acclaimed book which can be used to increase understanding of the problems Asian Americans may face in finding their identities is *Finding My Voice* (Lee, 1992). This tells the story of Ellen Sung, the only Asian American in her school, who is subjected to racist comments and does not know whether to follow in her sister's footsteps to Harvard. Much of the multicultural literature about Asian Americans focuses on their immigration or their experiences once they are in America. In *Angel Child, Dragon Child* (Surat, 1983) Ut lives in the United States while her mother remains in Vietnam. Although she feels isolated in the States, she is unable to express her angry feelings. Many children who have come to the United States from other countries will be able to identify with these stories.

Other books that show how children can be torn between cultures are those that involve living by strong ethnic traditions in a society where these traditions are not the norm. *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (Staples, 1989) shows the problems that can be caused by arranged marriages, having grown up in a society which does not practice this custom.

Multicultural books can also be used simply to expose students to other cultures and the ways in which other people live. *Dreamplace* (Lyon, 1993) introduces children to Native American life by describing a young Anasazi girl's vision of early life in Mesa Verde, and *A Woman of Her Tribe* (Robinson, 1990) describes fifteen year old Annette's journey from her rural Nootka community to the city of Victoria, Canada, to discover her cultural heritage. Also, *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars* (Merrill, 1992) is a wonderful story showing traditional Japanese life. It tells the tale of young Izumi who embarrasses her parents through her love of caterpillars. In refusing to conform to other people's expectations, Izumi proves herself to be an independent woman in a culture where this is not typical.

Translated books can also be a good source of multiculturalism by teaching about children's lives in other parts of the world. An excellent translated book is *The Man from the Other Side* (Orlevi, 1991). This book is based on real life events and tells the story of a fourteen year old boy living on the outskirts of a Warsaw ghetto during World War II. He and his grandparents help shelter a Jewish man. This is an ideal book for exposing children to the persecution of Jews under the Nazi regime. Another highly recommended book for this purpose is *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988) in which a young woman struggles to understand what her family went through during the Holocaust. However, using only books about Jews that describe their persecution should be avoided. There using only books that illuminate the joys and happiness of Jews. One example is *Starlight and Candles: The Joys of the Sabbath* (Manushkin, 1995). This tells the story of a Jewish family getting ready for the Sabbath and shows the closeness of the family during this weekly Jewish holiday. Another entertaining and amusing story is *The Chanukkah Quest* (Kimmel, 1990) in which Bubba Brayna makes potato latkes to celebrate Hanukkah with the Rabbi, but ends up entertaining a bear due to her poor eye sight.

Conclusion

Although there has been a big increase in multicultural literature in recent years, making it much easier to find books for the classroom, it is important that teachers are able to recognize the qualities that make a good multicultural book. Books should not be chosen simply because they have minority characters and are available. They should be analyzed and chosen using specific criteria such as: Is the text accurate and respectful of different cultures, while portraying them as true-to-life? Are characters diverse and from different backgrounds, with eclectic and varied lifestyles? Are differences among cultures within each "cultural conglomerate" acknowledged? Do illustrations represent true qualities of the race or are they stereotypical caricatures? Does the author write from a personal, enlightening perspective? All teachers are aware of how powerfully images and stories can affect children. When choosing literature, it must be remembered that books send very strong signals, not only to children about people who are different from them, but also to children about themselves.

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