

## **Class 13**

### **Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood Programs**

#### **Articles:**

A Child's Right to the Valuing of Diversity

The Importance of Including Culturally Authentic Literature

#### **Discussion Questions:**

How does exposure to diversity benefit all children?

What are some of the benefits of reading aloud to children?

What are some guidelines to consider when selecting culturally authentic books for reading aloud?



# A Child's Right to the Valuing of Diversity

Reaffirmations:

*Speaking Out for Children*

Mary Lane

*In response to today's retrogressive attitudes toward human needs, the U.S. National Committee for Early Childhood Education of the Organisation Mondiale pour L'Education Prescolaire (OMEF), the Association for Childhood Education International, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children urge child advocates to speak out about public responsibility for assuring children's basic rights. This series of statements, compiled by Monroe Cohen, Director of the Queens College Institute for Family and Community Life, is not copyrighted, and may be freely reproduced with credit to the authors.*

Great cultural diversity still exists on our planet, even as modern technology pushes for more uniformity and as McDonalds and Coca Cola spread everywhere. In ecological terms, we accept the principle of diversity for plants and animals. We protect endangered species—too late sometimes—in most of the civilized world. But if humankind is to maintain itself, the valuing of diversity must increase in our own lives also.

Indeed, we may become an endangered species unless we begin early to help our children learn to value diver-

sity. How? By recognizing the rationale for such a position and then organizing society to achieve this goal.

As our world becomes even smaller, communication can be almost instantaneous. Mobility characterizes families more than stability. People in this kind of world must have these three qualities to succeed: (1) the ability to cope with change; (2) an open, flexible personality that enjoys the process of change; (3) the ability to assimilate changes into a satisfying personal lifestyle. Diversity is the touchstone for each of these three qualities.

A child who associates with children who speak other languages, who worship in other ways, who eat other foods, whose skin color differs from one's own, and whose behavior suggests different upbringing, learns about the basic similarities of all people everywhere and can understand and appreciate their fascinating differences. Such children have many points of reference when they meet people with other values and when they encounter new situations.

Many of humankind's great upheavals have been caused by the blindness of those in power to the aspirations of people with whom they disagreed. The value of an open, flexible personality is

well established. Closed, rigid individuals are prone to prejudice, biased to the extent that they wear blinders to anything that does not match their early perceptions. On the other hand, children who have learned that people of all races and cultures have high ambitions and feel strongly about the quality of life; that love, peace, and respect are universal concepts regardless of the language used to express them—such children have incorporated the basics of an open, flexible approach to life.

Survival itself may well depend on the right to experience diversity and then to assimilate change. To evaluate the validity of experience for oneself and one's lifestyle is the outcome of thoughtfully charting a life course, as opposed to swaying with the whims of the times.

We who speak out for children must ensure that the nation who "tightens its belt" does not choke its future. We must speak out for the rights of children—to be nourished, to play, to imagine, and to value diversity.

*Mary Lane is the Director of the Oakland Parent Child Center, Oakland, California.*



## Reflecting on Our Read-Aloud Practices

# The Importance of Including Culturally Authentic Literature

Katrina Willard Hall

ON THE FIRST DAY of kindergarten, Alexis walked into the classroom and strode purposefully to the reading area. She reached for Natasha Anastasia Tarpley's *I Love My Hair*, looked at the girl on the cover, and smiling at her aunt, said, "Hey, she's got beads like me!" Merrily shaking her own braids, Alexis asked, "Teacher, are you going to read this to us today?" Although not in my plans, I did read the book aloud that day, and reread it aloud many times that year, eventually giving Alexis her own copy to keep at home. Other children made similar connections to other books, reinforcing my conviction that which



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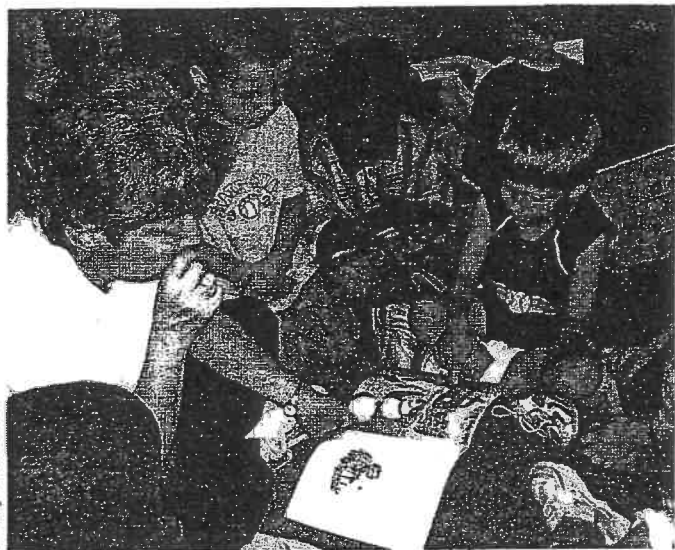
books we elect to place in classroom libraries and to read aloud is a decision to be made with care.

Early childhood classrooms in the United States have increasingly diverse student populations. Literature from authors and illustrators who authentically depict various cultures and backgrounds is an important part of building a classroom community.

### Reading aloud children's literature

Reading aloud is an accepted and effective practice in early childhood settings, often taking place several times a day. Research has shown that reading aloud children's literature facilitates literacy development in young children and promotes a love of books and reading (Galda & Cullinan 2003). In fact, many children begin to learn to read through their responses to stories and books read aloud, while also developing an understanding and preference for particular genres (Elley 1998; Bean 2000; van Kleeck 2003).

Teachers, through their selections of read-aloud books, can have an impact on children's language and



vocabulary development (Morrow 1992). Moreover, reading quality literature aloud can positively affect children's comprehension and higher order thinking skills as well as their verbal and written responses to books (Creighton 1997; Lancia 1997).

### Thinking about book selection in the classroom

In my early years as a middle-class, White, female, kindergarten teacher, I read aloud books from the "canon" of young children's literature, including Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* I kept up with Caldecott winners and read-aloud books that were entertaining, fit the curriculum, and taught social justice and compassion. I never really con-



## Guidelines for Selecting High-Quality, Culturally Authentic Books to Read Aloud

AS YOU INCREASE THE NUMBER of culturally authentic books in your classroom and plan your read-aloud selections, the following guidelines, based on the Council on Interracial Books for Children's (1980) *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks*, may prove useful. Look for a variety of genres and cultures and avoid using a single book to represent a particular group. If a book contains stereotypes or oversimplification (such as a quick resolution to a big problem), discuss the issues with the children so they can build their critical thinking and reflective skills.

Individual children's development varies, and teacher judgment is key, but educators should remember that children bring a lot of knowledge with them to school and are capable of reflection and critical thinking at a young age. For example, when I was reading aloud Sharon Dennis Wyeth's *Something Beautiful*, a book about an African American girl who realizes that beauty is complex, a 5-year-old noted that the child's apartment door, surrounded by graffiti and broken glass, would probably be "messed up" again if cleaned and would have to be cleaned repeatedly. His response, based on his personal experience, sparked an excellent classroom discussion on the causes and effects of vandalism and litter as well as possible solutions.

### When choosing books, there are many elements to consider:

**Your audience** (age, gender, race, ethnicity, and interests)

Remember to include books that allow children to see the world outside their classroom and neighborhood.

**Your goals:** What concepts or issues are important? Character education? Caring for the environment? Good citizenship?

**The use of multiple books** to present a diverse picture of various groups. Include contemporary or realistic books to prevent misconceptions or overgeneralizations (Reese, 1996).

**Human traits that animal characters may have:** Animal characters may have distinctive race, gender, age, and socioeconomic identities. Discuss these with the children to facilitate critical thinking. For example, a teacher reading aloud Marc Brown's *Arthur* books might begin a discussion regarding Arthur's family and home and encourage children to compare Arthur's home life with their own

The authors and illustrators. What is their cultural background? Does it appear that text and illustrations are authentic?

**The overt messages of the story:** Are they unbiased? If not, you still might choose to read and discuss these with the children. By modeling aloud your thoughts about the story and the messages, you can help children start to consider what the story means.

### When considering the portrayal of characters, keep the following questions in mind:

**Gender**—Are females and males portrayed in a variety of roles, not just stereotypical ones? Does the author use gender-neutral language (firefighter, mail carrier, server)? Teachers can draw attention to language that is noninclusive and observe, for example, that not all police are men and not all nurses are women. This lets children know that their future roles and possibilities are not limited by gender.

**Age**—Do older and younger characters interact in positive ways? Are older people presented with a variety of dispositions and activities (not just irritable and doing age-associated, stereotypical activities such as knitting)?

**Race and ethnicity**—Do the main characters come from diverse cultures? Are facial features and skin tones accurately illustrated? Are characters engaged in activities that go beyond stereotypes? If dialect is used, is it used in a sensitive manner?

**Family structure**—Are there a variety of kinds of families? Adopted or foster? Single parents? Grandparents or other relatives? Stepparents? Two mothers or two fathers?

**Groups typically marginalized**—Are they present in the story? Are people with disabilities depicted in sensitive ways? Are there individuals with mental illness? Are there any characters who are gay or lesbian? Any migrant or homeless families? Any recent immigrants? Again, be alert to stereotypes, which can provide good starting points for discussion.

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Closer to home, children who have little exposure to busy city life would benefit from hearing a book such as Arthur Dorros's *Abuela*, a story about a Latina girl going places with her grandmother on a bus in New York City. The folk-artlike aerial views of Manhattan artfully intertwine with the blend of English and Spanish in an

energetic celebration of ethnic diversity that many children will enjoy. Likewise, children in an inner-city school may enjoy Brian Pinkney's *The Adventures of Sparrowboy*, a comic-booklike adventure in a diverse suburban neighborhood about a paperboy who gains supernatural power reading

single-parent households (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2007). Further, statistics indicate that more than 2.5 million grandparents raise their grandchildren (Simmons & Dye 2003). These children might be better served with a more diverse selection of books and might not relate as well to books that primarily depict middle-class situations with two-parent households.

Teachers should consider those races, ethnicities, and cultures that are not represented in their classrooms and offer children books that depict the world "outside" so children can see a more global picture (Beaty 1996). Justine and Ron Fontes's *Israel: A to Z* is filled with snapshots of life in Israel and underscores the similarities between life in the United States and life in Israel. The other alphabet photo books in this series offer similar experiences.



## Resources for Finding Culturally Authentic Literature

THE FOLLOWING LIST is a starting point for identifying culturally authentic literature. Be sure to take care when choosing books—even those recommended by reputable sources may include stereotypes or inaccuracies or be inappropriate for the children in your classroom.

### Brochures

**Brown, J.C., & L.A. Oates, eds. 2001. *Books to grow on: African American literature for young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.**

An annotated list of recommended books that contain positive images and stories of African American children and families, divided by age group.

**Schon, I. 2002. *Books to grow on: Latino literature for young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.**

An annotated list of recommended books (in Spanish and in English) that contain positive images of Latino families and culture.

### Web sites

**The American Library Association.**—The association publishes book reviews in its journal *Book Links*, and this site has multiple links to information on award-winning books by and about people of color. You will find information on the Coretta Scott King Book Awards ([www.ala.org/ala/em/ert/coretta-scottkingbookaward/corettascott.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/em/ert/coretta-scottkingbookaward/corettascott.htm)), given each year for two distinguished books—one by an author of African descent and one by an illustrator of African descent—and the Pura Belpré Award ([www.ala.org/ala/also/awards/scholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belpremedal.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/also/awards/scholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belpremedal.htm)), presented every two years to the Latino or Latina writer whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience. [www.ala.org/ala/librariesandyou/recomreading/recomreading.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/librariesandyou/recomreading/recomreading.htm)

**Barahona Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents.**—The site promotes literacy in English and Spanish and recommends books in English and Spanish that are centered on people of Latino heritage. [www.csusm.edu/csb](http://www.csusm.edu/csb)

**Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association.**—IRA's Special Interest Group publishes an annual list of outstanding K-12 multicultural literature with its Notable Books for a Global Society project (see link on that Web page). [www.tcnj.edu/~childlit/index.htm](http://www.tcnj.edu/~childlit/index.htm)

**Children's Literature Assembly.**—The organization recommends children's books in the "Notables" section of the site. [www.childrensliteratureassembly.org](http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org)

**Children's Literature Web Guide.**—The site offers links to lists of recommended and award-winning books. [www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown](http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown)

**The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.**—The center provides links to and bibliographies of multicultural books for children of all ages. [www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc)

**Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page.**—The page includes links to lists of multicultural books. [www.scills.rutgers.edu/~kvander/@childrenlit/index.html](http://www.scills.rutgers.edu/~kvander/@childrenlit/index.html)



the comic strips before battling mean dogs and rescuing birds and cats.

### Finding high-quality, culturally authentic literature

It can be difficult to find high-quality culturally authentic books. Books about people of color made up less than 10 percent of the new books published in 2004, a percentage that has remained steady for the past several years (Horning et al. 2005). Only about four percent of the books were actually written or illustrated by people of color, and many cultures "are all but invisible in contemporary literature for children" (Horning et al. 2005).

However, there are many resources available for finding high-quality, culturally authentic literature. Most professional educator organizations recommend children's books for a variety of needs and interests in their national and state-affiliated journals. In *Young Children*, The Reading Chair column appears in every issue and is reprinted online in *Beyond the Journal* (<http://journal.naeyc.org/btj>). The International Reading Association's *The Reading Teacher* also contains reviews of high-quality and diverse children's books.

One of the most important resources available to teachers is the public library. Children's librarians not only read aloud often to diverse children but also keep up with recently published books, authors, and illustrators and are usually eager to give recommendations. Libraries often have programs that allow teachers to check out books for extended periods of time.

## Avoiding stereotypes

Simply having more literature that includes people of color or diverse cultures is not enough, and not every book will be right for every classroom. Stereotypes and generalizations can be common as authors try to reflect individuals within various cultures and groups, and it can be difficult for someone from another culture to evaluate them (Guevara 2003). Annotations or reviews from trustworthy sources (see "Resources for Finding Culturally Authentic Literature") and some general guidelines (see "Guidelines for Selecting High-Quality, Culturally Authentic Books to Read Aloud") can help.

The diversity and uniqueness of each group within a group should be evident in a book—not all Hispanics or Latinos are from Mexico or Cuba and not all Mexican or Cuban people have the same customs. Having more than one book about a culture is one way to address this concern. Furthermore, balancing selections to include traditional tales as well as contemporary ones allows children to see a more accurate portrait of themselves and modern-day cultures (Gangi 2004).

Stereotypes can be present with regard to gender, social class, religion, and other personal characteristics. Not every African American boy plays basketball; not every disabled child is in a wheelchair. Most important to remember is that every person has

Balancing selections to include traditional tales as well as contemporary ones allows children to see a more accurate portrait of themselves and modern-day cultures.

a unique past—no two children are exactly the same, even within groups of people with commonalities.

## Blending the old with the new

Culturally diverse books are a high priority, and research supports the practice of including more books that reflect the children we teach and the changing population of our schools (Gangi 2004). This does not mean that teachers have to abandon old favorites or read only multicultural books and recent publications. Books such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Norman Bridwell's *Clifford the Big Red Dog* can remain a part of early childhood classrooms. Still, it is possible to look at these books through a new lens and consider the possibilities for engaging children in critical thinking with these texts. Both authors' books lend themselves to a great deal of wondering and what-ifs for children.

## Conclusion

As teachers of young children, the books we read aloud influence children's learning and reading enjoyment now and in the future. Many of the books become the children's favorites, ones they will explore on their own and beg to hear again. We have a responsibility to consider why we are reading a particular book aloud and what messages we hope to impart through our choices. By carefully selecting what we read aloud and place in classroom libraries, we facilitate our own development as culturally responsive teachers while fostering children's literacy development, empathy, and acceptance of themselves and others.

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