

The Importance of Including Culturally Authentic Literature

Katrina Willard Hall

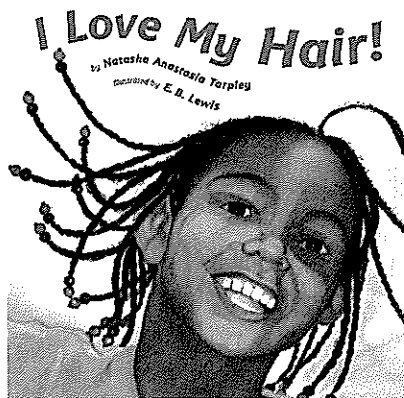
ON THE FIRST DAY of kindergarten, Alexis walked into the classroom and strode purposefully to the reading area. She reached for Natasha Anastasia Tarpley's *I Love My Hair*, looked at the girl on the cover, and smiling at her aunt, said, "Hey, she's got beads like me!" Merrily shaking her own braids, 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

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.



© Mary K. O'Connor



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-

Katrina Willard Hall, PhD, is an assistant professor in literacy at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. She taught primary grades for more than a decade and is a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Certified Teacher as an early childhood generalist. khall@unf.edu.

naeyc 2, 3

sidered the connection between the books I read aloud, the children in the class, and the messages that I sent until I noticed that every book I chose became a class favorite.

Reading aloud children's literature is a complex event if we accept the notion that it is impossible for a children's book not to be "educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology. . . . All books must teach something" (Hunt 1995, 3). Shannon notes that when reading aloud, teachers have to consider two sets of values—"the ones embedded in the author's representation of reality and the ones they assign to the text while reading" (2002, 8). As authors tell a story, their point of view and beliefs come through in their writing, intentionally and inadvertently.

Teachers also assign value to books, simply by choosing to read them aloud. Adding to the complexity of the issue, teachers have no choice but to limit the selection of books available in the classroom, whether it is due to time or curriculum restraints or to a lack of availability, access, or space (Au 1998). As educators select books to read aloud, there may be definite messages we want to express to the listeners—messages that are influenced by our beliefs. These beliefs are in turn influenced by our "cultural, economic, social, and political diver-

It is critical to be aware of our personal biases and to consider the children's cultures when selecting books to read aloud

sity" (Shannon 2002, 8). Knowing this, reflective teachers are aware of the impact of their personal values and beliefs as they make decisions.

Tarpley's *I Love My Hair* was not in the classroom library by accident. I intentionally chose it for its positive messages about Black children's hair and self-acceptance, and because it was written by an African American author and illustrated by an award-winning African American artist, E.B. Lewis. Whether or not I voiced my reasons, the children knew that I valued it simply because the book was in the room. Choosing to read it aloud only increased the degree of value.

A primary task for teachers is to guard against perpetuating stereotypes while carefully fostering children's development of positive self-identities and accurate, yet hopeful, perceptions of the world outside their neighborhoods (Strickland 1994).

Choosing to include culturally authentic books is one way to approach this task. Young children see themselves as the "center of the world" and "want to see themselves and their everyday lives in the stories they read" (McGlinn 2001, 50). It is critical to be aware of our personal biases and to consider the children's cultures when selecting books to read aloud (Sleeter 1992). Author and

illustrator Juan Felipe Herrera (2000, 56) wrote that "there were many years as a child and teenager that I felt I had no language at all, no culture, no worth, not even an identity I could count on."

The messages that teachers promote through what we choose to read aloud should convey our respect and acknowledgment of diverse cultures. This can be difficult as we recognize that with the growing diversity of the U.S. population, the concept of culture is an increasingly complex blend of ethnicity, family structure, socioeconomic class, shared values, spiritual beliefs, and conventions. Our classrooms are diverse, and the books we choose should be too.

Books and the increasingly diverse classroom

Many teachers have personal collections and access to school libraries or other resources, but these collections, although they may contain some classics, are often dated (Hall 2004). Older books frequently contain stereotypes or generalizations, and primarily middle-class, White characters (Fondrie 2001). Many of these books may not reflect the children we teach, or their families.

According to the Children's Defense Fund (2005), in 2004 nearly 13 million children under the age of 18 lived in poverty. In 2006 more than 20 million children 18 and younger lived in

Teachers have to consider two sets of values—the ones embedded in the author's representation of reality and the ones they assign to the text while reading



© Toni Liebman

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 Den- nis 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.

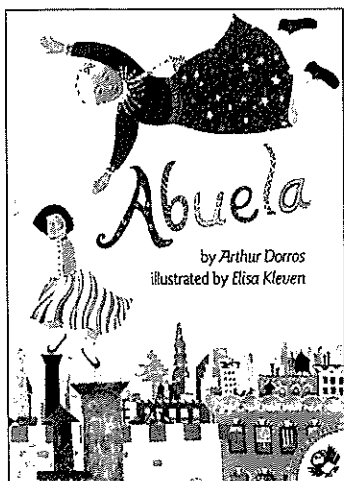
References

- Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1980. *Guidelines for selecting bias-free textbooks and storybooks*. New York: Author.
- Reese, D. 1996. Teaching young children about Native Americans. Eric Digest ED 394744. Online: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/29/b4/a0.pdf.



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 (Beatty 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.



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

Early Childhood Education

A Distance Education Bachelor's Degree Program



This online program in early childhood education makes it possible for students to attend class when it's most convenient for them. The program allows students to complete their education without having to relocate, quit their jobs, or lose precious time with their families.

1-800-622-2KSU

www.dce.k-state.edu/humanecology/earlychildhood

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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/emiert/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/alsc/awardscholarships/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

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

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

Children's Literature Assembly—The organization recommends children's books in the "Notables" section of the site. www.childrensliteratureassembly.org

Children's Literature Web Guide—The site offers links to lists of recommended and award-winning books. 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

Vandergrift's Children's Literature Page—The page includes links to lists of multicultural books. www.scils.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

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*

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.



Department of
Education

2008 Ohio Early Care & Education Conference

April 3-5, 2008

Greater Columbus Convention Center
Columbus, Ohio



Learn from
national
speakers such as
Maurice Sykes,
Valora Washington,
Ella Jenkins
and many others!

"It was well worth the drive from
Kentucky. This, by far, was the best
conference I have been to!"
~2007 Conference Attendee~

"The best part about the
conference was the
passionate and respectful
atmosphere that
surrounded me."
~2007 Conference Attendee~

Top quality professional
development at
affordable prices.

Big city fun with small city
accessibility and
convenience.

A warm, friendly setting
just right to learn,
laugh & grow.



2008 Keynote Speakers

Chris Gardner—His inspiring story was the basis of the bestselling autobiography and popular film, *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

Sharon Robinson—Daughter of the baseball great, Jackie Robinson, and author of several adult and children's books, including *Safe At Home*.

Todd Parr—Author/illustrator of children's books including *It's Okay to Be Different* and creator of ToddWorld on the Learning Channel.

For more information go to our
website at: **www.oaeyc.org**

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.

References

Au, K. 1998. Social constructivism and the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. *Journal of Literacy Research* 30 (2): 297-319.

Bean, T. 2000. Reading in the content areas: Social constructivist dimensions. In *Handbook of reading research*, Vol. 2, eds. M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr, 629-44. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Beatty, J. 1996. *Building bridges with multicultural picture books: For children 3-5*. New York: Pearson Education.

Children's Defense Fund. 2005. 2004 facts on child poverty in America. Online: <http://campaign.childrensdefense.org/familyincome/childpoverty/basicfacts.aspx>.

Creighton, D. 1997. Critical literacy in the elementary classroom. *Language Arts* 74 (6): 438-45.

Elley, W. 1998. Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly* 24: 176-86.

Fondrie, S. 2001. "Gentle doses of racism": Whiteness and children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature* 27: 9-14.

Galda, L., & B. Cullinan. 2003. Literature for literacy: What research says about the benefits of using tradebooks in the classroom. In *Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts*, 2nd ed., eds. J. Flood, D. Lapp, J.R. Squire, & J.M. Jensen, 640-48. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Gangi, J. 2004. *Encountering children's literature: An arts approach*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Guevara, S. 2003. Authentic enough: Am I? Are you? Interpreting culture for children's literature. In *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature*, eds. D. Fox & K. Short, 50-60. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Hall, K. 2004. A critical analysis of the books read aloud by kindergarten teachers and their reasons for book selection. PhD diss., University of Florida. Online: http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0005122/hall_k.pdf.

Herrera, J.F. 2000. From word to world: Reflections on the Ezra Jack Keats Award. *Journal of Children's Literature* 26: 54-59.

Horning, K., M. Lingren, H. Rudiger, & M. Schliesman. 2005. Observations on publishing in 2004. In *CCBC Choices 2005*. Madison, WI: Cooperative Children's Book Center. Online: www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/choiceintro05.asp.

Hunt, P. 1995. *Children's literature: An illustrated history*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lancia, P. 1997. Literary borrowing: The effects of literature on children's writing. *The Reading Teacher* 50 (6): 470-75.

McGlenn, J. 2001. Seeing themselves in what they read. *Book Links* 11 (3): 50-54.

Morrow, L. 1992. The impact of a literature-based program on literacy achievement, use of literature, and attitudes of children from minority backgrounds. *Reading Research Quarterly* 27 (3): 250-75.

Shannon, P. 2002. The myths of reading aloud. *The Dragon Lode* 20 (2): 6-11.

Simmons, T., & J. Dye. 2003. Grandparents living with grandchildren: 2000. *Census 2000 Brief* (October). Online: www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-31.pdf.

Sleeter, C. 1992. Resisting racial awareness: How teachers understand the social order from their racial, gender, and socioeconomic class locations. *Educational Foundations* 6 (2): 7-32.

Strickland, D. 1994. Educating African American learners at risk: Finding a better way. *Language Arts* 71: 328-35.

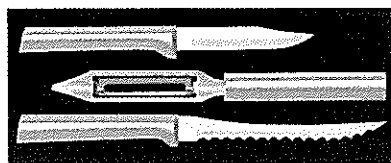
U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2007. Living arrangements of children under 18 years old: 1960 to present. Online: www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ch1.pdf.

Van Kleeck, A. 2003. Research on book sharing: Another critical look. In *On reading books to children: Parents and teachers*, eds. A. van Kleeck, S. Stahl, & E. Bauer, 271-330. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.



© Shari Schmidt

Fund Raising



Request your **FREE** catalog and information packet:

1-800-311-9691
or **www.RadaCutlery.com**
NOTE: Dept **A08YCH**

Your non-profit club, team, church or school works directly with the manufacturer to make great profits. Your customers receive a tremendous value on kitchen knives, utensils and gift sets while supporting your cause.

Rada Cutlery's reputation for Made in the USA quality is well known. We have made and sold 100,000,000 items since 1948! Our proven fund raising system guarantees your success.

Find out why our customers say that "Rada knives sell themselves!"

RADA CUTLERY
"A Cut Above The Rest"

Copyright © 2008 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp.