



COVER SHEET

Exley, Beryl (2005) Kangaroos on the main street? Using resources to break down stereotypes.
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Article Type: FEATURE

Article Heading: Kangaroos on Main Street?

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Lead In: **There are people in this world who are convinced that kangaroos hop down the main street of major Australian cities every day. While we may get a chuckle out of someone else's misunderstanding of Australian life, Beryl Exley explores the effects such stereotypes have on children's understandings of the other and offers practical strategies for carers to consider as they attempt to foster in children respectful attitudes to cultural and language difference.**

An Australian teaching friend who undertook a teaching exchange at a South African secondary school was troubled by the number of South African school children who thought Australia was 'backwards', 'primitive', and 'a colonial outpost'.

The children also found it difficult to separate fact from fiction. They wanted to know if kangaroos hopped down the main street like they did on the tourist advertisements and whether all Australians were as 'intelligent' as Paul 'Crocodile Dundee' Hogan. Applying these outdated stereotypes to my friend meant that it took some time for the children to see her as a highly qualified and experienced teacher.

The problem was the children were not exposed to other ways of understanding Australian identity. The point is that we should ensure that children explore the diversity within cultural groups rather than labeling all who belong to a group as 'the same' on the basis of one similar characteristic.

As we know, young children draw on their own experiences and understandings to form their own assumptions. On the way home from a birthday party recently, my three-year-old daughter was sifting through the take-home party bag. When she came across a little yellow 'Hello Kitty' book with blank pages she declared, 'We'll have to take this book back, it's broken, it's got nothing in it, it's no good'. I suggested that she might like to use it for something else. After some thought, she decided that it might make a good drawing book; which is exactly what it was!

Sometimes, children don't articulate their assumptions, which mean we don't have the opportunity to broaden their conceptions or correct their misconceptions as the case may be. This can occur when we don't provide the activities or resources for children to articulate their developing understandings of respectful attitudes towards cultural and language differences.

Good resources are not always easily available or even easily recognised. A quick look through my daughter's bookshelf revealed many books that lacked positive representations of cultural or language diversity. One book that I often share with young children is *The Jolly Postman* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. I like it because it allows me to expose children to a range of text types (a personal letter, display advertisement, note, business letter, traditional fairytale, letter of demand, and a birthday card), and children can bring in their knowledge of nursery rhymes, fairytales and play. Yet, when a colleague and I were looking at the cultural and language diversity in this particular book, it became apparent that only the white English-speaking characters were the 'good' or 'important' characters. Out of the fourteen pages of illustrations, only three characters were black:

- a female black cat who had no name and looked like she was the domestic servant for a white middle class witch
- Mr Wolf who was occupying grandma's cottage and wearing her clothes without her permission and who was presently being sued by the three little pigs for allegedly damaging their property
- an unnamed little black lamb who was Goldilocks' companion

All characters who spoke or wrote in the text used standard English. Characters who spoke non-standard English or their own languages had no speaking or writing parts.

So what assumptions might young children draw from only being exposed to this type of text? Possibly, that characters of colour or non-English speakers are not of central importance; or if they are, they are 'baddies'. Children from non-English backgrounds may have difficulty connecting with these types of books because they cannot see their lives, experiences or home language expressed within the pages.

Quote < **Consistent exposure to narrow representations of cultural and language diversity can have negative implications for children** > End Quote

In the 2004 *Quality Practices Guide*, an indicator of high quality care for Principle 3.6 is that *resources in languages other than English are provided to foster children's interest in a variety of cultures and languages*. This is important for children, and suggests that all Carers, irrespective of their own cultural background or those of the children in care, should be active in offering resources and activities to develop children's respectful attitudes towards cultural and language diversity.

Resources

The good news is that there are resources available that positively promote cultural and language diversity. The following list of publishers carry resources that provide positive and varied images and story lines of rural and urban Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

Some of these texts bring 'Dreaming' stories to life, while others focus on the everyday activities of Indigenous children. These books also blend Indigenous and Western pictures in ways that allow Indigenous and non-Indigenous children to connect with the text to learn more about the other. Some of the books also blend community languages with standard English to enable children to build bridges between the two. Contact the publishers directly or visit their websites to explore the range of texts on offer:

- **Indij Readers** (a not-for-commercial-profit publishing company)
Website: www.indijreaders.com.au or phone Tracey Hannon on 02 9597 7844 and ask for books 'on approval'. 11 titles are available in series one and 9 titles in series two. Features contemporary Aboriginal stories and illustrations by Aboriginal artists with all resources approved by Indigenous stakeholders. Big books available for some titles and there is a video of the making of an Indij Reader book.
- **Access Ed**
Website: <http://education.qld.gov.au/marketing/promotion/advertising/accessed/early-readers.html> or check out Education Queensland website and order through their bookshop (Access Ed).
- **Scholastic**
Website: www.scholastic.com.au/schoolzone or phone 1800 024 840 for a brochure
The 'Milly Molly' collection of books (16 titles available and can also purchase Milly and Molly dolls). Their theme is 'we may look different but we feel the same'.
The 'Reconciliation' and 'Reading Discovery' resources (big books, individual books and audio CDs) received an award for excellence in educational publishing.

- **Board of Studies NSW**

Website: <http://shop.bos.nsw.edu.au>

Big Mob Books for Little Fellas Emergent Readers Kit. There are 14 titles available.

- **Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation**

Website: www.magabala.co

A colour catalogue can be ordered by contacting orders@magabala.com or phoning (08) 9192 1991.

Careful scrutinising of children's books for positive and diverse cultural and language representations is also encouraged. Make regular use of your local council library; ask to speak with the children's librarian and put in a special request for books that provide positive representations of minority cultural and language groups in the pictures or in the story line. Librarians have access to a wide range of publishers, and are usually happy to fulfill special requests.

Another alternative is for Carers of children from minority cultural or language groups to work with the children to produce homemade texts. These texts could follow traditional story lines, use the children's vocabulary or home language, and be accompanied by the children's art work or digital photos that are enhanced through programs such as Powerpoint, PhotoShop or Paintshop Pro. Homemade texts are relatively cheap to print out or burn onto CD once the hardware and software have been purchased. Schemes might consider making the purchase of hardware and software a priority so that all Carers can use it with children in their care.

Author

Beryl Exley is an experienced early childhood teacher and currently lectures in language and literacy education at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane. She has delivered many professional development sessions to Family Day Care Carers in Queensland and NSW on the importance of, and strategies for, sharing books and drama with young children. Contact: 07 3864 3267, 0409 625 477 or b.exley@qut.edu.au.

The Language Book Centre in Sydney also has a wide range of dictionaries, textbooks, videos, fiction, non-fiction, children's books and software that cover over 100 languages.

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— "The material includes work from Author: Hilton, E. Illustrator: Hurley, R. & Long, D. Text 'The Old Willow Tree' – pages 6 & 7

Author: Townsend, P. & Sarra, C. Illustrator: Ambroz, M. 'Beware of Crabs' – pages 2 & 3

Author: Malthouse, R. Illustrator: S. Gordon. 'Star Pictures' – page 2.

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