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# **Fostering Multi-Cultural Awareness: Books for Young Children**

**Doris Walker-Dalhouse**

*If the 47 million children in our schools are to function successfully as adults in the next century, they must grow up with more knowledge about our interdependent world, keener awareness of other people, and greater sensitivity to other people's attitudes and customs.*

*(Cogan, 1981, p. 8).*

Parents are children's first teachers, and in this capacity the home provides the foundation for their later literacy development (Vacca, Vacca and Gove, 1987). Parents also transmit values and shape attitudes about people who function as the core for children's socialization in the school and larger community. Therefore attempts at multicultural education should, ideally, entail the active participation of parents. Thomas Sobol, Commissioner of Education and President of the University of the State of New York, believes that young children at home or in preschool need help at home and school in order to understand diversity. They must be helped to develop self-pride and to respect differences among people. It is my belief that the joint involvement of parents and teachers can provide support for a multicultural school curriculum and effective instructional practices, and data for subsequent research. Sobol (1990) seems to concur by stating that "teaching young children about the differences and similarities between people will

not singularly ensure a more gentle and tolerant society, but might act as a prerequisite to one" (p. 30).

A relatively easy way to facilitate cultural awareness in young children is by the incorporation of multicultural literature in the curriculum. This can provide a vehicle for expanding cultural awareness and decreasing negative stereotyping about children of different groups (Norton, 1983, 1984). While a need exists for more books about minorities in general, and African-Americans in particular, there are some books which are ideal for teaching cultural awareness of this group.

Another way that multicultural awareness can be taught to young children is for educators to provide leadership in recommending multicultural literature which parents can use with their children at home. To choose appropriate literature successfully, educators and parents must base their choices upon a concern and respect for diversity in the language and lifestyles of different people. They must look for quality in the characterizations and plot, and the accuracy of the perspective from which the story is told (Huck, 1976). Specific guidelines for selecting books about Asian Americans (The Council for Interracial Books for Children, 1977), Black Americans (Lattimer, 1972) and Hispanics and Native Americans (Norton, 1983) should also be consulted to aid in book selection.

The remainder of this article will focus on literature about African-Americans, who constitute one of the largest minority groups in the United States. Guidelines developed by Lattimer in 1972 for selecting literature to promote a pluralistic society are still appropriate today. Lattimer established criteria in the areas of theme and illustrations, word content, and tone and perspective of the author. The

essential elements of the criteria are that authors through their stories should demonstrate a knowledge of black people and an appreciation of the black experience; deal responsibly with problems and issues; and portray in their illustrations black characters as humans with realistic black features. They should also use language purposefully and without condescension; represent historical or factual events accurately; and not overvalue a stereotypical middle-class lifestyle (Lattimer, 1972).

These criteria are restated in Rudine Sims-Bishop's *Shadow and Substance* (1982), in which she has discussed ideal books about African-Americans and culturally conscious books that should be shared with young children. The essential dimensions of these books are that their elements, including pictures, make it clear that there is a conscious attempt to depict an Afro-American life experience. The major characters must be Afro-American; the story must be told from the Afro-American perspective; the setting must be an Afro-American community or home; and the text must include some means of identifying the characters as black — physical description, language, cultural tradition and so forth (p. 652).

As an elementary teacher and parent interested in finding books that can provide students and my four year old with a multicultural perspective, I began reviewing books which I believed adhered to the criteria established by Lattimer and Sims-Bishop, and that emphasized common cultural bonds with society in general, while showing the full range of feelings, emotions and circumstances of African-Americans (Jalengo, 1988). This article contains annotations of some of these books which I believe qualify them as worthy of recommendation to parents.

A culturally relevant and delightful book found for bedtime reading is *Tell Me A Story* by Angela Johnson (1989). A loving relationship between a mother and her daughter forms the core of the story. The daughter asks her mother to tell her the story about her childhood and the mother complies. However, as soon as the mother begins the story, the daughter takes over the telling with much embellishment. It is obvious from the extent to which the daughter can recall details of the story that the mother has used storytelling to teach her family history to her daughter. While clearly building upon the oral tradition of African-American culture, the book highlights the often under-emphasized tender dimension of the African-American mother. The book rises above the stereotypical representation of the African-American mother as either the sole support of her family or the matriarch of a hard-working lower socioeconomic family, a person who is always exhausted, angry or depressed. *Tell Me A Story* reflects a refreshingly different lifestyle and dimension of the African-American family.

Intergenerational ties and family history are explored and presented in *The Patchwork Quilt* by Flourney (1985). A grandmother's need to preserve family history by producing a quilt has produced conflict with her daughter. The daughter does not see the value in the old ways and has not shared this tradition with her own family. When grandmother becomes ill, her granddaughter Tanya recognizes the quilt's meaning to her grandmother. Tanya's love for her grandmother — along with a desire to continue her grandmother's project — acts as a catalyst to involve her mother in the project. It is through this involvement that the family comes to appreciate its life story.

A context for understanding African-American history and culture can be found in folktales and legends. The natural curiosity of children about people who talk or look differently can be explored in the story, language and pictures found in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987); *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (McKissack, 1988); *Cornrows* (Yarbrough, 1979); and *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1985). *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987) emphasizes African cultural ties, African beauty, and good versus evil, as two sisters, one vain and the other caring, compete for the King's attention and hand in marriage. *Mirandy and Brother Wind* explains the African-American tradition of "cakewalking" as it envelops the reader in a fun-filled quest to find Brother Wind — whose speed Mirandy thinks can help her win the cakewalking contest.

*Cornrows* by Yarbrough (1979) weaves a tale of African-American history, drawing on the prevailing practice of braiding hair in cornrowing style. It explains the origin of cornrowing and its significance as a symbol of African identification. During slavery, cornrowing was devalued and shamed, and the practice was diminished. Reading about the revival of cornrowing as a symbol of the rejuvenation of the black spirit after slavery can lead to further reading and discussion about African-American heroes. Names of African-American heroes and role models who have fought for freedom or distinguished themselves in a diversity of fields are highlighted in the book. The names can provide a good reference point for locating and discussing non-fictional accounts of their lives.

Virginia Hamilton's anthology to black folklore in *The People Could Fly* contains tales of fright, cunning, wit, slavery and oppression. The collection, which includes excerpts explaining the historical significance and origin of each tale

is appropriate for family sharing. *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) is another delightful tale which reflects southern ties and shows an African-American girl's thinking and cunning as she outsmarts an egg-poaching fox. Rachel Isadora's poignant illustrations — along with the straightforward use of southern dialect — makes this a wonderful book for sharing.

Other interesting themes such as occupational roles and sibling rivalry can also be explored through African-American literature. Perceptions of the occupational roles of blacks are challenged in the book *Grandpa's Face* (Greenfield, 1988). When a granddaughter overhears an angry conversation and witnesses a scene in which her grandfather's face is transformed from that of the gentle man that she loves to that of an angry stranger, she becomes upset and afraid. She later learns that her grandfather is a professional actor and what she had overheard and seen was his rehearsing for a play.

The topics of friendships, sibling rivalry, and families can be explored in three interesting books by Ann Cameron. Julian is a truly delightful character in *The Stories Julian Tells* (1981), *Julian's Glorious Summer* (1987), and *More Stories Julian Tells* (1986). Julian shares stories about hiding his fear of learning to ride a bicycle from his best friend Gloria, his fights with his brother Huey, his adventures with his friends, and life with his family. The characters are well-developed in all the books. A leading character is Julian's father, a strong role model who clearly disciplines his sons in a loving manner. He teaches Julian, Gloria and Russell many valuable lessons about meaningful ways to fill their time, and ways to get along with others. The portrayal of Julian's father as a hard-working garage owner and mechanic who understands and loves his sons does much

to provide a positive image of the African-American male who is too often depicted as a strong disciplinarian, but a weak role model.

A favorite book for providing insight into the world and family of African-American children is *Me and Neesie* (Greenfield, 1975). *Me and Neesie* deals with a little girl's relationship with her imaginary friend, Neesie, and her family's reaction to Neesie. Because of its positive reference to cornrowing hair, it might be followed up by reading *Cornrows* by Yarbrough. Other interesting books that can be used to explore family life are *Eat Up Gemma* (Hayes, 1986); *I Need a Lunchbox* (Caines, 1988), and *Just Us Women* (Caines, 1982).

Poetry is another literary form that can be used effectively with young children. An excellent book for doing this is the book *Nathaniel Talking* (Greenfield, 1989). The character Nathaniel emerges in the book as an articulate, sensitive and intelligent child who expresses his thoughts about life and his family in poetic form.

Multicultural literature has value as a literacy tool and mechanism for expanding cultural awareness and knowledge. It also has the potential of providing us with better educated students, and perhaps more humane children.

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### **Multiculturalism and Literacy**

*Reading Horizons* is interested in publishing articles, anecdotes about teaching, and annotated bibliographies supporting the development of literacy through multicultural educational practices. Prospective contributors should follow guidelines for submission of manuscripts, given elsewhere in this issue.