

USING READ-ALOUDS WITH CULTURALLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A STRATEGY THAT CAN LEAD TO TOLERANCE AND IMPROVED READING SKILLS

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Using research based reading strategies to enhance students' reading abilities may not be enough to motivate all students to read. To reach students from different backgrounds, it is important for teachers to select children's books that represent various cultures accurately. If students do not read about their cultural groups' contributions or see pictures of people that represent their cultural backgrounds, they will likely feel alienated, and this will hinder their academic performance (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006). Culturally sensitive children's books can also aid students to develop positive cross cultural attitudes because children's books are not just resources to teach reading; they also transmit values, norms, and attitudes (Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005).

Russell (2009) discusses that culturally authentic children's books help both minority and mainstream students and mentions that this kind of literature provides minority cultures with positive role models that lead these students to develop cultural pride. He also states that these books help mainstream students by reducing misunderstandings and stereotypes they have towards minority groups. Hansen-Krening (1992) and Tunnel & Jacobs (2008) express similar ideas relating to the power children's books have in aiding young students to develop tolerance.

Unfortunately, Children's literature has traditionally omitted or misrepresented the experiences of many minority groups (Nieto, 1996; Russell, 2009; Tunnel & Jacobs, 2008). The purpose of this article is to recommend the use of read-alouds along with culturally sensitive children's books. This article explains why this may be necessary in certain cases and why this strategy leads to academic gains.

Culturally Authentic Children's Books

Today, many culturally sensitive children's books are available, but teachers do not always take advantage of such books. Schools and libraries often keep many books containing stereotypical images and outdated information (Yokota, 1999). Furthermore, teachers often mistakenly believe they are making a good choice when selecting children's books that focus on a particular minority group not realizing that the way these books represent that group might be stereotypic (Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Barba, 1992).

It is hard to believe that stereotypical children's books are still published today, but research on books for young readers indicates this still occurs especially towards certain groups like Native Americans (Lindsay, 2003; Roberts et al., 2005). One reason this happens is because some writers do not keep up with the latest research (Roberts et al., 2005). Many children's books on Native Americans do not show

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a specific tribe in the illustrations but mix aspects of different tribes together (Reese, 1999; Roberts et al., 2005). Reese (1999) discusses an example of an illustration showing a totem pole made by the Northwest Indians next to a tipi used by the Plains Indians. These kinds of illustrations do not reflect the great diversity among Native American people and lead young children to develop erroneous and stereotypical ideas towards Native Americans. Authentic children's books on Native Americans include those that portray American Indians participating in ordinary tasks of living in a modern setting with accurate facts about each tribe (Roberts et al., 2005).

American Society is Changing

The number of students coming from linguistic and cultural minority groups is steadily increasing, and for this reason, the need to develop tolerance towards these groups seems to be more important than ever. In 1990, for example, Anglos comprised seventy-six percent of the population, but by 2050 the Anglo population is projected to decrease to fifty-two percent of the population as ethnic minority groups continue to increase (Boutte, 1999).

Schools in predominantly white districts often ignore the importance of multicultural education believing that it is only beneficial for minority students (Boutte, 1999). Harris (1990) discusses that schools have often left African American literature out as a result of sanctioned lists created by educators. In elementary school, for example, children are more likely to read children's books that reflect

the values and perspectives of whites such as *Little House on the Prairie* rather than those written by African Americans or other people of color (Harris, 1990). If schools that use this approach change their outlook towards culturally authentic books, the results are likely to be beneficial.

Read Alouds & Children's Books

Research on improving children's reading ability suggests that read-alouds can be effective when teachers use them while engaging students to think critically by asking analytic questions (Ivey, 2003; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Research also indicates that reading books aloud as children sit passively is not enough to improve a child's vocabulary and comprehension development significantly in the early childhood years (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007).

One reason that read-alouds are effective in improving children's reading ability has to do with the fact that during read-alouds teachers typically play a more active role than when other reading strategies are used. During read-alouds, teachers can clarify concepts that children may not understand by giving characters a distinctive voice and by pausing and asking students questions that help them understand certain aspects of a book that would otherwise puzzle students (Ivey, 2003).

Many culturally authentic children's books are about difficult subjects that might be best explained through the guidance of an adult. Some elementary teachers may even avoid these books for fear of leading students to discomfort. Such books include those that discuss prejudice, slavery, and discrimination. An excellent example is

When Marian Sang written by Pam Munoz Ryan. This book is about the real life story of Marian Anderson, an African American singer. Although Marian applied to an all-white music school after she finished high school, she was denied the chance to attend because she was an African American. Although she encountered many obstacles such as being denied the right to sing in concerts, Marian was eventually allowed this chance. When people realized how talented she was, Marian became a tremendous success. She debuted with the New York Philharmonic on August 26, 1925 and captivated the audience with her voice. Marian's story is important because it shows the struggles that racial minorities may face and how they can overcome them. Harris (1990) mentions that these kinds of stories are not intended to scare children but to portray accurate historical facts and perspectives.

Banks (2003) suggests the use of similar books as part of a multicultural curriculum and recommends this type of literature as early as when students are in the primary grades to teach concepts of race, culture, discrimination, similarities, and differences. Banks uses *A Jar of Dreams*, by Yoshiko Uchida (1993) as an example of a book that has these qualities. This story is about a young girl, Rinko, who has to face acts of discrimination. Pang et al. (1992) also recommend the use of children's books that question inequalities and those that do not portray Asian Americans as accepting discrimination passively but confronting it actively.

Interactive read-alouds may allow students to explore difficult subjects like this while minimizing fear in students because

a teacher or an adult is there to facilitate the difficulties a child may have with this topic. As teachers interact with students during read-alouds, they can choose to discuss concepts like race, culture, and discrimination. Banks (2003) discusses that focusing on these concepts can make them meaningful for young students.

For younger students such as those in pre-school or kindergarten, teachers can use different kinds of culturally authentic books. Good multicultural children's books for students at this age level show people of different cultural backgrounds in more prestigious positions such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, or bankers rather than in a stereotypical way. Other authentic books for students at this level teach that although people are different in the way they appear, these differences are a good thing and should be celebrated.

Other Benefits of Read-Alouds

Read-alouds offer other advantages. One of these benefits is that they help students become better readers, but for this to happen, teachers must engage students to predict, hypothesize, analyze, and make connections (Barrentine, 1996; Beck and McKeown, 2001; Reutzel and Cooter, 2008). If teachers engage students by asking analytic questions as they read, students will learn to do this on their own (Barrentine, 1996; Ivey, 2003). Reading to children can also motivate them to read on their own. Teachers can make a children's book appealing when they read it if they read the parts of a book that will inspire the students to become interested in a particular book (Ivey, 2003). Read-alouds can also enhance vocabulary development if teach-

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ers pause to go over difficult words and then have conversations with students using the new words after reading (Reutzel and Cooter, 2008).

Another advantage of using read-alouds is that teachers can be sure that students are focusing on a book. Teachers can tell if students are engaged when they pause and ask questions during a read-aloud by the way students respond. Teachers can also engage students who do not appear engaged during read-alouds by asking them analytic questions about the book that is being read. During independent reading, not all students are usually engaged in reading as some might be looking at pictures while others quietly do other things (Fielding & Roller, 1992). These students might not like reading or may not be motivated by the books in the classroom. During independent reading time, there is little that a teacher can do about this problem because this is a period of quiet reading time often referred to as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading).

Choosing Culturally Sensitive Children's Books

Choosing culturally sensitive children's books is not easy. Lo and Lee (1993) state that there are quite a few stereotypic books on Asian Americans and sometimes it is difficult to avoid these because many of these books are illustrated attractively or traditionally thought of as appropriate. Reese (1999) offers an excellent example of how difficult it can be to select an authentic children's book on Native Americans when she discusses how one book published in 1999 was reviewed favorably in leading journals but offended the Native

American community.

Although Harris (1990) discusses the importance of books portraying accurate historical experiences, other authors like Reese (1999) and Roberts et al. (2005) suggest that it is important to have a balance between books describing a group in a historical setting and those that portray modern day life. This is especially important to consider when selecting children's books on Native Americans since there are few contemporary stories on this group. Yokota (1999) explains that a lack of contemporary stories about Japan is likely to lead children to view that area as an imaginary ancient place rather than a progressive country with diverse people.

To avoid selecting books that are offensive, teachers can select those that are recommended by researchers who specialize in multicultural children's books. Many articles and books on multicultural children's literature offer lists of authentic books similar to the list below.

Suggested Children's Books

Native American

Pueblo Boy: Growing Up in Two Worlds, by Marcia Keegan. (Ages 9-12)

Brave as a Mountain Lion, by Ann Herbert Scott. (Ages 4-8)

Asian American

A Is for Aloha, by Stephanie Feeney (Baby-Preschool)

A Jar of Dreams, by Yoshiko Uchida (Ages

9-12)

Hispanic Americans

I Love Saturdays y Domingos, by Alma Flor Ada (Ages 4-8)

Gracias, Rosa, by Micelle Markel (Ages 4-8)

African Americans

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, by John Steppoe (Ages 4-8)

Grandpa's Face, by Eloise Greenfield (Ages 4-8)

For more authentic children's books on these and other groups, educators can visit the websites below:
<http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com>
<http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/higgins.htm>

Conclusion

Culturally authentic children's books have been documented to benefit students when used during the early years of schooling. These books are a valuable resource because they teach tolerance in a society that is steadily becoming more diverse. They are important not only for minority students but also for mainstream students. These books build self-esteem in minority students and aid mainstream students to develop tolerance towards students of color (Russell, 2009; Tunnel & Jacobs, 2008). The sense of pride minority children develop from exposure to culturally authentic books may motivate them to read more.

Although a wide variety of reading techniques work well together, this article suggests that read-alouds offer advantages that are especially helpful for teachers when they use culturally sensitive children's books. One of the main advantages read alouds offer is the guidance of an adult. This can be a crucial advantage because many authentic children's books deal with race and inequalities and may lead some students to feel uncomfortable without the influence of an adult.

Teachers often have extra time. Sometimes it rains, and students cannot go outdoors for recess. Other times a teacher is absent, and instead of going to that teacher, students need to stay with the homeroom teacher. A useful tip for teachers whenever they have free time with students in pre-school through elementary grades is to start reading aloud from a culturally authentic book and to ask students analytic questions about the book as they read. Teachers will not only improve students' reading abilities when they do this, they may also be creating an opportunity for a harmonious society in the future.

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