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Searching for Culturally Responsive Books to Share With K-8 Students: A Teacher's Guide

■ **The American educational curriculum has historically lacked images of diversity and differing world-views. Although progress has been slow in changing this fact, multicultural books for K-8 students are more widely available than in the past several decades. Authors, illustrators, publishers, and educators are more committed to providing a large collection of culturally responsive resources. Nevertheless, teachers are responsible for choosing high-quality books to share with their students. This process requires carefully evaluating each work. Just because a book is approved by the district, a gift from a publisher, or the result of funding from a large corporation, it isn't necessarily an appropriate choice for students. In this article two teachers model the process of choosing high-quality culturally responsive books for students, using a comprehensive list of guidelines to critically examine both text and illustrations.**

With thousands of books being published for children and young people every year, it's easy for busy teachers to feel overwhelmed by the task of choosing high-quality culturally responsive books for their students.

Because they don't want to offend anyone or select inappropriate books by mistake, it's tempting for teachers to simply give students whatever comes across their desks. However, just because a book is approved by the district, a gift from a publisher, or the result of funding from a large corporation, it isn't necessarily an appropriate choice for students. Even if a book has been praised in a well-known journal of children's literature, teachers still must take responsibility for what their students read, and that means critically examining every book.

Good teachers evaluate books all the time. They may have a special language arts project and need to get a cross section of books from the library. Perhaps they have an extra-credit assignment that students need appropriate books to complete.

The good news is that multicultural stories are more widely available today than they have been in the past. Parents, educators, children, and librarians can choose from many titles that reflect the diversity in our society. Authors, illustrators, publishers, and educators are more committed than in previous decades to providing a large collection of quality resources from a multicultural perspective. However, access to these books is influenced by the availability of public funds, literacy initiatives, and retail outlets (Scharer, 2000). In addition, T. J. Hill (1998) identified three "gatekeepers" who influence the number of culturally responsive books that are published: publishers whose focus is only on profits; review journals whose focus is only on what they think will appeal to schools and libraries; and librarians and bookstore buyers who depend too heavily on these journals and publishers when selecting books.

A growing body of critical literature on children's books makes excellent multicultural children's books easier to find. Resources include the *Journal of Children's Literature*, *Multicultural Education*, and the Children's Literature and Reading special interest group of the International Reading Association.

However, progress in providing students with books that are true reflections of socie-

ty has been slow since the issue first reached national attention in the early 1960s, and much work remains to be done. In 1965 Larrick surveyed the more than 5,200 children's books published between 1962 and 1964. Only 349 (6.7%) included one or more African American characters. In 1997, more than 30 years later, Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie conducted a similar survey. They examined 2,400 children's picture books—Caldecott Medal winners, *Children's Catalog* books, and Little Golden Books—published from 1937 to 1990. They found that only 15% of the books surveyed had African American characters.

Because progress in this area has been slow, educators have to take the responsibility to seek out high-quality culturally responsive books to share with their students. In the following examples, two experienced teachers model the process for choosing books for students. A summary of the guidelines they use can be found at the end of the article. (For a list of high-quality culturally responsive books, see the Appendix.)

Terry has just returned from her first day of prepping her third-grade classroom for the start of the term in a year-round school. Her colleagues gave her an earful of warnings about her new class. "Limited English," "broken home," and "problem child" are labels she has been hearing all day. The last teacher left behind several boxes of tattered materials from 10 years ago. Armed with funds saved for a special occasion, Terry heads to a secondhand bookstore to find some high-quality books for her students.

The bookstore is crammed with possibilities. How can Terry use her limited funds (and time) to find the best books to engage her students? The bookseller makes some good suggestions for books to start with, and Terry finds a comfortable chair and begins to review the stack of books she has gathered.

One good place to begin is with a book's publication date, listed on the copyright page on the back of the title page. When a book was published may predict what biases might

be found in the book (Day, 1994). The first book Terry looks at was originally published in the 1950s, whereas the second book was published in the late 1990s. She will keep that difference in mind as she continues to review the two books.

Illustrations can be another quick way to begin to evaluate a book. Illustrations are an extension of the text, "and integral to comprehension of the narrative" (Manifold, 1997, p. 3). Illustrations comment on the characters' situation and often contain hidden messages or stereotypes. Stereotypes cause both individuals and cultures to lose their human qualities, and they don't promote understanding of social realities (Verrail & McDowell, 1990). For example, if the only Native Americans students see in their books are wearing war paint and living in tepees, how will they ever come to think of Indians accurately as people living in the modern world who are engaged in a wide variety of activities (Gay, 1994)?

The illustrations in the next book Terry picks up show several minority characters taking part in the activities of the story. But a closer look shows something odd about the pictures. The nonwhite characters lack authentic facial features and look the same as the white characters. This book may be an example of a publisher's using the Zipatone technique to make some characters look darker without redrawing the original artwork (Scharer, 2000). This cost-saving method of "recycling" old illustrations was once common. When Broderick (1971) analyzed children's literature published from 1827 to 1967, she found that fewer than 1% of children's publications had people of color in the story line and the illustrations depicted minority characters with Eurocentric features darkened using the Zipatone technique. With so many other better choices available, Terry puts this book back on the shelf.

Often a brief biography of the book's illustrator appears on the back cover of a paperback or the back flap of a hardcover book. Terry checks the illustrator's biography to see whether he or she seems to have the back-

ground to accurately depict the people and places in the story. For example, someone who grew up in China may be a better illustrator for a history of that country than an illustrator who seems to have lived his or her whole life in New York City.

The next book Terry looks at won an award for its illustrations, and they are indeed beautiful. However, she soon begins to question the choices the illustrator has made. She notices that no minority characters are depicted except in one picture that shows a Japanese gardener half hidden by a tree. Another picture shows an older person sitting on a porch in a rocking chair while others take part in the activities described in the text. As Highwater (1983) states in *Arts of the Indian American*, "Art is a way of seeing, and what we see in art helps define what we understand by the word *reality*" (p. 74). This book is not a good choice for Terry's students because it does not display characters that children of color can identify with and it uses stereotypes in its portrayal of occupations and age groups.

As Terry continues to work her way through the bookstore's collection, she keeps looking for high-quality stories that offer a truthful look at human experience. As Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (1998) write, in high-quality children's literature "the characters ... are true to life, and the insights the books imply are accurate, perhaps even wise" (p. 10).

When Terry leaves the used bookstore, she is carrying two bags of high-quality culturally responsive books that reflect the diversity of our world. She is pleased with her choices and the bargain prices she paid. On her way home she thinks about her own favorite childhood books and remembers how they touched her life and showed her new ways to think about the world. She feels certain that these books will do the same for her students.

In our second example, a national fast-food corporation has donated funding to sponsor a literacy program for grades K-6. Each classroom teacher has the opportunity

to select reading materials to support the district curriculum. Bart knows his sixth-grade students have little access to books at home. What is going to make reading fun for them? How can he help them discover that reading is its own reward?

He hopes to find high-quality culturally responsive books that will connect with the life experiences of the students in his class. He believes in the importance of making the educational experience relevant to the culturally diverse students (Gay, 1994). He hopes to find a wide variety of materials that will match his students' needs, which vary based on age, skill, learning styles, reading ability, prior schooling, background/cultural knowledge, English language development, interest, physical and intellectual abilities, and socioeconomic class (M. A. Hill, 2006).

Unfortunately, the local children's bookstore has recently closed its doors, like many other independent bookstores that specialize in children's literature. The advantage of a children's specialty bookstore is that the sales staff are usually knowledgeable about books and children. The bookseller often suggested new titles to Bart and would "hand sell" books she knew would meet his students' needs. "In contrast, large chains of bookstores may have limited flexibility to purchase books to meet the needs of local buyers and the expertise of the sales staff may be limited" (Scharer, 2000, p. 4).

So Bart knows he will probably be on his own when he goes to select books at the chain store. He begins his search with some important principles in mind. First, he understands that selecting good books that reflect the diversity of the world begins with the same elements that make any children's book excellent, including plot, characters, setting, style, theme, illustrations, and point of view. The story must be compelling and age appropriate. The support material such as student workbooks must conform to state standards (M. A. Hill, 2006) and curriculum frameworks.

As he examines each book, Bart looks carefully at whether it conveys messages that we want young people to learn. That a book

has characters who are people of color is not enough. He looks carefully for loaded words, derogatory terms that exclude or ridicule characters. He eliminates one book because it uses dialect that seems to have no purpose in the story other than to make the speaker sound ignorant.

Bart also looks for gender-neutral language. One older book he examines uses terms such as *mailman* and *stewardess* instead of *mail carrier* and *flight attendant*. This same book features a family in which the mother does all the household and parenting tasks while the father stays in the background. Bart adds this book to his growing pile of rejects.

The corporate funding Bart is using reminds him to look at brand names and how they are used in the stories. One book is filled with references to brand names: sodas, electronic toys, fast-food menu items. The illustrations prominently display corporate logos on buildings, signs, and the products the characters are using. No educational purpose is served by this material. In fact, the book seems almost like a series of advertisements. Bart puts it back on the shelf.

Bart considers how each book will affect his students' self-image. He looks for stories that have more than one character who children of color can identify with and characters who come from a cross section of socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and occupations. He knows that quality literature does not simply display diversity but rather fills the story with characters who are individuals with a variety of attitudes and actions (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001).

To gauge the author's point of view, Bart checks the author's biography on the back cover. He also looks at the crucial elements of the story—the turning points and crises, the heroes and villains. He rejects one book because all the “good guys” seem to come from the same narrow background. Although the story features one character with disabilities, she is always shown sitting on the sidelines, never participating in the story. Another he puts back on the shelf because occupations

are not shown in a balanced way: All the executives in the story are white and all the minority characters wear uniforms and name tags. A third book is a well-known classic, but Bart turns it down because the characters who do the problem solving are all boys. Girls seem to exist in the story only so boys can rescue them. This is a hidden message his students don't need to hear.

When Bart turns to the nonfiction section to find some history stories for his students, he looks for books that give accurate factual details about historical events. He's alert to what is omitted as well as to what is included because “whether intentional or unintentional, the omission of multiple perspectives has debilitating effects on students” (Tonnell & Annom, 1996, p. 212). He asks himself why a book tells the story the way it does.

When a book mentions religion, he looks to see if religious matters are treated respectfully. He rejects one book because it seems to advocate a particular religion, another because it uses language that might be considered prejudicial.

He looks carefully at the illustrations and photographs in the history books because he understands that “a powerful image may become a mental ‘bookmark’ of a historic event by capturing and freezing the essence of the represented event in visual allegory” (Manifold, 1997, p. 2). Pictures can also reveal the artist's bias or point of view about an event (Manifold, 1997).

As the afternoon wears on, Bart puts together a small collection of truly outstanding material for his students. Thanks to his careful appraisal of each work, he has a wide variety of books that are worthy of his students' attention. These books will show them what a wonderful experience reading a book can be. They are books that his students will remember for a long time, perhaps their whole lives.

The following guidelines (Amber & Gibbons, 2006) summarize the issues considered by the two teachers in the examples.

- *Authenticity.* How authentic are the story and illustrations? Does it tell an authentic human experience?
- *Brand names.* How are corporate logos and brand names used in the story? Notice where they are placed. Unless they are used to illustrate a concept, brand names should not show prominently.
- *Copyright date.* When was the book published? A recent copyright date does not ensure that the material gives a fair and accurate treatment of the subject matter.
- *Disabilities.* Are people with disabilities depicted any differently from people without disabilities? Achievements of people with disabilities must be included when appropriate.
- *Family forms.* Children live in a variety of family forms. Are nontraditional families structures such as blended, single parent, cohabiting, grandparent-led, and foster families represented?
- *Heroes.* Who are the heroes in the story line? Do “good” characters reflect a variety of backgrounds?
- *Hidden messages.* What unspoken ideas are communicated in the text and illustrations?
- *History.* Are the historical details in the book accurate? Without sacrificing accuracy, historical material should include contributions from varied cultures and from both men and women. Think of groups that might consider the account inaccurate.
- *Illustrations.* What choices has the illustrator made? Examine the illustrator’s biographical information. Does it suggest that the illustrator has the background to accurately represent characters?
- *Lifestyles.* How are the characters’ lifestyles depicted? If dialect is used, does it have a legitimate purpose and does it ring true?
- *Loaded words.* Does the book contain sexist language or loaded words that exclude or ridicule characters?
- *Occupations.* Are minority and nonminority groups represented in fair proportions in trades and occupations?
- *Older people.* Do older people take part in activities in the story? When appropriate,

aging should be pictured as a continuous process that extends across an entire lifetime.

- *Perspective.* What is the author’s point of view? Look for feminist or patriarchal perspectives that influence the story line. Find the author’s leading perspectives by identifying the arcs and turning points in the story line.
- *Religion.* Is religion treated respectfully without being advocated? Are religious matters treated respectfully, without being reenacted or simulated? One religion cannot be advocated over another. Derogatory words or language that instills prejudice may not be used in any way.
- *Self-image.* How will the book affect students’ self-image?
- *Stereotypes.* Does the story use stereotypes or oversimplify the characteristics of different groups?

Authors

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Appendix Annotated Bibliographies

Primary Reading Level: Grades 1-3

- Ada, A. F. (2002). *I love Saturdays*. New York: Athenaeum.
- A little girl expresses her delight in her weekend visits with both sets of grandparents. One day is spent with her Mexican American Abuelito and Abuelita. The other day is shared with her grandmother and grandfather.
- Cherry, L. (2002). *The great kapok tree: A tale of the Amazon rain forest*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Flora and fauna are beautifully illustrated as the theme of the ecological importance of saving the rain forests unfolds.
- Edwards, M. (2005). *Pa Lia's first day*. New York: Harcourt Paperbacks.
- Pa Lia Vang has her first day of second grade as a new girl at Jackson Magnet School. This is the initial book in the Jackson Friends chapter book series.
- Polacco, P. (2001). *Mr. Lincoln's way*. New York: Philomel.
- "Mean Gene," the school bully, appears to be a handful, a boy who talks back to his teachers, picks on other students, and makes ethnic slurs. Mr. Lincoln, the school principal, skillfully sees beyond Gene's behavior and dissolves his intolerance and bullying.
- Reiser, L. (2003). *Margaret and Margarita*. New York: Greenville.

On the left, Margaret and her mother come to the park. Little Margaret disputes in English that “there is no one to play with” except her toy rabbit. On the right, in Spanish, Margarita and her mother hold the identical conversation.

Rodman, M. (2005). *My best friend*. New York: Viking Juvenile.

Lily, 6, wants to be best friends with Tamika, 7, and tries everything to get the older girl’s attention. This a story about friendship illustrated with lustrous watercolors.

Intermediate Reading Level: Grades 4-8

Ada, A. F. (1996). *Me llamo Maria Isabel* [My name is Maria Isabel]. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Me llamo Maria Isabel imparts the story of a young girl who moved from Puerto Rico to New York City. She is determined to adapt to new surroundings while retaining her cultural identity.

Betancourt, J. (1995). *My name is Brain Brian*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks.

Brian is anxious about entering sixth grade. In the past his learning experiences have been times of confusion and frustration. Fortunately, his teacher recognizes his problem without delay.

Bolden, T. (2005). *Maritcha: A nineteenth century American girl*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

The history of blacks in the 19th and early 20th centuries unfolds in this fascinating biography. Maritcha’s accomplishments were astonishing for her time, gender, and ethnicity.

Chi, F. L., White, B., & Lu, C. F. (2001). *Double luck: Memoirs of a Chinese orphan*. New York: Holiday House.

Orphaned at a young age, Chi Fa grows up surviving adversity and hardships. Optimism and determination in the face of harsh conditions is the strength of this book that is relayed in a moving narrative.

Curtis, C. P. (1995). *The Watsons go to Birmingham—1963*. New York: Delacort Press.

Not fitting in because of being smart, being teased for a lazy eye, and learning to not fight with brothers and sisters are all part of the entertaining and poignant story of Kenny, set in an important time in American history. The bombing of the church in Birmingham changes members of Kenny’s family.

Johnson, T. (2001). *Any small goodness: A novel of the barrio*. New York: Cahners Business Information.

Daily life in East Los Angeles teaches Arturo “any small goodness is of value.” The Spanish words and phrases sprinkled throughout give a good example of dialect.

Pearsall, S. (2005). *Crooked rivers*. New York: Random House.

Life and times in Ohio, 1812, are captured in the story of Rebecca Carver. She returns home to find Native American “Indian John” chained upstairs awaiting trial for killing a trapper. Learning truth and justice binds this compelling story.

Ryan, P. M. (2004). *Becoming Naomi*. New York: Scholastic Press.

Naomi discovers her heritage and talent while overcoming abandonment and disappointment. Oaxaca, Mexico, serves as the location though the story is universal.

Soto, G. (1992). *Pacific crossing*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.

Two Mexican American boys are invited to spend the summer in Japan as exchange students. This coming-of-age story engrosses readers to experience customs and culture in an eye-opening and moving journey.

Woodson, J. (1990). *Last summer with Maizon*. New York: Putnam.

Everything changes for Maizon and Margaret the summer they are 11. Margaret’s father dies and Maizon is offered a scholarship to a private boarding school. Learning to accept the inevitable changes in life tests both characters.