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Providing Windows for Non-Minority Readers

Roberta Gardner
Galloway School, Atlanta
rgardner@gallowayschool.org

Collecting and presenting children's literature takes on new meaning when the audience is comprised of students who are affluent and represent the dominant culture. As a school librarian, the author of this article believes that children's literature provides a means by which she can introduce the diversity of society into the classroom. Highlighting the accomplishments, contributions, and experiences of minorities within the context of the library curriculum is a continuous process. In addition to sharing books for the sake of enjoyment, the author works to create a reading program that promotes tolerance, social justice, equality, and inclusion.

Using literature has proven to be an effective means for providing both mirrors and windows for young readers. It can be a source of affirmation as well as a means through which we can gain understanding, empathy, and knowledge about people unlike ourselves. It is one of the primary reasons I decided to become a school librarian. Yes, I wanted to play with puppets and recite the poetry of Shel Silverstein (2004) and Janet Wong (2008), but I also wanted to provide opportunities for social enrichment by consistently collecting and presenting materials that feature people and realities from the broad context of our world, both past and present. Reading books about diverse people, places, and experiences -whether they are real or imagined- can fulfill this need. Thus, the objective to help foster in children social and cultural values has become one of the key elements of my literature program.

A Look into Their World

As the Early Learning Librarian at an independent progressive school, my job is to expose students to literature that gets them excited about reading and the uniqueness of our world. Our students are by and large from affluent European American households; about 20 % of them are students of color. It is a unit school with students divided into Early, Middle, and Upper Learning; the school community is small and close knit, and many families have started and finished their K-12 education at the school. The school community is characterized by differentiated learning, individualized contracts that monitor student progress, and a refusal of artificial reward systems. I know all of my young readers by name, and throughout their years in early learning I have the pleasure

and challenge of supporting their reading needs and interests. I help to build upon the strong language and literacy foundation started by parents who are keenly aware of the advantages of a print-rich environment. Parents have selected this private institution for various reasons, but in doing so, they have inadvertently isolated their children from the diversity of a world in which they must function outside of the school grounds. Therefore, both parents and teachers have expressed a strong desire for students to understand and embrace cultural, economic, geographical, gender, generational, racial, and religious differences.

Recently, I used the book *Come and Play: Children of Our World Having Fun* edited by Ayana Lowe (2008) with a group of second grade students. The scope of diversity is clearly represented in this book and is centered around a universal theme that the children can relate to. Photographs of children from all over the world are featured as they are engaged in play; three young Muslim boys from Masat, Oman toying with a homemade wooden plane, young children in Bagdad playing tag, a young Alaskan boy with his grandpa playing a string game. Each photograph is accompanied by short “word riffs” or poems written by young elementary students, and edited by Ayana Lowe, their multicultural studies teacher. In a small group setting, I allowed the students to observe a photograph from the book for a few minutes; I then encouraged them to provide descriptive words, questions, and ideas about the photos. Where do you think these children live? What kind of game are they playing? Have you ever played a similar game? Our activity replicated the project created by the young authors who wrote the text for the book.

Introducing children to literature that features diverse people and their experiences is merely the beginning, a part of a continuum that progresses towards active engagement. After reading the story, *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit Ins* by Carole Weatherford and Jerome Lagarrigue (2007), my students and I had discussions based on the concepts of freedom, justice, equality, and civil disobedience. The book provided an opportunity to introduce students to how segregation impacted everyday life from the perspective of a young child. Jade raised her hand, “I think that it was so unfair, that Connie couldn’t sit at the lunch counter, and I’m glad that things have changed.” “Well, I think that without the sit ins black people still might not be allowed to eat in certain restaurants” Ryan chimed in, “I’m glad that in the end, Connie finally got to have her banana split.” “Yes, me too,” I said. “It was never that way for me, because of how others stood up for what was right for *all* people. Can you think of another time when people worked to make a change?” Jake waved enthusiastically, “It reminds me of Rosa Parks, when she refused to move from her seat on the bus.” “That’s right,” I said. “She was one of many people who fought to end segregation in the South.”

Our conversation indicated that the students had developed empathy and a strong connection to the characters. During this exchange, children learned about the difficulty that people of color endured in a world that was unwilling to grant opportunities and freedom to people unlike themselves. I also wanted the students to be able to express their understanding of the story through a technique called dramatic tableau in which students physically recreated a scene from a story using facial expressions, body language, and sometimes props. Once the scene had been set, the students “freeze framed” the moment, taking turns and asking and answering questions about the characters and events. I used this technique, as well as role-play, fairly often. The

students enjoy bringing a story to life, and it allows them to express their understanding of a character and their situation in a unique way.

Another way to make authentic connections was through the sharing of personal stories. One of the benefits of our school community is that parents and even extended family members are active participants in the classroom. Last year, after a first grade class completed a unit on India, I read the book *Dadima Wears a Sari* by Kashmiri Sheth (2007). I surprised the students and invited the Dadima (paternal grandmother) of an Indian student to our session. In the spirit of Kashmiri Sheth's (2007) book, she shared personal stories and family traditions in addition to bringing several beautiful saris for the students to see up close and personal. Her visit was an excellent educational experience. Her Dadima helped us to properly pronounce many of the Hindi words I had struggled with in the book, and her young Pakistani granddaughter benefited from a sense of pride and affirmation.

Diversity in the Curriculum

I consistently seek to create balance in my literature program so that children will not gain a monolithic perception of minority experiences, family structure, gender roles, the elderly, or people living in different socioeconomic classes. As our young students glimpse the social and political order of our society, they can formulate meaningful questions and an understanding of differing lifestyles and points of view. As a librarian, one of the difficulties that I often face is finding books without stereotypical images. Although literature selections featuring "nontraditional" families remain sparse, there are some representatives that could be used in the classroom. The issue of same-sex parents is discussed in *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson (2006), a book that features two male chinstrap penguins who are mates in the Central Park Zoo, and who become parents of a new penguin. Another useful book for any school library or classroom about families is *The Family Book* by Todd Parr (2003), which highlights the diversity of the contemporary family in a fun matter of fact tone; from single parent homes, to two moms, two dads, adoption, and more.

I was able to address issues of gender bias in the course of my own library curriculum by introducing students to the book *The Daring Nellie Bly: America's Star Reporter* by Bonnie Christensen (2003) which featured a bold, competitive, and spirited female heroine. Her story served as a catalyst for a lesson on the past, present, and future of newspapers and more importantly, it served as a fine example of the impact a woman made within this field, and how she defied the conventional ideas of a woman's role in society. Students enjoyed the short readers' theatre script I created to accompany the book. They were intrigued by the escapades and stunts she used to gain a great story and the title remains a favorite selection for leisure reading and student reports.

Debbie Reese's Native American Children's Literature Blog is one of my favorite resources. She speaks up about the lack of acceptable Native American titles in the marketplace. Similarly, even though Latino Americans are a rapidly growing segment of our population, the number of children's literature offerings depicting them continues to lag. Authors like Janet Wong (2006) and Grace Lin (2008) are providing contemporary voices in the Asian community, but the pickings remain slim. In order to bolster my collection of culturally sensitive books, I typically scout small independent publishing houses; a few of my favorites are Free Spirit Publishing and Lee & Low Books. I also

look for new titles by authors who have written successful books in the past. One example is Fredrick Lipp (2008). He has consistently written compelling multicultural stories, and his most recent book *Running Shoes* provides a strong portrayal of a young Cambodian girl determined to make her dream of attending school a reality. I also share folktales and fairytales that feature protagonist from different cultures. Some popular favorites among students are *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* by Robert San Souci (2000), *Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet* compiled by Neil Phillip (2003), and *Master Man* by Aaron Shepard (2000).

For younger students, I use my fair share of books that feature anthropomorphic characters that exhibit human frailties and teach tolerance. I also use many of the newer melting pot books that have been published in the last few years. Books like *The New Girl and Me*, by Jacqui Robbins (2006) series like *Willimena Rules* by Wilson Wesley, (2007) and *Ziggy and the Dinosaurs* by Sharon Draper (2006) have increasingly become popular leisure reading selections. It has been debated by scholars such as Bishop (1982) that melting pot books such as these are effective at educating others about racial or cultural identity. In some ways this is a fair assessment. Melting pot books feature children of color but lack cultural references. An educator who solely uses these books as multicultural literature is certainly missing the boat. Nevertheless, these books illustrate the plurality of American culture, and they often depict children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds engaged in conflicts common to all children. I believe that in a balanced, well planned literature curriculum, melting pot books can serve as a bridge for connecting children to other books about minority individuals and families and can provide children with a sense of our universality (Bishop, 1982). When race is not the antagonist, children are allowed to see their commonalities between life experiences like losing a tooth or issues with friendship.

I strive to suggest diverse titles to teachers that they can include in daily lesson plans. Recently, I passed along the book *Wangari's Trees of Peace* by Janette Winter (2008) to a young kindergarten teacher who was starting a unit on trees. In the book, children learn about Wangari's inspiring quest to replant trees that were destroyed as a result of over development in Kenya, her country. Her passion for sustaining the environment created the "Green Belt Movement." This movement was comprised of resourceful and diligent women throughout Kenya who ended up planting nearly 30 million tree seedlings. The teacher was able to expand her unit in a variety of ways as a result of this resource. One book can open the door to a variety of interdisciplinary studies. I consult a variety of resources in order to make selections that are respectful and accurate portrayals of minorities. Multicultural Review, Teaching Tolerance, and Notable Books for a Global Society are just a few of the resources I refer to for new selections.

Moving Forward

Too often, minorities are introduced in isolation, and not within the context of the curriculum. Minority groups tend to get overlooked with the exception of celebratory months and cultural celebrations. I still shudder thinking about my own loathing of Black History Month as a young student. I was one of five or six African American kids in a class of twenty, but I always felt like all eyes were on me during these studies. Looking back, I'm sure the other African American students felt the same way and now I know why. This sudden influx and focus normalized Whiteness and made me feel like an

outsider. It was certainly not intentional, and a good faith effort (albeit a small one) was being made for inclusiveness. This fragmented approach, however, devalues the contributions of minorities within the fabric of American culture. I certainly don't want the few minority students at our school to feel the same isolation and confusion I felt. Highlighting cultures during these isolated periods throughout the year nullifies the strength and perseverance of minority groups and belittles their contributions. We must be deliberate and consistent about integrating the curriculum.

In our school, we are working collectively to create an environment in which tolerance and inclusiveness is valued. For my part, I will work to consistently provide students with introductions to diverse people and their world, engage students in meaningful activities, and infuse selections into their learning that will provide an opportunity for young readers to develop a sense of the world outside of their own context. I will continue to build resources and literature presentations that not only get children excited about reading, but that also open windows to the world, not only as we wish it were but as it exists. A school library collection that is diverse teaches children a true reflection of our world (Agosto, 2007). These literature experiences can provide a sense of social justice and moral consciousness while at the same time connecting our students to issues pertinent to the improvement and understanding of humanity.

Roberta Gardner has been the Early Learning Librarian at the Galloway School in Atlanta, Georgia for the past seven years. She holds an MLS from Clark Atlanta University, and an undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois in Sociology.

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