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Terrell A. Young
Washington State University

Lois Case Campbell
Washington State University

Linda K. Oda
Weber State University

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Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults: A Rationale and Resources

Terrell A. Young
Lois Case Campbell
Linda K. Oda

"Just because you're different from other people doesn't mean you're not as good or that you have to dislike yourself," [Aunt Waka] said.

She looked straight into my eyes, as if she could see all the things that were muddling around inside my brain.

"Rinko, don't ever be ashamed of who you are, she said. "Just be the best person you can. Believe in your own worth. And someday I know you'll be able to feel proud of yourself, even the part of you that's different... the part that's Japanese."

A Jar of Dreams by Yoshiko Uchida (1981, p. 125).

Aunt Waka's message to Rinko illustrates two of the many potentials of multicultural children's literature: to enable nonmainstream children to see others who are like them reflected in literature they read and hear, and to help them build self-esteem and feel pride in themselves as part of their culture. Yet the underlying message of multicultural literature is one that benefits *all* children.

Multicultural literature is literature by and about people belonging to the various self-identified ethnic, racial, religious, and regional groups in this country. These groups are referred to as parallel cultures rather than minorities, since the term *minority* is problematic. The following passage from Jacqueline Woodson's *Maizon at Blue Hill* (1992) illustrates some of the negative connotations associated with 'minority.'

"Are there other black girls there, Mr. Parsons?"

Mr. Parsons blinked. "Yes, Maizon. Of course there are other black girls."

"Then how come there aren't any in any of these pictures? We must have looked at a hundred of them. And how come there aren't any in this?" I waved the catalog at him.

"The catalog needs to be updated, Maizon," he said slowly. "We're working on doing that this year. Blue Hill is actually somewhat behind other schools, in a way." Mr. Parsons cleared his throat before continuing. "While we have small classes with caring teachers and some of the best athletic equipment, we're still working on being more inclusive — bringing in more minorities and students who financially wouldn't be able to have a boarding school experience if it weren't for scholarship..."

I listened to him drone on for a while. I hated the word minorities. I mean, who decides who becomes a minority? Personally, I don't consider myself less than anyone. (pp. 2-3)

Thus, *minority* denotes a value less than that assigned to majority, as if the terms reflect an intrinsic quality rather than a numerical quantity. The term is also problematic in view of sheer numbers; culturally distinct populations exist in dense

pockets across the country often outnumbering the regional mainstream population.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first purpose is to present a rationale for making multicultural literature a part of the curriculum for all children. The second purpose is to present teachers with helpful resources they can use to learn about multicultural literature and how to weave it into the fabric of the curriculum.

Rationale

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1980 and 1990, the total population grew ten percent. The Asian and Pacific Islander population showed a 108 percent increase, the greatest increase of any nonmainstream group. Latinos increased their numbers by 53 percent, Native Americans, 38 percent and the African American population, 13 percent. This information begs for consideration, since Sanders (1994) warns, "If students in our schools feel alienated in curriculum, instruction, or climate they will suffer. If they are alienated in two of the areas they will fail." Though not a panacea, we see multicultural children's literature as a tool for modifying curriculum, instruction, and climate so *all* students can feel included in the classroom.

Multicultural children's literature is a powerful tool to help students develop an understanding and respect for individuals of all cultures while at the same time gaining an appreciation of their own cultural and literary heritage (Norton, 1990, 1991; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992). An important component of a deeper understanding of these issues is in becoming sensitive to the collective human condition regardless of culture: our needs, emotions, and desires (Cullinan and Galda, 1994). Readers are invited to explore new ways of viewing people of parallel cultures through the eyes of characters like

Cassie Logan in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), David Logan in *The Well* (Taylor, 1995), Maria Isabel Salazar Lopez in *My Name is Maria Isabel* (Ada, 1993), Miata Ramierez in *The Skirt* (Soto, 1992), Henry Yazzie in *The Shadow Brothers* (Cannon, 1990), and Joan Lee in *The Star Fisher* (Yep, 1991).

Finally, our classroom literary selections ought to reflect the diversity outside its walls and provide balance to the predominantly mainstream focus found across the curriculum and grade levels. It is through reading nonstandard selections that students will be able to appreciate the contributions women and members of parallel cultures have made to our country in history, science, mathematics, and the arts.

The remainder of this article is devoted to a discussion of resources for teachers who are in the process of selecting and evaluating multicultural children's books for classroom use. Additional resources will provide teachers with essential background information about various cultures, and appropriate ways of weaving multicultural literature into the curriculum. While most of the resources are current and in print, others can only be found in libraries.

Resources

We include the following section on resources since many teachers need help in getting to know the literature by and about people of parallel cultures. Dorothy Strickland (1993) suggests teachers need three types of help in making multicultural education a meaningful experience for their students and themselves: 1) help in locating resources, 2) help in learning about people of parallel cultures through involvement in study groups in which they read and discuss adult fiction and nonfiction in addition to literature for children and young adults, and 3) help in establishing literature

based programs. Thus, the resources section is meant to help teachers in addressing these needs. We include the three topics listed above and add a fourth: issues in multicultural literature.

Locating Resources

Strickland identifies two facets of this need: 1) booklists and 2) information about authors and illustrators. We include a number of books and bibliographies teachers can consult in selecting multicultural literature. To help teachers and students learn more about authors and illustrators, we describe a few of the articles, biographies and autobiographies, and books that are currently available.

Booklists

Many teachers have been pleased with the available resources to help them select quality multicultural literature. One excellent source is Bishop's *Kaleidoscope* (1994) with annotations of nearly 400 books published in 1990, 1991, and 1992. The books are grouped by theme or genre. Another is Miller-Lachman's (1992) *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World*, which presents annotations of nearly 1000 titles published between 1970 and 1990. *Teaching Multiethnic Literature in Grades K-8* (Harris, 1992c) contains chapters written by members of different cultural perspectives writing about the literature that reflects or concerns their respective groups. *The Multicolored Mirror* (Lindgren, 1991), *Multiethnic Literature for Children and Young Adults* (Kruse & Horning, 1991), and *Many Faces, Many Voices* (Manna & Brodie, 1992) include chapters written by authors and illustrators of color along with annotated listings of recommended culturally authentic books. Oliver (1994) and Rochman (1993) present many titles of multicultural books for young adults.

Journal articles often include bibliographies of books considered culturally accurate. For instance, Junko Yokota's article in *Language Arts* includes an annotated bibliography of more than 30 books meeting the criteria established in her article (1993a). This example is one of the many excellent articles available. Teachers will also want to consult others (e.g., Cox and Galda, 1990; Duff and Tongchinsub, 1990; Gracia, Hadaway, and Beal, 1988; Galda and Cotter, 1992; Galda and Cox, 1991; Galda, Diehl, and Ware, 1993; Norton, 1990).

Many children's literature textbooks include information about multicultural literature. For example, Cullinan and Galda (1994), Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (1993), Norton (1990), and Rudman (1993, 1995) all contain specific chapters dealing with multicultural literature. Huck, Hepler, and Hickman (1993) mention multicultural titles throughout their book as they discuss genres, selection criteria, and classroom applications. Chapters dealing with multicultural literature also appear in many professional volumes (e.g., Allen, 1993; Harris, 1992a).

Teachers can also depend on many journals to provide them with recommendations of current multicultural titles. *Booklinks* for instance, often publishes bibliographies and reviews of multicultural books. Another is *MultiCultural Review* which regularly features reviews and analyses of multicultural literature for children and young adults. Columns highlighting multicultural titles often appear in *The Horn Book*, *Language Arts*, and *The Reading Teacher*.

Other resources are available that present analyses of titles about a single group. For instance, many works are devoted to African-American children's books (Bishop, 1990b; Dickerson, 1990; Harris, 1992b; Johnson, 1991; Kirk, 1993; Mitchell-Powell, 1994; Moll, 1991; Rollock, 1989; Sims, 1982;

Smith, 1994). For evaluations of books about Native Americans, see Slapin and Seale (1988), Caldwell-Wood and Mitten (1992), Giorgis and Mathis (1995), Hirschfelder (1993), MacCann (1992), Noll (1994), and Scott (1995). To learn more about Asian-American books, see Aoki (1992), Cai (1994), Jenkins and Austin (1987), and Yokota (1993b). For information about Latino books, see Barrera, Liguori, and Salas (1992), Nieto (1992), Resendez (1985), and Schon (1989, 1992a, 1993b, 1994c). There are also many sources for recommended books in Spanish (Ada, 1993; Schon, 1992b, 1993a, 1994a, 1994b). See Capan (1994) for listings of books about biracial characters. Frankel (1994) presents an analysis of books about Palestinian-Arabs. Finally, Yokota (1994) notes books representing more than one culture.

Information about authors and illustrators

Fortunately, more and more resources are becoming available for teachers and students to become acquainted with authors of multicultural children's literature. This section is divided into two areas: 1) resources introducing a number of authors and illustrators, and 2) resources introducing a single author or illustrator. The second category includes articles, biographies and autobiographies.

Teachers are delighted with the recent resources now available for learning about authors and illustrators. Frances Day's *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature* introduces teachers to the lives and works of 39 different authors and illustrators. *Contemporary Spanish-Speaking Writers and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults* (Schon, 1994a), *Conversations with Artists* (Cummings, 1992), and *Book People* (McElmeel, 1992) are also valuable information sources. *Growing Up Latino* (Augenbraum and Stavans, 1993) contains memoirs and short stories by many Latino authors such as Rudolfo Anaya, Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros,

Nicholasa Mohr, Gary Soto, and Piri Thomas. Teachers will also wish to consult other excellent resources for learning about authors and illustrators (Kruse and Horning, 1991; Lindgren, 1991; Manna and Brodie, 1992).

Other resources present information about a single author or illustrator. These range from biographies and autobiographies to articles. Autobiographies, such as Nicholasa Mohr's (1994) *Growing Up Inside the Sanctuary of My Imagination*, Laurence Yep's (1991) *The Lost Garden*, or Yoshiko Uchida's (1991) *The Invisible Thread* illustrate how authors craft many of their stories from their own experiences. Bishop's *Presenting Walter Dean Myers* (1991) not only provides information about the author but about several of his books as well. Many articles provide information about a single author or illustrator (Bishop, 1990a, 1990c, 1992a, 1993; Mora, 1994; Soto, 1992; Strickland, 1994; A. Say, 1994, 1995; Y. Say, 1994; Zarnowski, 1991).

Learning about other cultures in adult study groups

Adult book clubs and Teachers as Readers groups provide teachers with opportunities to meet together to discuss and share responses to books they have read. Sometimes parents, teachers, and administrators in these groups talk about children's books; at other times, they discuss young adult, adult, or professional books. Adults participating in such groups learn a great deal about other cultures as they read and discuss realistic fiction and nonfiction written by members of parallel cultures. This learning helps them to challenge stereotypes and over generalizations by seeing variations within groups and similarities among groups. Moreover, this knowledge is essential in selecting authentic multicultural literature for children. Teachers who participate in these groups find themselves relying less and less on expert

recommendations as they choose literature for their classrooms and curricula.

There are many fiction and nonfiction books adult readers can read to learn more about other cultures. A few possible authors of adult books to consider are Paula Gunn Allen, Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, Mary Crow Dog, Richard Erdoes, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Amy Tan, and Victor Villasenor. Zimmerman's (1992) annotated bibliography of U.S. Latino literature is a useful tool for selecting additional Latino books to read in these groups.

Establishing literature-based programs

Too often multicultural literature is confined to special dates and holidays. It is not sufficient for teachers to pull out African American literature for Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month or Mexican American literature for use on only Cinco de Mayo. Multicultural literature should be available for students to read on their own, to study together in groups (perhaps literature circles), as information sources to provide balance across the curriculum, and as models for would-be writers (Bishop, 1990b). We are not implying that teachers should no longer read, teach, nor promote mainstream children's literature; we are simply suggesting they make multicultural literature a part of the literary canon and the curricula.

Teachers have been pleased with the many useful resources for making multicultural literature an integral part of their curriculum rather than a token effort. Norton (1990) recommends a five phase model for making this literature a part of the reading program. In this model, students are immersed in one culture's literature. She suggests they begin by broadly reading folktales. For instance, when studying

Mexican-American Literature, students begin (phase 1) by reading folk literature from throughout Latin America before (phase 2) narrowing the study to folk literature from Mexico and the American Southwest. The folk literature is followed with (phase 3) a study of historical autobiographies, biographies, and information books. Students analyze this literature for the values, beliefs, and themes identified in the traditional literature. Next, students (phase 4) read historical fiction to search for the role of traditional literature and to compare it with the historical nonfiction read. Finally, (phase 5) students read contemporary fiction, biography, and poetry. This literature is then analyzed to look for themes and threads across the literature.

Zarillo (1994) suggests teachers include multicultural literature as part of the units they teach. He shares author, genre, thematic, and cross-curricular units that focus on teaching methods that allow every child to be successful, emphasizing cooperative learning, multiple resources (including books written in languages other than English), student experience, and both visual and performing arts. Moreover, suggestions are provided for teachers to use in creating their own units.

Experts have recommended teachers provide children with daily poetry experiences (e.g., Huck, 1989). Teachers are delighted to discover such collections as Joseph Bruchac and Jonathan London's *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back*, Ashley Bryan's *Sing to the Sun*, Lulu Delacre's *Arroz Con Leche*, Eloise Greenfield's *Nathaniel Talking* and *Under the Sunday Tree*, Walter Dean Myers' *Brown Angels*, Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve's *Dancing Teepees*, Gary Soto's *A Fire in My Hands*, and Joyce Carol Thomas' *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*. Another excellent poetry resource is *A Chorus of Cultures* (Ada, Harris, and Hopkins, 1993). The editors have selected 365 poems, songs, and folktales from a wide

variety of cultures for this wonderful anthology. Organized in a calendar format with a poem for each day, the anthology includes activities and suggestions to "develop literacy and extend concepts across the curriculum." The poems are indexed by themes, by poems appropriate for ESL instruction, author, genre, activity (e.g., drama, games, writing, role playing), and curricular area. We can not imagine an elementary teacher who would not want this anthology!

Multicultural literature has great potential across the curriculum. Rasinski and Padak (1990) "suggest classroom approaches that capitalize on the power of literature to promote intercultural and multicultural appreciation" based on Banks' hierarchical model for integrating ethnic/multicultural content into the curricula. The approaches are contributions which focus on heroes and holidays, the additive where content, concepts, and themes are added to the established curriculum, transformation which changes the curriculum and presents problems, themes, concerns, and concepts from nonmainstream perspectives, and the social action where students "identify social problems and concerns, make decisions, and take actions to help resolve" the identified problems. "Literature can provide the impetus for acting in a positive fashion."

There are many other resources teachers have found valuable for providing their students with meaningful experiences with multicultural children's literature. Many teachers will want to consult the other available resources (e.g., Au, 1993; Crawford, 1993; Diamond and Moore, 1995; Encisco, 1994; Hadaway and Florez, 1990; Milord, 1992; Olson, 1994; Smallwood, 1991; Tiedt and Tiedt, 1994).

Issues in multicultural children's literature

A myriad of issues relating to multicultural children's literature exists for teachers to consider. Many of those issues are beyond the scope of this article. We have chosen to address only the following: defining multicultural literature, selection of multicultural literature, insider/outsider perspective, and potentially sensitive topics.

Defining multicultural literature

According to Cai and Bishop (1994), multicultural literature is a byproduct of the multicultural education movement of the 1960s and "a concept in search of a definition." They present both pedagogical and literary definitions of the concept before presenting three kinds of multicultural literature: world literature, cross-cultural literature, and literature from parallel cultures.

Selection of multicultural literature

This article has suggested many benefits of multicultural literature for students. It must be noted however, these benefits can only be derived from culturally authentic literature. Teachers must be careful in selecting multicultural literature for their students since some books reinforce stereotypes. At this time, teachers and librarians can consult many excellent guidelines for selecting authentic multicultural literature (Bishop, 1992b; Pang, Colvin, Tran, and Barba, 1992; Yokota, 1993a).

Of course, the books should also be good literature. Cultural authenticity is not enough; books must be well written with a good plot, strong characterization, and offer a worthwhile theme (Bishop, 1992).

Insider/Outsider Perspective. Many scholars and educators are debating whether authentic multicultural literature

can be written by outsiders (those who write about a cultural group other than their own). We believe that more often than not, cultural emphasis and essence are lost when authors write about another culture through the lens of their own cultures. Cai (1995) presents a clear account of what is required for one to write culturally accurate literature about another group. He presents successful and unsuccessful examples of authors "capturing ethnic experiences" of other cultures. Moreover, he also illustrates how insider authors can sometimes present inaccurate cultural information.

Potentially sensitive topics

Many issues such as racism, prejudice, and violence, presented in multicultural literature can be disturbing to young readers (Harris, 1992a). Rochman (1993), supports this notion as she writes, "good books unsettle us, make us ask questions about what we thought was certain. They don't just reaffirm everything we already know." Such books demand response. Aoki (1992) concurs, noting that along with reading or listening to multicultural literature, it is also important to actively discuss the values that underlie the literature. At other times, it may be helpful to include role playing and taking different characters' points-of-view (Bello, 1992).

Conclusion

More and more teachers are becoming more intentional about teaching, sharing, and including all types of literature in their classrooms and curricula. If teachers do not ensure that their students have ongoing access to literature that portrays characters from diverse cultural groups, they are depriving them of one of the most important ways of learning how people are more alike than different. At the same time, however, this kind of literature can help them to understand the way culture affects the uniqueness of individuals.

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Terrell A. Young is a faculty member in the Department of Literacy Education at Washington State University, in Richland Washington. Lois Case Campbell is a graduate student at Washington State University, in Pullman Washington. Linda K. Oda is a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Education at Weber State University, in Ogden Utah.