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Integrating African-American Literature in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom

Loraine Moses Stewart

African-Americans are one of the largest minority groups in the United States; therefore it is imperative that literature that features African-Americans as the main characters be in today's classrooms. This literature is not only important for African-American children to see themselves, but for children of other races to see as well. Carlsen (1971) stated " ... young people want to read about people like themselves, with whom they can identify" (p. 208). "If African-American students cannot find themselves and people like them in the books they read and have read to them, they receive a powerful message about how they are undervalued in both school and society" (Bishop, 1990, p. 561).

According to Bishop (1990), less than two percent of the children's books published each year feature African-Americans as major characters. As a result, these few books are often unknown to classroom teachers. Thompson and Meeks (1990) stated that many teachers are "not familiar with children's literature that reflects the country's cultural diversity" (p. 9).

Along with this lack of knowledge there is also a lack of awareness of how useful these books could be as a means of reinforcing basic skills and emphasizing topics such as family life and self-esteem. According to the National Black Child Development Institute (1991), "Children's books that present accurate and realistic images of Black people and our culture are a major vehicle for generating high self-esteem and a positive self-concept in Black children" (p. 5). Experiencing authentic African-American literature is important for all students regardless of their race (Harris, 1991).

This article will focus on picture books that feature African-Americans and ways they can be used in the social studies classroom. Some of the books discussed are not authentic in regard to particular language and life experiences that clearly identify the characters as African-American, but are acceptable because they represent the diversity within African-American culture.

African-American picture books

It is my belief that African-American picture books can be used when addressing many different issues in the social studies classroom. One concept that permeates the first grade curriculum is the family. There are many African-American picture books that address family issues such as a new baby in the family, sibling rivalry, and grandparent relationships.

Many of the picture books that feature African-American families are fictional with a story line that could be appropriate for any race. This does not devalue the books; instead it celebrates the diversity within the African-American culture and supports the fact that all African-Americans do not share the same life experiences.

An example of a book that fits into this category is Eloise Greenfield's *First Pink Light* (1976, 1991). This is a wonderful story of a little boy, Tyree, who tries to stay up all night to surprise his father when he comes home at dawn from taking care of his grandmother. Jan Spivey Gilchrist's beautiful soft illustrations create a calm feeling of love and warmth between Tyree and his mother as they await his father's arrival the next morning. This story shows a sense of love and togetherness in an African-American family, in spite of their separation from one another. In addition, it contradicts the negative stereotypes that are often associated with African-American men. Not only is Tyree's father taking care of his immediate family but he has also gone on a trip to take care of his ill mother.

Faith Ringgold's books, *Tar Beach* (1991) and *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993), focus on family life also. They are more authentic to African-American culture than Greenfield's *First Pink Light* (1991). Both books emphasize families coming together for a time of fellowship and enjoyment. In addition, both books combine fantasy and realistic fiction; therefore it would be important for the teacher to preface the stories with discussions about real and make believe. For example, in *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991), Cassie imagines flying over the city and gaining ownership of everything she wants as she passes over it. She also imagines that the rooftop her family is gathered on for an evening of cards and fellowship is a tar beach.

In *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (Ringgold, 1993), Cassie and her cousin Lonnie find talking pictures of African-American women leaders in the attic. When discussing this book, the teacher should help students understand that although pictures do not talk, these are real people and true stories. This would be a good time to give nonfictional accounts

of the women's lives through discussions, individual library reports by upper elementary students or reading biographies.

This book allows for the integration of art and mathematics also. Art could be integrated by assigning the students one of the twelve female leaders to draw for a class or school African-American Women Art Exhibit. Other more contemporary women leaders could be included such as Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, and Carol Moseley Brown. Math concepts could be included by having the students imagine that they are having a real art exhibit to sell their paintings. The students would need to add up the cost of things such as entry fees to the exhibit, number of prints needed, and other costs for the exhibit.

When teaching about families, it is also important for teachers to discuss the members of a family and how there are different types of families. This will help children who do not fit into a traditional nuclear family to be able to validate their family and not feel left out of the activity. Under that umbrella, issues such as a new baby in the family and grandparent relationships are likely to surface. Regarding a new baby, *Peter's Chair* (Keats, 1967), *Everett Anderson's Nine Month Long* (Clifton, 1978), *My Mother Needs Me* (Walters, 1983), and *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (Greenfield, 1974) would be good books to use. Each of them deals with an older sibling struggling with accepting a new baby into the family. Each story ends with the older siblings realizing they love and accept the new addition to the family.

Picture books that discuss African-American customs and traditions can also be very useful in a social studies classroom. *Cornrows* (1979), by Camilee Yarbrough, is a lively book that addresses the traditional African custom of hair-braiding. In addition to discussing the custom and history of

cornrowing, *Cornrows* also presents an array of African-American heroes that could lead to a deeper study of each of the heroes discussed in the story. The teacher could lead students through the same kinds of activities mentioned earlier in reference to Ringgold's *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993). Furthermore, inviting a student who wears braids to talk to the class about her hairstyle would be another possibility. (I get many questions from white adults about my braids, and I am sure white children have these questions as well.) This would be an opportunity to use African-American literature as a tool to increase ethnic understanding as suggested by Walker-Dalhouse (1992).

Greenfield's *Me and Neesie* (1975) is another book that refers to cornrowing; it would be a good prelude to *Cornrows* (1979). It deals with a little girl's relationship with her imaginary friend Neesie and her family's reaction to her. This is also a good book to use when illustrating the difference between what is real and what is imaginary.

Tell Me a Story, Mama (Johnson, 1989) and *Your Dad Was Just Like You* (1993) are two stories that build upon the oral tradition of African-American culture. *Tell Me a Story, Mama* is a story of a little girl asking her mother to tell her a story about when she was a child. Each time the mother tries to tell the story, the little girl takes over and tells the story for her. It is obvious that she has heard the story so many times she knows it by heart. Nevertheless, she still begs for her mother to continue telling it to her. *Your Dad Was Just Like You* (Johnson, 1993), is a story of a little boy who complains to his grandfather about his father scolding him for breaking an item in their home. The little boy is quite surprised when his grandfather tells him stories about his father when he was his age, and how much he is like his father. The story has a beautiful ending because the boy realizes why his father is scolding

him and how much he really loves his father, and his father loves him. Both books reflect warmth, passing of life stories, and families spending quality time together talking, which is a tradition in the African-American culture.

Biographies and family histories are also a part of the elementary social studies curriculum. Books such as *The Patchwork Quilt* (Flournoy, 1985), *Martin Luther King Day* (Lowery, 1987), and *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder, 1989) would be appropriate when addressing these themes. *The Patchwork Quilt* (Flournoy, 1985) explores intergenerational ties and family history. It is a story of a family learning to appreciate its history through finishing a quilt started by their grandmother, who is too ill to complete it. As they look at the completed quilt made from various pieces of clothing each of them had worn during the year, they are able to reflect on the previous year. Elementary students could create their own quilts depicting the history of their family, community, or state, using squares of either cloth or paper.

In addition there are elementary level biographies of such African-American leaders as Langston Hughes, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Scott Joplin, Jesse Jackson, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Students could read and study the lives of these individuals when topics relevant to them are being discussed. For example, Hughes could be included with poetry units; Parks and King with civil rights and social justice units; and Joplin with music units. Some teachers already discuss these African-American leaders, but usually it is only during Black History Month. In order to have a genuine multicultural curriculum, it is imperative that minorities be incorporated into the curriculum throughout the year instead of just designated times of the year.

Homelessness is a topic that can be discussed under the umbrella of community involvement, as part of the second grade curriculum. Guthrie's *A Rose for Abby* (1988) addresses the issue of homelessness by telling how one little girl's concern for a bag lady on her street encouraged her family and neighbors to reach out to the homeless. Slavery is an issue that usually does not enter the social studies curriculum until the fourth or fifth grade. Nevertheless, it is a topic that teachers often feel uncomfortable teaching and they have concerns about how and when to present it. Ringgold's *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992), Mendez's *The Black Snowman* (1989), and Johnson's *Now Let Me Fly: The Story of a Slave Family* (1993) are fictional accounts of slave life. Even though they do not go in depth into the struggles of slaves, they depict a general idea that would be appropriate for elementary students. More advanced factual accounts could be shared at a later time.

Educational Implications

This article only presents a few of the many appropriate picture books that feature African-Americans as the main characters and ways they can be included in the social studies curriculum. There are many other books as well as ways of incorporating them into the curriculum. African-American literature has a great deal to offer as an enhancement to the elementary social studies curriculum. It provides many colorful stories that can be infused into the school curriculum and provide meaning and diversity.

Unfortunately many of the books are difficult to locate, I believe it is safe to assume that many teachers do not use them because they are not aware of them or can't find them. I challenge all social studies teachers to become more familiar with the African-American picture books available in their

school and county libraries and include them in their curriculum whenever possible.

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