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Arlene L. Barry  
*University of Wisconsin Madison*

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# Teaching Reading in a Multicultural Framework

**Arlene L. Barry**

*Cultural pluralism stresses a new interpretation of the word different as applied to cultural differences. This is illustrated by the story of a Westerner who saw his Oriental friend putting a bowl of rice on his grandfather's grave and asked "When will your grandfather get up to eat the rice?" To which his friend replied, "At the same time that your grandfather gets up to smell the flowers you put on his grave." Different means different, not better than or worse than.*

*Harry N. Rivan, cited in Cuch, 1987, p. 65.*

People in the United States have not melted into one homogenous group. Ethnic groups have retained customs, language, and beliefs. Some have referred to this special diversity as the "tossed salad" effect. Diversity in our population is likely to remain. In 1987, immigrants from 48 different countries arrived on U.S. shores. Our country's Hispanic population increased 30 percent in the last decade. More than 37 million Americans have disabilities and the majority of disabled children spend a good part of their day in regular classes. As educators, we find many representatives of this diverse population in our classrooms. We have an obligation to teach all of these children and to do so effectively. In order to be effective, we must understand, accept, and address our students' differences. In educational terms, acceptance of diversity has come to be known as multicultural

education. More precisely, multicultural education is the term used "to describe educational policies and practices that recognize, accept, and affirm human differences and similarities related to gender, race, handicap, and class" (Sleeter and Grant, 1988, p. 137). The purpose of this article is to provide guidelines for teaching reading in a multicultural framework, to discuss *why*, *when* and *how* to use multicultural literature, and to offer criteria for choosing good multicultural literature.

### **Why use multicultural literature?**

Reading is a key to a good education. And education is, for most, the key to a better life. The integration of multi-ethnic literature into a school reading program can lead to five important outcomes:

1. *Multicultural literature helps students recognize similarities among people.* Literature can point out that all human beings are connected to one another through common experiences, emotions, needs, and desires. Understanding our common humanity is one way to learn to accept one another.

2. *Multicultural literature helps students recognize the value of differences.* Books can help us realize the history, contributions, and heritage of other cultures. The handicapped and elderly certainly possess knowledge and insights that are valuable because of their uniqueness.

3. *Multicultural literature helps students develop an awareness of social issues affecting all of their lives.* Poverty, racism, or war are not social issues to be discussed only during the social studies class. Social issues can be addressed regularly through literature so children come to understand that the problems of a minority can be solved with the cooperation of the majority.

4. *Multicultural literature aids the learning process and enriches the education of all students.* A healthy sense of

self has been found to be a key factor in academic success (Lewis and Margold, 1981). The study of one's own cultural group can develop a child's sense of self and make the child feel welcomed to the learning environment. Curriculum content that builds on a child's experiences and background knowledge can be more easily incorporated into the existing cognitive structure. Majority students who live in a diverse society need more than a monoculture experience.

5. *Multicultural literature builds on our future.* We are a mobile population with a global economy. We must work together to share goods and resources so we can all benefit. We also have nuclear weapons. Literature can help us teach our children to know, understand, and respect each other so we do not destroy our earth.

### **How and when to use multicultural literature**

Multicultural literature can be used in the same manner as any other material for reading instruction. Studies on early learning help answer the question of when to begin using multicultural literature. "Research has shown that between the ages of three and four children are aware of the status assigned by race and sex...Young children learn racist attitudes from adults — from our language. ..from the environment we create ...from the books we read to them" (Wilson, 1983, p. 6). It is critical, therefore, that during the first few months when parents begin sharing books with children, they choose books that represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds, social classes, abilities, ages and both sexes. These groups should be portrayed in a positive, but realistic, fashion. One example of a good book to begin with is Helen Oxenbury's "big board book," *Tickle, Tickle*. In this storybook Black, White, and Asian toddlers "squelch" in the mud, scrub in the tub, and play before naps. Adult males and females both care for the busy children and a spirit of cooperation is evident. Other appropriate books are

*Welcome Little Baby* (Aliko, 1987), *The Baby's Catalogue* (Ahlberg, 1983), *Ten, Nine, Eight* (Bang, 1983), and *All Fall Down* (Oxenbury, 1987).

As children's communication skills develop over the next couple of years, they begin to play actively with language. New words and phrases are frequently repeated and nonsense words are created. Two and three-year-olds enjoy rhyme, repetition, and playing with words (Owens, 1984). Nursery rhymes fit easily into this stage of development. *The Prancing Pony: Nursery Rhymes from Japan* (Deforest, 1968), *Tortillitas Para Mama and Other Nursery Rhymes* (Driego, 1981), and *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes* (Wyndham, 1982) are nursery rhymes that take some other cultures into consideration.

**Table 1**  
**Recommended Children's Books**

- Aliko. (1987). *Welcome little baby*. Greenwillow.
- Ahlberg, J. & A. (1983). *The baby's catalogue*. Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Bang, M. (1983). *Ten, nine, eight*. Greenwillow.
- Oxenbury, H. (1987). *All fall down*. Aladdin; *Clap hands*. Aladdin; *Tickle, tickle*. Aladdin.
- Deforest, C.B. (1968). *The prancing pony: Nursery rhymes from Japan*. Walker/Weatherhill.
- Driego, M.C. (1981). *Tortillitas para mama and other nursery rhymes: Spanish and English*. Illustrated by B. Cooney. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Wyndham, R. (1982). *Chinese Mother Goose rhymes*. Putnam.
- Bowers, K.R. (1983). *At this very minute*. Illustrated by L. Shute. Little, Brown.
- Bradman, T. (1987). *Through my window*. Illustrated by E. Browne. Silver Burdett.
- Rosenberg, M.B. (1984). *Being adopted*. Photographs by G. Ancona. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Tax, M. (1981). *Families*. Illustrated by M. Hafner. Little, Brown.

By ages three and four, children use language as a tool to discover their world (Norton, 1985). Their burgeoning vocabularies help them describe what they see. Children in this age group ask many questions in order to continue expanding their knowledge of the world around them. Books that represent a range of families, homes, and environments can supply information to children about our diverse society. A few age-appropriate books that do this effectively are *At This Very Minute* (Bowers, 1983), *Through My Window* (Bradman, 1987), *Being Adopted* (Rosenburg, 1984), and *Families* (Tax, 1981). The message is reinforced, that no one culture or lifestyle is inherently better or worse, just different. As Tax's book explains, "families are who you live with and who you love." Children can make and share books about their own families as well as enjoy books written by many others.

The five-year-old has developed a complex range of physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills. Many children of this age who are beginning kindergarten can control their fine motor skills and use such tools as scissors, pencils, crayons and paint brushes. They are usually interested in letters and numbers and begin to print and copy these symbols. The emergent reader recognizes that one can get meaning from printed words and frequently tries to "read" books and messages. Kindergarten teachers can assist their students by remembering two principles:

1. *Read to your students.* According to *Becoming a Nation of Readers* "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). Reading aloud enhances vocabulary development, background information, a sense of story structure, and it acquaints children with book language as opposed to oral language. Reading aloud

permits a child to observe reading behaviors and builds positive attitudes towards reading. Remember also that reading aloud can build attitudes towards others. Campbell and Wirtenberg (1980) reported increased favorable attitudes toward other races by children who read stories depicting the targeted groups in varied roles. Fisher (1980) also found that children developed positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups when exposed to literature portraying those ethnic groups in a positive light.

2. *"Consider print awareness as a prerequisite for children's success with beginning reading"* (Durkin, 1989, p. 111). Print awareness is developed through meaningful experiences that involve written language. Children can draw pictures or make greeting cards and include information they "print" themselves or that which is written by an adult. The language or dialect the child uses can be written as spoken. Standard English should be modeled, of course, but meaning is more important than form in the beginning (Jaggar and Smith-Burke, 1985). Children also need to know that their language, one of the few things they bring to school as representative of their family, is respected. Harber and Bryen (1976) did not find evidence that a dialect difference interfered with children who were learning to read.

### **Criteria for choosing multicultural literature**

As children move through the elementary grades, a wide range of reading material is used. Basal readers and trade books are two of the more common sources of literature. Basal readers are important to consider because "more than 90 percent of elementary classrooms in this nation contain basal readers" (Vacca, Vacca and Gove, 1987, p. 266). There is concern among some educators that the stories in basal readers reflect an unrealistic representation of minorities, families, the elderly, disabled, and women.

For example, the three most frequently depicted careers for white women in basals were mother, teacher, and queen. Minority women's top three careers were mother, teacher, and slave (Britton and Lumpkin, 1983). Careers most commonly depicted for minority men were worker, farmer, warrior, Indian Chief, and hunter. These are hardly realistic representations of the occupations held by today's women and minorities. Garcia and Florez-Tighe (1986) noted other inaccuracies. They found that although most Hispanics live in metropolitan areas, they were consistently depicted in rural settings. Almost no stories portrayed Native Americans as they currently exist, which is on reservations, in cities or assimilating into American life. The Native American is still depicted as a "Noble Savage" (Garcia and Florez-Tighe, 1986). Basals have chosen not to address the real life problems minorities encounter: prejudice, discrimination, or the civil rights movement. Publishers have also avoided questions of sexism by creating neutral and neutered characters. Sixty-five percent of the main characters in current basals are neutral (Hitchcock and Tompkins, 1987), whereas a decade ago 23 percent were neutral (Britton and Lumpkin, 1977).

Disabled and elderly individuals have clearly been underrepresented in basal readers. It is possible for a nondisabled child to be exposed to only one basal story about a disabled person in six years of school (Hopkins, 1982). Few elderly are depicted at all — representing only two percent of the characters depicted when they are twenty-one percent of the population (Britton and Lumpkin, 1983) — and even fewer are shown engaged in activities outside their homes. If the purpose of putting minorities, disabled, and elderly in basal stories is to create more positive attitudes toward these individuals, underrepresentation and unrealistic representation will not serve that end.

The teacher who is committed to the principles of a multicultural classroom and is required to use a basal does have options. One interesting basal supplement is a text called *Embers* (Equity Models for Basal Readers) designed for grades 3 and 5, later to be expanded for grades K-6. The curriculum consists of an anthology of readings and a teacher's manual. These materials, according to Project Embers staff members, "were designed to serve as a model both to improve children's reading competency and to promote children's understanding of social and educational inequities based on sex, race, and disability" (Embers Staff, 1982, p. 38).

Another option is the use of trade books (story books or novels chosen by students and/or teachers). Trade book units are a good way to integrate multicultural literature with content subjects. Guidelines for choosing other quality multicultural materials have been constructed by several sources. Grant and Sleeter (1989) provide an in-depth method for analyzing printed material for bias, based on sex, race, social class, and disability. A briefer guideline constructed by the Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Education, a division of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, consists of 10 points:

1. Check the illustration. Look for stereotypes, for tokenism, and for who's doing what.
2. Check the story lines. Look for subtle forms of bias in such approaches as standards for success, resolution of problems, and the role of women.
3. Look at the lifestyles. Are minority persons depicted in unfavorable contrast with white middle-class suburbanites?
4. Weigh the relationships between people. Do whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, etc.?

5. Note the heroes. Are minority heroes admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous?

6. Consider the effects on a child's self-image. Are norms established which limit the child's aspirations and self-concepts?

7. Consider the author's or illustrator's background. Is there anything in that background to recommend this person as the creator of the book?

8. Check out the author's perspective. Does the direction of the perspective weaken or strengthen the book?

9. Watch for loaded words. Does a word have insulting overtones?

10. Look at the copyright date. Pre-1970 books may be biased.

It appears that the current U.S. population diversity will make future teaching an exciting and challenging task. As teachers, we can learn from our students at the same time they learn from us. Through the use of multicultural materials, we can try to help our students recognize similarities among all people and appreciate the value of human differences. Parents should be encouraged to use multicultural literature from the time they begin sharing books with their children. In this way, the concept of acceptance of others is made a continuous process, beginning in the home and continuing through school. We send powerful messages to students through the methods and materials of our instruction. We can tell them that every person has value or we can tell them that only some of them do.

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*Arlene L. Barry is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.*