

1-1-1984

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Marcia Baghban

College of Graduate Studies Institute, West Virginia

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Recommended Citation

Baghban, M. (1984). The Application of Culturally Relevant Factors to Literacy Programs in Appalachia. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 24 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol24/iss2/1

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THE APPLICATION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT FACTORS TO LITERACY PROGRAMS IN APPALACHIA

Dr. Marcia Baghban

COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES INSTITUTE, WEST VIRGINIA

Appalachia is an American region characterized by a strong oral tradition. Ballads, ghostlore, minelore, herbllore, riddles, and proverbs abound. It is not uncommon to have family members and neighbors visit for an entire day, filling the time talking. While the imposition of the mainstream technological society may be weakening the opportunities for the practice of such lore or the desire of the young people to learn the lore, the subculture continues to support a basically oral tradition.

The historical role of literacy in the region is defined in this scene from The Dollmaker (Arnow, 1954, p. 33):

Gertie held the Bible open at Ecclesiastes. She stood with her back to the open front door, and faced the five children. Amos, still a shade pale and thin from his sickness of three weeks back, sat on a sheepskin rug near the heating stove. The four older ones, neat and quiet in their Sunday clothes, sat in a row between the two beds that stood, one in each back corner of the big low-ceilinged, small-windowed room. Her reading seemed a talking, for she looked more often at the children than at the Bible page, saying the words sometimes when her eyes went past the children to the rows of October-colored hills that lay behind the back window.

Here reading is a skill which exists solely as a means of moral instruction for the young. The particular skill required is the ability to read aloud. Listeners base their evaluations and remembrances of personalities on a reader's manner of delivery. Moreover, the content of The Bible, which includes stories from another even older tradition, is in harmony with the requirements of a present-day oral tradition. Any uses for reading other than religious training may still be considered unnecessary or even dangerous (Stewart, 1971).

This restricted role for reading in the lives of the children interferes with the successful acquisition of literacy because it leads to widespread anti-intellectual attitudes. Teachers recount parent conferences in which those parents who come have emphatically told the teachers, "We don't want our children to

be brains" (McClure, 1981; Massey, 1981; Spurlock, 1981). Education is not seen as a path to success in Appalachia. To be successful by an Appalachian yardstick is to be a good person, particularly in the eyes of your family and church. Even in college, students may be missing because a sister had a baby or a brother-in-law is in town. Some parents may verbally support the educational system yet condone skipping school or dropping out. As researchers have noted, children are far more influenced by the home than the school (Jencks, 1972). For example, students may be absent from school for an entire hunting season and teachers are expected to anticipate and adjust to their absences (Winfree, 1981). The impact of the hunting experience is apparent in children's oral language. Several of my teachers have asked their pupils to name the seasons of the year and even after instruction, the students respond with the names of the official hunting seasons (Winfree, 1981; McClure, 1981; Marks, 1981).

Educators must deal with cultural diversity. However, their attitudes are the result of personal experiences. As professionals, they may have espoused the middle class values of the educational system, thereby rejecting any examples of regional characteristics they come across. Such teachers typically regard their charges as deprived and constantly correct their behavior and their language. Failing to recognize the bias of intelligence tests, they use the children's low scores to support their assumption that they have low intellectual ability. Such attitudes are consciously or unconsciously communicated to the children, and their negative self-concept helps them conform to the teachers' expectations. At the other extreme, a different teacher may have passed through the system herself all the while resenting the imposition of a so-called standard, middle-class culture on her feelings for her native region. This teacher is accepting of "things regional", but her bitterness also encourages a negative self-concept in the children and interferes with her helping them prepare for the wider world.

The polarity that most adults demonstrate fosters a kind of cultural schizophrenia in the children. Literally caught between two cultures, the children make choices in order to survive. For example, in 1980, the average dropout rate in West Virginia, computed by comparing the number of students in grades 7-12 who leave school to those who graduate, was 25.71 percent (Ward, 1980). While this figure may be lower than in previous years, certain counties continue to experience a dropout rate as high as 50%. Apparently the children, even when faced with a minimally supportive environment outside the educational system, will choose to identify with family and neighborhood.

In the dilemma facing the youth of this region, the teacher as a representative of the system through which the children must pass, is the pivotal figure. Her attitudes toward the culture, family, and language of her pupils can make or break educational careers. Children come to school speaking the only language they know. They have learned to talk in culturally determined contexts. They use different idioms, vocabulary, or manner of speaking in church, in school, or at play. They have learned to edit or expand

their talk according to the age group with whom they are dealing. With peers, elders, authority figures, and younger children, they play different roles. They have learned when to speak and when not to, how to be tactful, and what is sarcastic. They have learned what language is by observing what language does (Halliday, 1975). They are constantly defining their roles their roles in their society through language and in so doing they are contributing to the maintenance of the patterns of life in that society. Therefore, to reject the way any child talks is to find the child's family and culture also unacceptable. It is irrational to expect any child to participate in such a conspiracy. Ideally, teachers must prepare their pupils to handle the wider world while allowing them to maintain their ability to communicate with their neighbors and families. In so doing, teachers must bring into harmony the community's enculturation of its young and the learning context of the school.

For example, one universal function of language is the telling of stories. It has been said that "Humanity was born telling stories" (Cazden & Hymes, 1978). We gossip, joke, and refer to common experiences. In daily life we ask each other, "How was your day?" "What did you do after that?" or "How did you get your start in newspaper work, weaving, etc.?" and bring on the recounting of life events. A sense of story is crucial to our development because—

We resort to story to make an entity of experience; to give our experience form and balance; to make generalizations about the world. We structure and often modify experience when creating stories of our everyday life, and also, often modify our own internal representations of experience when listening to the stories of others (Brown, 1975, p. 357).

Children observe such functional uses of story, and when these observations are accompanied by the more structured storytelling of a rich oral tradition or the parental reading of stories, we observe a story schema in the oral language of children as young as 2½ years of age (Brown, 1975).

Furthermore, narratives emphasize group affiliation. When personal narratives are excluded in educational settings, which is typically the case, the implication is that the students do not comprise a group. And if the teacher allows herself but no her pupils to tell stories, she may be setting up barriers which may weaken her effectiveness as a teacher (Cazden and Hymes, 1978). Moreover, a classroom that excludes narratives may be attempting to teach new subject matter in an unfamiliar mode of learning, since the family and community frequently teach through storytelling. Giving the students the opportunity to take turns as storytellers in the classroom allows them to use learning strengths which they have as functioning members of the community, and the experience brings the outside context into the classroom (Cazden and Hymes, 1978).

In the lives of young Appalachians, storytelling demonstrates

not only entertaining and instructive functions, but fieldwork indicates that the storytelling model in the community transfers to literacy as well. Two communities in the Carolina Piedmont, Roadville and Trackton, are presently being looked at for the types of oral tradition they support (Heath, 1981). Roadville stories are true tales that reaffirm commitment to community and to church values through personal experiences and testimonials. In contrast, Trackton stories use fact only in the universals of human strength and they include play songs, ritual insults, and cheers. When the children from both communities were allowed to write stories in school, the teachers noted that the Roadville children wrote personal experience stories and the Trackton children wrote tales. The results strongly suggest that educators need to attend to the kind and degree of sociocultural integration any pupil brings to the academic setting, how this integration molds the pupil's linguistic models, and how these linguistic models may be incorporated into educational programs.

The teacher's use of an appropriate learning mode from the larger society in her classroom can guarantee a place for literacy in the lives of her pupils and by extension in the lives of the adults and the society she serves. Appalachian children have a well-developed sense of story and the teacher of Appalachian children should take advantage of this strength by incorporating activities which allow this strength to shine. Because the sense of story serves as an organizer for the meaning found in experiences in life, let us return to the example of the children who recount the hunting seasons for the broader seasons of the year. Rather than voicing her frustration at attempting to push her pupils into a middle class mold, the teacher can take advantage of their knowledge by reading hunting stories to the class and encouraging a group language experience story on the chalkboard about a hunting expedition. The class might then divide into small groups or pairs to compose a collaborative story or play that they tape record or write and then share with the rest of the class. The tapes may be incorporated into listening centers and the stories can become books which the teacher or students transcribe and the children illustrate. Name plates at the front tell the authors, and a paper glued at the back may provide a space for the names of those who read the book and their opinions. Teachers then have a classroom library of books the children have created about the lifestyle that matters to them. A New Yorker and an Appalachian can both successfully decode the sentence, "In the spring we gather greens," but the impact of the sentence is significantly different for both readers. For the Appalachian the statement represents a slice of life that is part of a worldview, while for the New Yorker, the sentence is empty. When learners really understand that print functions because it is meaningful, they will value their ability to handle print. And when learners value communicating through print, they will not only easily begin reading and writing, but they will keep at learning the processes.

Another opportunity which capitalizes on the lifestyle of the community follows the Foxfire concept. Training students in such ethnographic techniques as interviewing and participant observation enables them to record oral traditions and oral histories

of the people in their community. Speaking, listening, reading and writing are well integrated in such a project. While some of the stories collected may be unfamiliar to the students, the names and places are usually known to them. For example, in a ballad about a feud in Lincoln County called "Lincoln County Crew", the creek, store, and hollow mentioned were very familiar to students who had never heard of the song. Students learn to care about reading and writing the materials they collect in such a field project. Moreover, recording the traditions and crafts which may be fading in the community provides students with an obvious sense of origin and place in the world. Such awareness has the potential to ease much of the cultural ambivalence they face as Appalachians.

Literature helps each of us internalize the world while we externalize our feelings. We deal with human questions which are dramatized, and develop deeper insight into human nature and human values. The ballads of Appalachia may also be studied from the point of view of literature because they are well developed stories which demonstrate not only the human condition but also individual strengths. For example:

LIGHTNING EXPRESS

*The lightning express from the depot so grand
had just started on its way,
And most of the passengers who were on board
all seemed to be happy and gay,
Except a young man on a seat by himself
was reading a letter he had*

*It was plain to be seen by the tears in his eyes
that the contents of it made him sad.
The stern ol' conductor then started around
collecting a fare from all there.
And finally reaching the side of the boy
he gruffly demanded his fare.*

*"I have not a ticket," the boy then replied,
"I'll pay you back someday."
"I'll put you off next station," he cried,
but stopped when he heard the boy say
"Please, mister conductor,
don't put me off of your train.
For the best friend I have in this world, sir,
is waiting for me in pain.
Expected to die any moment,
she may not last through the day,
I want to bid Mama good-by, sir,
before God calls her away..."* 1

This ballad tells that a collection was taken among the passengers to see that the boy could reach his mother's bedside. Listening to or reading such a story can prompt discussions about what it is like not to have money when you really need it, the illness or death of a parent, the humanity at least occasionally found in the world, or even Appalachian migrations to cities to find

work. The writing of compositions, poetry, or ballads can follow.

Other ballads quickly spark controversy. For example, this song presents a strong case against women.

I've Got No Use for the Women

*I've got no use for the women,
A true one may seldom be found;
They'll use a man for his money,
When it's gone, they'll all turn 'im down.
They're all alike at the bottom,
Selfish and grasping for all;
They'll stay by your side while you're winning
And laugh in your face at your fall... 1*

Some girls in class might easily make a similar case against men and develop aspects of the discussion into written expression in various genres.

In fact, teachers of Appalachian children might be well advised to focus their attention on facilitating pupils' ability to handle written language. Dialect speakers can acquire control over written language though they may never acquire a so-called standard oral language (Goodman, 1973). Miscue research indicates that readers make miscues which move toward their own oral language and that when the classroom teacher accepts the reader's oral language such miscues do not interfere with comprehension. Among my students I have teachers that I would consider strong regional speakers. Many of these teachers passed through college, but were constantly referred to speech therapy classes. They are presently in graduate school with their dialects intact but they are able to write college exams and term papers in standard English. This dichotomy may also be observed in developing countries whose citizens speak a variety of dialects yet become literate. Therefore a bidialectal program which emphasizes oral (D_1) - oral (D_2) competence may not be as successful as a bidialectal program which accepts oral (D_1) - written (D_2) competence.

In summary, Appalachia is an American region whose communities need to give literacy both a life and a significant role. The educational system has the responsibility of seeing that this realization takes place by demonstrating the functionality of reading and writing in Appalachian life. Teachers can accomplish this task by capitalizing on the strengths with which learners come to school. One strength we all have, but particularly well-practiced and valued in the peoples with strong oral traditions is the telling of stories. With a little imagination, the use of stories from daily life and the more formalized ballads and tales can provide meaningful encounters with written language. In addition, teachers need to emphasize classroom language models which are compatible with community models of language. Story-telling, reading The Bible aloud and singing ballads are social events. Reading as a silent, private act is not compatible with the values the Appalachian community treasures. For strengths in learning to flourish, teachers must provide an integrated, student-centered language arts program which not only uses the

students' oral abilities in activities such as book-making and language experience, but also which uses such sociable techniques as discussions, working in pairs, small group projects, and a constant sharing of experiences and projects.

By avoiding a consideration of regional strengths and gearing the educational system toward a middle class norm, we have cut any harmony that could exist between home learning and school learning. In so doing, we have added to the frustrations of those students who must pass through the system and those teachers who feel they must perpetuate the system. (Pity the poor teacher who feels obligated to force the so-called real seasons of the year on the pupil who wonders why children have to go to school at all.) We have conveyed negative attitudes toward language variety and ended uncouneted educational careers. We have produced reading materials with exercises devoid of local color, often meaningless even in terms of the broadest human values. In our concern over test scores, we have taught to the test and lost sight of our real goal of teaching. Our real purpose is, as it has always been, to help our students learn to read and to write. The learning of literacy can only be accomplished in contexts as meaningful and as joyful as those which nurtured our learning to talk. If our students are able to read and write, and to enjoy reading and writing, then we, as educators, and, in particular, reading educators, have truly served our society.

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1. Both ballads were collected from Mrs. Naomi Sitton, a resident of Boone County, West Virginia, by Dr. Hafiz Baghban.

The observations described in this paper are based on ethnographic fieldwork supported by West Virginia College of Graduate Studies, the West Virginia Humanities Foundation, and Appalachian Studies Center, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.

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