

New Horizons
for Learning

by Jennifer Johnson Higgins

Abstract:

In this project, research-based criteria were established and a tool for evaluating multicultural children's literature was developed. This tool was then applied to 30 multicultural picture books and 5 multicultural chapter books. Quality and authenticity were determined and an evaluative summary was written for each book. The result is an annotated list of quality multicultural children's literature.

Literature Review:

The following review of research and resources focuses on defining authentic multicultural children's literature and appropriate evaluation strategies for choosing authentic literature. The issues and perspectives discussed provide a background for the resulting evaluation tool and annotated bibliography of quality multicultural children's books.

Defining Authentic Multicultural Children's Literature

The term "multicultural" has only recently come into usage (Lindgren, 1991; Rochman, 1993) and is variably used to describe groups of people from a nonwhite background, people of color, or people of all cultures regardless of race. Multicultural literature has often been used to show only positive images of minority cultures. However, in its most authentic form it is an area of literature that focuses on the reality of various cultures (Lindgren, 1991; Nieto, 1992; Rochman, 1993). In her research on Puerto Rican children's literature, Sonia Nieto describes her search for "a more balanced, complete, accurate, and realistic literature that asks even young readers to grapple with sometimes wrenching issues" (1992, p. 188). Children's literature used in this study focuses on the cultures of people from a nonwhite background, though the resulting evaluation tool can be effectively used with any culture defined by the user.

In the literature, the authenticity of multicultural books is determined in different ways by different scholars. For some, authentic books include only those written by a member of an ethnic group about that ethnic group, its cultural traditions, and its people (Aoki, 1992; Mikkelsen, 1998; Slapin & Seale, 1992). Nina Mikkelsen (1998) concludes that books about African Americans could only be authentic when written by "insiders;" that African American authors should be the only ones allowed to write literature about their culture. Others believe that the most accurate portrayal of a culture will come from an author writing about her or his own culture, but acknowledge that there are exceptions (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Howard, 1991; Nieto, 1992; Sims Bishop, 1992). These exceptions include authors who have lived within the culture they are writing about all or most of their lives regardless of their race (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Howard, 1991), those who write based on experience and a growing awareness in our society of other cultures (Nieto, 1992), or those who provide an accurate representation of the culture being portrayed (Hillard, 1995; Yokota, 1993). Junko Yokota (1993) defines authentic literature as that which shows evidence that "the author and illustrator are intimately familiar with the nuances of a culture" (p. 156).

Rudine Sims uses the term "culturally conscious" when evaluating African American children's books for cultural authenticity in her book *Shadow and Substance* (1982). Culturally conscious literature is that in which the author is sensitive to aspects of African American culture and

"consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro-American life experience" (p. 49). The characters are African American, it is set in an African American community or home, the story is told from their perspective, and the text describes the ethnicity of the characters in some way. Sims found faults, however, even in culturally conscious books, finding differences in books written by members and nonmembers of the African American cultural group. The culturally conscious books written by non-African American authors emphasized different aspects of African American life than did African American authors, and the authentic detail in story and illustration was often lacking in those written by non-African Americans.

Authenticity includes the accuracy and validity of the text as well as of the illustrations (Mikkelsen, 1998; Sims Bishop, 1991; Slapin, Seale & Gonzales, 1992). If the illustrator does not have an accurate picture of the culture he or she is drawing, the result is an inauthentic portrayal of that culture. Beverly Slapin (1992), in her introduction to *Through Indian Eyes*, notes the detrimental effects an inaccurate portrayal can have on a Native American child reading supposedly about his or her culture yet seeing illustrations depicting another tribe, or worse yet, seeing a conglomeration of Native American cultures in one picture.

Why Multicultural children's literature?

Hazel Rochman (1993) in her book *Against Borders*, explains the overall purpose of multicultural literature. She says,

A good book can help to break down [barriers]. Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community: not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person - flawed, complex, striving - then you've reached beyond stereotype. Stories, writing them, telling them, sharing them, transforming them, enrich us and connect us and help us know each other. (P. 19)

Researchers and professionals seem to agree about the need for children's literature to better reflect the reality of our pluralistic society. Thus, the books we select for our classrooms need to not only reflect the diversity of the students in the classroom and school, but the diverse reality of the world in which we live. To begin with, every student should be represented, and accurately, in the literature used. Negative images and inaccurate stereotyping of people and cultures in children's fiction books is harmful to students whose ethnicity is being portrayed. Students should be able to see themselves and their lives reflected in the books they read (Aoki, 1992; Slapin & Seale, 1992).

Authentic multicultural literature in the classroom is also necessary in helping students to develop an understanding of diverse cultures, the people and their perspectives (Aoki, 1992; Banfield, 1998; Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; MacCann, 1992; Pescosolido, Grauerholz & Milkie, 1997; Rochman, 1993; Slapin & Seale, 1992; Yokota, 1993). Bernice Pescosolido and colleagues (1997) speak of children's books as cultural objects that are intimately tied to social relations and power shifts in society. "The depiction of race relations to the newest members of society via children's picture books subtly colors children's understanding of status arrangements, social boundaries, and power" (p. 444).

Barta and Grindler (1996) describe how multicultural children's literature can be used to explore bias. Their article entitled "Exploring Bias Using Multicultural Literature for Children" describes ways in which literature can make children more aware of bias and active toward its elimination.

Making students aware that there is prejudice and discrimination against differences helps them to prepare for what they may encounter in the future (or help explain what they have already encountered).

Multicultural children's literature also emphasizes the similarities in experiences across cultures (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Barta & Grindler, 1996; Frosch, 1994; Hillard, 1995; Roberts & Cecil, 1993; Rochman, 1993). Learning how people from other cultures do similar things in different ways can help children gain a sense of acceptance and appreciation for diverse cultures (Hillard, 1995). As Rosalinda Barrera and colleagues state in the context of Mexican American literature, "literature about the Mexican American experience is literature about the human experience" (1992, p. 231). In the introduction to her book *Coming of Age in America*, Mary Frosch (1994) describes the purpose behind her anthology of stories as a way to show children that people in all cultures deal with issues of adolescence and "growing up."

Trends in Multicultural Children's Literature

Those who research authentic multicultural literature agree that, compared to the number of children's books published each year, the number of books focusing on minority cultures is extremely low. Of the few that are published, a small percentage could be considered authentic, or culturally conscious, material (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Greenfield, 1986; Hill, 1998; Lewis, 1988; MacCann, 1992; Nieto, 1983, 1992; Pescosolido, Grauerholz & Milkie, 1997; Sims, 1982; Sims Bishop, 1991, 1992; Williams, 1983).

Pescosolido, Grauerholz & Milkie (1997) looked at the history of African American children's literature and found that while the number of children's books portraying at least one Black character (not necessarily of African descent) has risen since 1937, the number of books that focus exclusively on Black life is still incredibly low. There are even fewer books written by African American authors, some researchers estimating between one and two percent of all published children's books (Sims Bishop, 1991).

The truth about other minority cultures represented in children's books is even more discouraging since there is probably more literature focusing on African American culture than any other (Hill, 1998). Nieto (1992) found in comparing three studies from 1972 to 1992 that the number of books depicting Puerto Ricans had decreased considerably, while the quality of the literature had increased slightly.

There is promise in a recent trend toward more minority authors being published (Lewis, 1988; Sims Bishop, 1991). This may account for the increase in quality, but the decrease in quantity still needs to be addressed. There is a need for more minority authors to write for children, and large publishers need to take responsibility for actively seeking them out (Greenfield, 1986; Hill, 1998). Twyla Hill (1998) studied the publishing, marketing and distributing practices pertaining to multicultural children's literature in America. She identified three "gatekeepers" who are at least partially responsible for the paltry numbers of culturally conscious books being published: publishers who do not actively seek minority authors and tend to focus only on the profitability of a book; review journals that select books for review based on what they believe will appeal to libraries and schools; and librarians and bookstore buyers who look to the review journals and large publishers in selecting the books they will include in their collections.

Multicultural children's books have been slowly improving with regards to stereotypes, inaccuracies, and negative portrayals (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Nieto, 1992; Lewis, 1988; MacCann, 1992;

Williams, 1983). But stereotypes are still found in currently published children's books. MacCann (1992) and Magda Lewis (1988) both note that Native Americans are often still depicted as a generic Indian type, or as helpless and dependent upon benevolent whites.

Developing and Applying Evaluative Measures

After becoming familiar with the definitions, purposes, and trends of multicultural children's literature, evaluative measures become more important. Being selective about choosing from the small number of multicultural books is crucial. Several researchers and reviewers of children's multicultural literature have laid out criteria they believe to be important in selecting books for the multicultural classroom. I have developed an evaluation checklist for use with multicultural children's books from the works of Day (1994), Sims Bishop (1992), and Slapin, Seale and Gonzales (1992). The checklist was created to help guide its user in evaluating books for stereotypes, negative images of cultural groups, and literary quality. The set of criteria covers the attributes of "quality" children's books and "quality" multicultural literature in order to give the user a picture of the ideal book. The checklist follows:

High literary quality.

No distortions or omissions of history. Look for various perspectives to be represented.

Stereotyping. There are no negative or inaccurate stereotypes of the ethnic group being portrayed.

Loaded words. There are no derogatory overtones to the words used to describe the characters and culture, such as "savage," "primitive," "lazy," and "backward."

Lifestyles. The lifestyles of the characters are genuine and complex, not oversimplified or generalized.

Dialogue. The characters use speech that accurately represents their oral tradition.

Standards of success. The characters are strong and independent, not helpless or in need of the assistance of a white authority figure. Characters do not have to exhibit extraordinary qualities, or do more than a white character to gain acceptance and approval.

The role of females, elders, and family. Women and the elderly are portrayed accurately within their culture. The significance of family is portrayed accurately for the culture.

Possible effects on a child's self-image. There is nothing in the story that would embarrass or offend a child whose culture is being portrayed. A good rule of thumb: you would be willing to share this book with a mixed-race group of children?

Author's and/or illustrator's background. The author and/or illustrator have the qualifications needed to deal with the cultural group accurately and respectfully, and are most likely a member of the cultural group being portrayed in the story.

Illustrations. The illustrations do not generalize about or include stereotypes of a cultural group and its people. The characters are depicted as genuine individuals. Characters of the same ethnic group do not all look alike, but show a variety of physical attributes.

Relationships between characters from different cultures. Minority characters are leaders within their community and solve their own problems. Whites do not possess the power while cultural minorities play a supporting or subservient role.

Heroines and Heroes. Heroines and heroes are accurately defined according to the concepts of and struggles for justice appropriate to their cultural group. They are not those who avoid conflict with and thus benefit the white majority.

Copyright date. During the mid- and late 1960's most books on minority themes were written by white authors and reflected a white, middle-class, mainstream point of view. More recently (beginning in the 1970's) books began to reflect a pluralistic society. The copyright date of a book may be one clue as to the possible biases to be found within it (Day, 1994).

First and foremost, it is important that any book chosen for use with children be of high literary quality (Lu, 1998; Sims Bishop, 1992; Yokota, 1993). Because of the limited quantity of multicultural literature, this may be even more important to remember since "there may be a greater tendency to accept poor literary quality just to have something in the classroom or library" (Sims Bishop, 1992, p. 48).

If you are looking to influence your students' beliefs about different cultures, look specifically for pluralistic themes within the stories (Lu, 1998). It is also valuable to collect both contemporary and historical fiction to expand students' knowledge. Mei-Yu Lu (1998) suggests consulting local ethnic communities and multicultural resources for suggestions on what to include in a multicultural literature collection.

Sims Bishop (1991, 1992) suggests that those who want to become adept at evaluating literature about different cultures, to read extensively in the literature written by "insiders," those writing about their own culture and experiences. Once immersed in the work of authors and illustrators writing or drawing about their own cultural group, there will be a basis for comparison with books by authors whose ethnicity is unknown.

Aoki (1992) believes that, in evaluating multicultural children's books, one should look for those that fulfill a purpose (see also Yokota, 1993). While one quality book may not address every need, a collection should be formed based on the following criteria. Text and illustrations should reflect reality, attempt to transcend stereotypes, and seek to rectify historical distortions and omissions. They should avoid the "model" (well behaved) and "super" (perfect) minority syndromes and accurately reflect the diversity within cultural groups. She also states (in the context of Asian Pacific American literature) that one should be aware of the changing status of women in society and include books that reflect their current roles. The same argument could be expanded to include women within all cultural groups, and all cultural groups within society.

Methodology

A checklist was created to help guide its user in evaluating books for stereotypes, negative images of cultural groups, and literary quality. The set of criteria covers the attributes of "quality" children's books and "quality" multicultural literature in order to give the user a picture of the ideal book.

Thirty-five books were evaluated using the checklist created. An evaluation form was completed for each of 30 picture books and 5 elementary level chapter books, each focusing on one of five cultural groups - Native American, African American, Asian American, Hispanic and Latino. The

books are from various sources, including multicultural author and book lists, bookstores, library searches and literature recommended by friends and colleagues. The main focus was on picture books and on books published within the past five years, however 12 of the 35 books were published prior to 1996.

These evaluations are presented in an annotated list of quality multicultural children's books. For each book the title, author, illustrator, publication date, and cultural group represented are listed, followed by a brief summary and evaluation of its contents. Since only books found to be of good quality are included in the annotated list, there is no rating system. The description should help the reader decide if a particular book would be worth purchasing for individual purposes.

From the beginning of this project's conception I have been looking forward to the book search and reading many wonderful books. I have not been disappointed. There have, however, been some stumbling blocks in the road to finding the quality literature I need. While there seems to be plenty of African American and Asian American children's literature to choose from, finding books on the Latino and Native American experiences has been a challenge. I have found many picture books about the Mexican American experience, and fewer on other Latin American or Hispanic cultures, but there are very few elementary level chapter books about Mexican American life. The two books I have chosen to evaluate for the umbrella group Latino/Hispanic are excellent books. One is a fictional story based on the real life of an important Puerto Rican woman in 1930's New York, and the other is an autobiography by a woman about her childhood in Cuba.

I also experienced difficulty in finding picture books on contemporary Native American life. The chapter book I read for this section is a beautifully written story of a boy living and learning on a reservation on the East Coast, and is relevant to this project and its intentions. However, I feel this was a rare find, and there are very few such stories written in picture book form. I feel lucky to have found the three contemporary picture books included in the annotated list. The one nonfiction and two fictional picture books would be a positive addition to any multicultural children's book collection, though more like them are needed.

Conclusions

This project focused on the characteristics of quality multicultural children's books and how these characteristics can be used practically by teachers and librarians wishing to build a collection of quality multicultural children's books. Educators, with little time to peruse the literature that discusses characteristics of quality multicultural books, or to search bookstore shelves, have a need for a list that can provide the information for them.

Quality multicultural books are difficult to find, even with time to search. The percentage of books with multicultural themes is low, but there are ways to find them. For example, when looking up a specific book, one Internet site provided other authors' names and book titles similar to the current selection. With this information, authors' names and various subjects could be cross-referenced to find additional selections. Aside from this search format, also used by some public libraries, there was no other way to find books besides searching the bookshelves of libraries and bookstores --a tedious process.

African Americans and Asian Americans appear to have the best representation in children's books compared with other minority groups. There is a wide variety of themes that focus on contemporary African American life and African folk tales (e.g. *In My Momma's Kitchen*, and *In The Time of The Drums*, respectively). Books with Asian American themes include such issues as learning to adjust

to a new culture (e.g. In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson) and the problems that arose for Japanese Americans during World War II (e.g. Baseball Saved Us). There are also books, though very few, that focus on other Asian groups, such as Vietnamese Americans (Journey Home) and Korean Americans (Halmoni and the Picnic).

Not as well represented in children's literature are Latino, Hispanic, and Native American cultures. In regards to the Latino and Hispanic cultures, Mexican Americans are better represented in picture books by contemporary authors and artists such as Pat Mora, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Rudolfo Anaya. In this author's searches, other Latino and Hispanic cultures seem to be better represented in chapter books than they are in picture books (e.g. Puerto Ricans in All For the Better; Cubans in Under The Royal Palms). Most picture books with Cuban, Puerto Rican or Caribbean themes are set in the country of origin. In this book list, Latino and Hispanic picture books set in America are all Mexican American stories.

Books that focus on Native American themes are also lacking. Those with contemporary characters and themes are especially lacking. Native American themes in picture books tend to depict images of an extinct race. That is, there are many books that tell of past Native American heroes and heroines, legends and tales, and that contain poetry that stems from the traditions and beliefs of certain tribes and groups. However, while these books and stories are an important part of Native American life, they send a message that the people and their traditions are a thing of the past. As a result of intensive searches, however, there are several exceptions on this list. One of these is Powwow, which depicts an event that takes place annually on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana, one in which Native American people from all over North America attend. Another exception is the chapter book included for this cultural group. The Heart Of A Chief tells the story of a boy on a fictional reservation in the late 1990's who faces issues relevant to Native Americans today, such as alcoholism, casinos, and the use of Indian words and names for sports teams.

This project provides for educators a practical tool for evaluating and selecting multicultural children's literature, and a list of books to help start a good book collection. Educators can use the checklist with books they already have, or with books they find on bookshelves or in catalogs in the future.

Literature Evaluation

My main goal with this project has been to gain knowledge of and experience with the issues surrounding multicultural children's literature so that when I begin to build my own collection of classroom literature I will be prepared to evaluate and choose quality books. Another goal, and an added benefit, has been to create a list of evaluation criteria for fellow educators looking to do the same. Because this project has been so personal, there may be some books missing from the list of quality literature for the very reason that I would not wish to use or purchase the book at this time. Also, it cannot be a comprehensive list, if for no other reason than because of time constraints. It is, however, a useful list for starting a collection of quality multicultural books as I highly recommend each selection. The evaluation tool will serve to assist anyone who wishes to find other books to add to their collection.

Following is a copy of the evaluation tool and an annotated list of the 35 multicultural books focusing on the experiences, lifestyles and issues of Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latino and Hispanic cultures. Books about both Latino and Hispanic cultures are combined into one section. This Latino/Hispanic section is intended to identify areas of the world where the cultures represented are from - that is, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Caribbean

islands. It is not within the scope of this project to try and place the specific cultural groups under the correct umbrella group. Doing so would be a difficult and possibly unnecessary task. While the people of a specific ethnic group may identify themselves under one such group, one person within a group may identify him or herself otherwise. This is true for each of the four cultural groups represented in this list. Today, many Black American tend to be identified as "African Americans" regardless of their actual heritage, and Native Americans from different tribes traditionally hold separate beliefs and have distinct customs based on history and heritage.

Therefore, within the four sections of the annotated list, each title is individually labeled with the specific cultural group represented in the story. I hope you find this to be helpful, yet non-intrusive on the individual needs and beliefs of the people being represented.

African American

Bud, Not Buddy - African American

Written by Christopher Paul Curtis, Chapter book. 1999.

New York, NY: Delacorte Press

A ten-year-old orphaned boy in 1936 Flint, Michigan sets out to find the man he believes is his father. His mother died four years before and left him only a few hints about a jazz bandleader from Grand Rapids. While this is a story about a boy seeking the family he has never known, it is also a descriptive, and often hilarious insight into the personality of a homeless, motherless, African American boy who has learned how to make it on his own during the Depression. The issues addressed in Bud's thoughts and experiences are sometimes deep and may require explanation to a younger audience. Since it takes place in the 1930's, discrimination and prejudice are woven into the story, but are never the story itself.

I Love My Hair! - African American

Written by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, Illustrated by E.B. Lewis. 1998.

Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company

A little girl's nightly struggle with a comb turns into a celebration of her family life and heritage. Her mother can style it to look like soft spun yarn or to reflect the rows of vegetables in their garden. Or the little girl can celebrate her African heritage by letting it all go free. The illustrations portray the different expressions and emotions that the little girl has throughout the story. Children will enjoy the individuality of the main character. African American children will see personal characteristics celebrated in a book that all children will love.

In My Momma's Kitchen - African American

Written by Jerdine Nolen, Illustrated by Colin Bootman. 1999.

New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books

This story is a year in the life of an African American family, celebrating family events and momma's everywhere. A little girl describes special events in her family that always seem to happen in her momma's kitchen. Her sister tells the family about her music scholarship; her aunts gather together to remember, tell stories and make soup; the family gathers for a midnight snack. The characters have true personality in colorful and detailed illustrations that also convey a warm, cozy kitchen where all the special events of the year take place. This is a contemporary story that African American and non-African American children can relate to.

In The Time of The Drums - African American

Written by Kim Siegelson, Illustrated by Brian Pinkney. 1999.

New York: Hyperion Books for Children

Set in the time of slavery, this story is about the freedom of spirit passed down from an old slave woman to a young boy. It is told as a legend but is more than just a story of the past. It is a reminder of how one should live. The language of the book is poetic. While the story itself could stand alone, Brian Pinkney's art could also tell the story on it's own. For some African American people the message of the story could be read as a reminder of their heritage. Yet it is also an inspiration to any child who needs strength of spirit to live through difficult times.

The Magic Moonberry Jump Ropes - African American

Written by Dakari Hru, Illustrated by E.B. Lewis. 1996.

New York: Dial Books for Young Readers

This contemporary story about two sisters looking for friends during the summer months includes a special lesson about friendship and provides a connection between the girls' passion for Double Dutch and their heritage in Africa. Their uncle arrives home just in time from his trip to Africa with a gift for them - two magic moonberry jump ropes that will fulfill the user's wish. Both the main theme of jumping Double Dutch and the underlying importance of family are relevant to children's lives today. The illustrations are detailed and sensitive. Each character has a personality of her or his own.

The Music in Derrick's Heart - African American

Written by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert, Illustrated by Colin Bootman. 2000.

New York: Holiday House, Inc.

Derrick is a little boy who can't wait for his uncle to teach him to play the harmonica. In the heat of summer, Uncle Booker T. and Derrick tour the town, visit family, and play music. But Derrick must learn that the music doesn't come from learning the notes so much as it comes from the heart. The characters speak in Southern dialect, and the feeling of a close-knit community is conveyed in the text as well as in the colorful illustrations.

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