

Connecting Children's Stories to Children's Literature: Meeting Diversity Needs

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Combining children's natural storytelling abilities with quality multicultural literature serves to enhance their language skills and students' appreciation of cultural differences. Narrative abilities—particularly stories—are a natural vehicle for building on children's oral language skills and develop literacy with print. If the stories have a multicultural focus, it is only natural that readers and participants will develop an appreciation of both cultural similarities and differences.

KEY WORDS: multicultural literature/concepts; oral language skills; print literacy; storytelling; reading activities.

INTRODUCTION

Children are natural storytellers from the time they can string together a few sentences. Children use oral tradition and the power of stories to recount life's experiences, to recast stories that have been told to them, and to share stories of wonderment.

By combining children's natural storytelling abilities with quality multicultural literature, students' language skills and students' appreciation of cultural differences are enlarged and enriched. Narrative abilities—particularly stories—are a natural vehicle for building on children's oral language skills to develop literacy with print. If these stories have a multicultural focus, it is only natural that readers will develop an appreciation of both cultural similarities and differences.

STORIES TOLD BY CHILDREN

Asking children to tell you about their favorite toy, person, holiday, or experience opens them up to generating a narrative as rich as any published text; it will be meaningful, relevant, and full of emotion. Why is this

so? We learn in the form of stories; the human brain is a story-seeking, story-creating instrument (Smith, 1990). The stories that we share are the foundation for our identity; nothing tells us more about a person than the stories he or she chooses to tell (Nelson, 1989; Smith, 1990). Stories fit all ages, places, timeframes, and circumstances (Chenfield, 2002). As teachers listen to children tell a story, they gain insight about the children's prior knowledge, creativity, language ability, and thinking processes, while also serving to develop children's imagination and their ability to think creatively (Jalongo, 2003; Roney, 1989). Storytelling acts as a vehicle or metaphor for enabling children's creativity, experimentation, and language enrichment in their own oral and written stories. Rushton and Larkin (2001) emphasize that teachers need to remember that each child's educational experiences inside the classroom will play a part in shaping a lifetime of learning habits. Asking children to share their version of a favorite story, to create a new version of a tale, or to retell a memorable event in their lives actively involves children in a discussion that allows them to express their thoughts.

If we ask about their lives, we will hear about them, and even young lives are full of warts. We need to accept what comes out, because it will be what the child needs to say (Csak, 2002). Stories are a means of response, a vehicle for interpreting the literature we read and a structure for sharing it with others (Mathis, 2001). Chenfield (2002) tells us that as our children are wel-

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comed by us (and we by them) into the enchantment of stories, they develop their expertise in storytelling, learn academic skills and knowledge, and nourish their too often diminished spirits. Story-sharing gives the students an open invitation to read, write, think, and speak about issues that are important to the children (Nelson, 1989). Stories can teach, nourish, and inspire. They can carry a burden of a political message, sometimes without breaking. It is clear that stories change to fit our worlds. Conversely, stories may change our worlds (MacDonald, 1993).

USING STORIES TO BUILD MULTICULTURAL CONCEPTS

Children are aware of lifestyle (cultural) differences at a very early age, and drawing on this knowledge can foster intercultural understanding throughout life. Anderson (2002) recommends including books about a variety of cultures because it makes curriculum more interesting and complete. Greater variety in literature also makes it more likely that all children will have access to narratives that represent their various backgrounds as well as enrich and enlarge their understanding of other backgrounds. Perini (2002) explains that sharing children's books with students can provide opportunities to make explicit and call into question the traditional, prevailing beliefs and views people hold of themselves and of others.

Hamilton (1987) describes three basic story types: the Known, a body of verifiable facts that we carry around regarding a certain subject; the Remembered, everything that recollection and memory can recall about a topic; and the Imagined, all that the imagination can create to develop a concept. When early childhood educators include all of these story types, they attend to all of an individual child's creative abilities as well as building on the diverse cultural backgrounds represented by the group.

When children share stories about special occasions in their home/family life, it strengthens social ties. We live in a global community. Valdez (1999) promotes that all children should have a multicultural education in order to learn to challenge and reject racism and other forms of discrimination, to accept and affirm pluralism, and to advance the democratic principles of social justice. This is especially important because young people are acquiring knowledge or beliefs that are sometimes unfounded concerning ethnic and cultural groups. Invalid knowledge and beliefs about ethnic and cultural groups are limiting the perspectives that many people have available to them. Mathis (2001) emphasizes that the universal power of story needs to be acknowledged

as a powerful source of cultural understanding in our classrooms.

We need to examine critically the stories that we all believe and creatively improve on them, providing better alternatives to people who believe different stories (Smith, 1990). As Heath (1994) affirms, stories align themselves with hidden or mysterious dimensions of subjective experience, which is particularly appropriate for those who see their vision as alienated and set them apart. Multicultural stories celebrate the contributions of people of different genders, races, ethnicities, historical eras, and social classes. Dyson (1994) has shown that children as authors and as storytellers play with both the boundary between the real and the imagined, while they are also playing with social and cultural lines that are influenced by age, sex, class, race, and ethnicity. Moreover, she reminds us of the importance of having these social and cultural boundaries crossed not only within the children's stories but also within the official world of the classroom. Rushton (2001) furthers this thought for early childhood and primary teachers: to remember to provide experiences that are meaningful and relevant to children's lives. An in-depth awareness of these issues must begin at the preschool level (Poissaint quoted in Patton, 1984). By offering students positive, diverse experiences that open their minds to new and different worlds, educators are allowing children the opportunity to expand their own minds within the realm of the classroom and the world at large.

PROMOTING MULTICULTURAL CONCEPTS: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Four specific ways that stories promote multicultural concepts are by: (a) practicing democracy; (b) analyzing the circumstances of one's life; (c) developing social action skills; and, (d) forming coalitions (Sleeter & Grant, 2002).

Practicing Democracy

This area consists of students working in collaborative, democratic processes to discuss relevant issues. The book *I Hate Red Rover* (Lexau, 1979) deals with a young girl's dislike of a playground game. She discusses this with her grandfather, in the hope of coming to grips with the situation, only to find out that he, too, has a problem. Children's innate sense of righteousness enables them to understand the basic democratic principle of fairness, especially at the concrete-operational stage.

Another possibility would be to begin by brainstorming about poetry: ideas, feelings, apprehensions,

and misconceptions. Read a few selections from Arnold Adoff's *All the Colors of the Race* (1982). For younger students, Adoff's *My Black Me* (1994) is a good beginning book of poetry. When possible, have students work in groups writing poems. Remind students that poetry takes many forms in its storytelling function, not always rhyming—some students have trouble breaking out of the “Roses are red . . .” mentality, so be patient. Watercolors, pastels, and charcoal sketches should be encouraged as illustrations or “picture frames” to enhance the poetry for classroom display.

Analyzing the Circumstances of One's Life

Here the goal is to help students analyze the circumstances of their lives and work on developing the ability to recognize inequities in our social structure and create alternative solutions. In early childhood settings, an appropriate beginning would be with an exploration of differing holidays. By helping children at an early age develop healthy understandings of and tolerances for the diversity of holiday celebrations, teachers are laying a solid foundation upon which other concepts of diversity can be built. This would be a good opportunity to welcome parental and community involvement into the classroom and vice versa. By taking a class into the community, teachers are showing the community positive social action and developing a good role model for others to follow. Some examples of holiday books include: Berger's *Celebrate! Stories of the Jewish Holidays* (1998), Sabuda's (1999) *Saint Valentine*, or one of dePaola's tales: *The Lady of Guadalupe* (1980) or *Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland* (1992). By exploring these stories (the Known) and tying them to the children's personal Known, or their family's Remembered, children are encouraged to Imagine life in the shoes of their classmates, as Hamilton (1997) has encouraged us to do.

For second or third grade classes, the teacher could read *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1990). The students could then think about how females are often excluded from some sports and suggest formation of some athletic teams for their age group. Or, for students with interests that are not of the athletic nature, take a poll of potential activities that the class would like to get involved with and do some community research to see if there are any special interest groups for the students' age or interest level; if not, begin to build one.

Developing Social Action Skills

This concept involves using knowledge to affect constructively political, social, and economic changes. In an early childhood setting, this means reinforcing democratic principles and social concepts. Csak (2002)

states that the first step in the journey toward literacy and social responsibility is taken through oral language. This is further reinforced by teaching students cooperative skills, which are part of the everyday curricula and an accepted component of developmentally appropriate practice. These can be reinforced through literature such as Hines' (1986) *Daddy Makes the Best Spaghetti*. Using a simple KWL (What do you Know? What do you Want to know? What did you Learn?) activity and exploring the concepts of cooperation, family chores, and daily routines with the students helps establish the importance of treating others with respect and the need for cooperation from an early age.

Valdez (1999) devotes an entire section to social action. Her activities include helping the elderly, environmental awareness, and saving the earth. Young children love being involved in projects, especially when they can see immediate results. Perhaps your community has a special interest, such as a “Save the Manatee” group. Raising funds or performing volunteer work at their local manatee sites are other options for your class. Having the students write about the activities afterward, either internally or as a class project for the local newspaper, gives the project even more of an impact, along with building the children's literacy skills.

Forming Coalitions

Students are actively using interpersonal similarities to form social action groups. Forming coalitions can be addressed by showing students how strength and cooperation help to achieve goals more easily than individualism. To stimulate creativity as well as focus on the issue of forming coalitions, stories with animals as the main characters can be used. Texts such as *Just So Stories* (Kipling, 1980), *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1975) or *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (Hamilton, 1988) can get students thinking about and determining the roles played by the animals, why the tales were told from these perspectives, why certain animals were chosen for certain roles, how the roles they assume determine the outcome, and so forth. Assign a different story to each student with the intention of having them analyze and “teach” the story to the others, paying particular attention to the above questions. For younger or ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) students, use groups of three or four instead of individuals. Similarities and differences should be generated based on the elements of fiction. Modern-day animal tales can be generated using current issues/themes relevant to the students' lives. Paired-authorship can help reluctant writers. Recycle old *National Geographic* and other nature magazines, along with dis-

carded greeting cards and outdated calendars as a source of animal pictures for students who want "perfect" animal pictures. If you have a classroom computer and printer, students can download photos from the Web. Sharing these stories with parents at an evening roundtable conference or with students in different grade levels through the reading-buddy system are effective methods of "marketing" students' texts.

Another recommendation is to read aloud to the class *The Story of Ferdinand* (Leaf, 1936) and use it as an example for generating themes. Students should be able to detect some of the following: individualism, peer pressure, pursuing your dream, anger (resulting from an injury), people misinterpreting anger, and others. Once students "latch on" to a theme, their task is to extend it to their personal lives. They can talk in small groups, tell the story into a cassette recorder, or write the story to be shared with the entire class. Some schools have parent or senior volunteers or classroom aides who can be used for students to dictate their stories, instead of having them labor over manually writing the text. The children can then spend their energy creating the illustrations for their stories.

MULTICULTURAL STORIES AS CULTURAL MIRRORS

Multicultural stories can be a mirror, reflecting and validating familiar cultures and experiences for children who rarely have a "voice" in the classroom. For mainstream children, these books can be a window, revealing a vista that juxtaposes the familiar and the less familiar (Cox & Galda, 1990). Literature provides a means for presenting multiple interpretations and experiences surrounding particular events or dates. Simultaneously, it can support awareness of the diversity within any particular racial or cultural group as well as the similarities between groups (Perini, 2002). Using authors and texts who have written narratives to reflect different ways of knowledge construction as well as different perspectives on events is a surefire method for promoting critical thought—and for making learning relevant to all students, not just a few.

Strategies and experiences like these reinforce the message that no one culture or lifestyle is inherently better than another, just different (Barry, 1990). These activities can be readily applied and easily adapted to the age levels of your students and to other trade books than those suggested. Integrating quality literature from diverse sources enhances many areas of a curriculum. In many classrooms, curriculum is presented as separate subjects in distinct units with little overlap. Information

would be better presented in a context of real life experiences where new information can build on prior knowledge, reinforcing its relevance to the learner (Rushton & Larkin, 2001). Probably the most beneficial result is achieved in student motivation and involvement. Giving students a vested interest in the curricular process and methodology helps them become active, successful learners.

Anderson's (2002) text is an excellent resource for parents, teachers, and students. It provides both theoretical and practical, hands-on information about how and why to use literature in your home and classroom. Valdez' (1999) book is directed more toward primary educators, but parents and home-schoolers could glean many excellent ideas and activities from reading it. Both volumes contain lists of trade books as well as summaries of their content, along with lessons or activities that are easily employable.

CONCLUSION

Learning is most meaningful when materials are in the children's own language, speak of issues that are salient and familiar to them, and are rooted in their own experiences (Katz & Chard, 2000; Nelson, 1989). The use of oral language in the classroom is not only enjoyable for children but is also necessary for establishing a classroom community, developing literacy, and defining children's self (Csak, 2002). The task of early childhood practitioners is to make learning as relevant and meaningful as possible, to draw children into the learning process.

Teachers (and parents) need to get back in touch with the belief that shining a beacon on one person's story can illuminate the lives of others (Jalongo, 1991, p. 79). The Known, the Remembered, and the Imagined will be enhanced through creative use of literature for students and teachers alike. Combining students' original stories with trade book literature contributes to children's narrative abilities and promotes multicultural concepts.

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