



Heightening New Teacher Sensitivity Toward Families Using Children's Literature as a Tool

Kathy B. Grant and Joyce Goddard

ABSTRACT

Many elementary teachers include a thematic unit on families as a part of their yearly curriculum. During student teaching new practitioners may be tempted to choose only family-themed books within their experiential background and comfort level (Gay, 2002). However, culturally responsive teachers entering our highly diverse classrooms need to develop sensitivity toward families of diversity. Children's literature can be an effective tool to heighten new teacher sensitivity toward families. This article provides a direction for supporting teacher candidates in becoming more culturally open-minded through reflective engagement. We provide a checklist for evaluating culturally diverse literature on families, and close with some examples of children's literature that help to heighten sensitivity toward families.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kathy B. Grant, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor at SUNY Plattsburgh. Her research interests include culturally responsive family involvement and children's literature, teacher candidate dispositions, and using literature circles in teacher education

Joyce Goddard, M. Ed is a reading/literacy specialist in Harnett County, North Carolina. She has taught literacy to all ages - kindergarten through university. Her research interest includes multicultural children's literature promoting a deeper understanding of families of diversity.

Many elementary teachers include a thematic unit on families as a part of their yearly curriculum. During student teaching new practitioners may be tempted to choose only family-themed books within their experiential background and comfort level (Gay, 2002). However, culturally responsive teachers entering our highly diverse classrooms need to develop sensitivity toward families of diversity. Novice teachers who view the families of their students in an "affirming light acknowledge the existence and validity of a plurality of ways" of family values and traditions, communication, structure, daily family interactions, and family literacy (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 23). One effective method is to heighten new teacher sensitivity toward families using children's literature as a tool.

New teachers may harbor commonly accepted assumptions about minority families based on negative portrayals via the media (Compton-Lilly, 2004). For example, in the throes of critical literacy discussions, Van Sluys, Legan, Laman, and Lewison (2006) found undergraduate students reluctant to engage in conversations on issues of homelessness, racism, and equity. By acknowledging and accepting families of diversity, new teachers can step into the role of proactive family advocates.



Teacher Standards

Teacher accreditation organizations wrestle with the complex issue of preparing majority teachers to effectively work with increasing numbers of minority students and their families. NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) standard number four under diversity (2002) mandates in-school experiences that help candidates explore diversity as it impacts teaching and student learning. Under INTASC (Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium) principle number three, dispositions to be nurtured include respect of differing family backgrounds and sensitivity to community and cultural norms (1992). The act of evaluating, considering, and ultimately selecting high quality family themed multicultural literature enables teacher candidates to fairly present culturally accurate family issues during literacy instruction. Furthermore, INTASC principle number nine (1992) urges the teacher to be a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others.

Reflective Engagement

When engaging with children's literature, key questions we need to ask are:

1. Does the book broaden vision and invite reflection about families for students?
2. Does the text help the student identify with his/her own culture positively?
3. Does the text aid students in connecting with cultures of other students around the world?
4. Does the text engage the teacher in self-reflection about differing family dynamics and configurations? (Hancock, 2004)

Becoming Culturally Open-Minded

Becoming culturally open-minded is a complex process involving self-evaluation and reflection. Grant and Gillette (2006) describe culturally receptive teachers as "willing to be introspective about themselves and their teaching, monitor their beliefs and actions for bias and prejudice" (p. 294). Gestwicki (2004) believes teachers must take the initiative in understanding cultural backgrounds of families. Reading multicultural literature about families brings people together through increased understanding and respect. She notes families maintain their own specific interpretation of the key elements of their culture. However, reading and reflecting upon the daily lives of families might circumvent misperceptions about "patterns of behavior and communication styles that might otherwise be misinterpreted or even offensive" (p. 112).

Checklist for Evaluating Culturally Diverse Literature on Families

The Checklist for Evaluating Culturally Diverse Literature on Families (Figure 1) provides a starting point for beginning teachers. This heuristic may serve as a framework for (a) reflective exploration of quality children's literature, (b) a vehicle to promote self-reflection on family-teacher relationships, and (c) a springboard for classroom discussions on social equity, anti-racism, and changing family dynamics. Applying this template to children's literature will aid teachers in selecting quality family-themed books.



<i>Essential Questions:</i>	<i>Teacher Outcome</i>
<p>1. Are family members portrayed avoiding stereotypical roles? ✓ Minority versus dominant nuances are highlighted. ✓ Roles assumed by family members are different from traditional roles, yet work for family portrayed. ✓ Gender roles authentically depicted.</p> <p>2. Is the quality of the family’s cultural content authentic and accurate? ✓ Contemporary or historical settings in text are authentically representative of a particular cultural group. ✓ Family traditions, actions, and beliefs are presented positively and represent a clear understanding of the culture.</p> <p>3. Does the book make positive impact towards understanding family relationships within the culture? ✓ Socio-cultural relationships are treated honestly and openly. ✓ Every character is seen as a unique individual supporting the family within a cultural milieu.</p> <p>4. Does the language used in the book reflect the cultural group usage correctly? ✓ Dialect or patterns of speech should be considered an authentic form of discourse. ✓ Distinctive vocabulary adds to appeal of the book. ✓ Derogatory terms are avoided.</p> <p>5. Does the variety of changing roles across families add to the realism of the text? ✓ Differing family configuration may be explored including “grand” parenthood, siblings raising siblings, and extended family configurations. ✓ Challenges of single parenting and the emerging roles of fathers are highlighted.</p> <p>6. Does the book broaden vision and invite reflection? ✓ Critical analysis is possible in inviting connection with self and world.</p>	<p>Teacher is alerted to stereotypical family roles and provides a balanced portrayal of a culture through literature discussions.</p> <p>Teacher develops an understanding of the critical process of choosing authentic literature depicting accurate community and cultural mores.</p> <p>Teacher strives to establish respectful and productive relationships with parents and guardians from diverse home and community situations.</p> <p>Teacher seeks to foster culturally sensitive communication with parents from differing cultural backgrounds.</p> <p>Teacher, by transcending family member stereotypes, develops effective partnerships with family members in the learners’ other environments.</p> <p>Teacher assumes an active role as an advocate for families by better understanding cultural traditions of diverse families.</p>

Figure 1. Checklist for Evaluating Culturally Diverse Literature (Hancock, 2004)



Books Heightening Sensitivity Toward Families

The following books are recommended as exemplary sources of children's literature exploring the major premises of cultural family support outlined in the checklist. Teachers should seek out realistic portrayals of families challenged by racism, language barriers, immigration obstacles, economic survival, health problems, or child-raising issues. Only through exposure to "family stories" can we hope to develop empathy through an awareness of their daily struggles.

Does the language used in the book reflect the cultural group usage correctly?

In *Going North* authored by Janice Harrington (2004), Jessie, a young African American girl, and her family leave their home in Alabama to head for Nebraska seeking a better life. But traveling through the segregated South is not easy in the 1960's—most restaurants and filling stations are reserved for "whites only." The lyrical text and evocative illustrations resonate in the girl's thoughts; the dialect is natural and the vocabulary appealing. Family relationships are believable: Big Mama, uncles, aunts and cousins come to say goodbye as they depart, Jessie's Momma, Daddy, brother, and baby sister share cold chicken and lemonade as they watch the gas gauge running out and hope the North will be better. When they reach Lincoln, together they vow, "Be brave. We're together. Pioneers."

Are family members portrayed avoiding stereotypical roles?

A young Chinese girl charmingly tells an immigrant's story in *Hannah is My Name* by Belle Yang (2004). Her family tries their best to assimilate into their San Francisco neighborhood while anxiously awaiting their green cards. Family conflicts, traditions, and beliefs are presented positively within the accurate historical setting. Family relationships are believable as they work and hope to make America their home. Hannah must adjust to a new language, a new school...even a new name. When the green cards arrive, they celebrate by eating pot stickers, a favorite.

Is the quality of the family's cultural content authentic and accurate?

Coming to America: A Muslim Family's Story by Bernard Wolf (2003) chronicles an Egyptian family's struggles and triumphs in moving to Queens, New York City. This non-fiction photo essay underscores the importance of preservation of cultural and religious identity. In the Islam religion, men and women are separated during Friday prayer in the mosque, something contrary to the American belief of equality of the sexes. The book also presents a realistic picture of the difficulties of transitioning to life in America. The father works night shift for four years to bring the family to the US while the mother struggles at Hunter College to master English with the daughter remaining homesick for the sights and sounds of Egypt.

Does the variety of changing roles across families add to the realism of the text?

Becoming Naomi Leon by Pam Munoz Ryan (2004) is a chapter book telling the story of a young girl and her brother abandoned by their mother being raised by



grandmother in a California trailer park. Although of Mexican heritage, Naomi and Owen speak no Spanish, and only after a visit to Mexico, to locate their father, are they connected with the Mexican custom of vegetable carving as art. This book presents an authentic family scenario; mother abandons children, later returning to claim only the adolescent daughter not the disabled brother. Fortunately, a savvy court judge rejects the mother's plea to take Naomi only--citing the fact that siblings should remain together--and the grandmother and father in Mexico share custody of the children.

Does the book make a positive impact towards understanding family relationships within the culture?

American Indian author Joseph Bruchac (1998), in his *Heart of a Chief*, positions his sixth grade character Chris Nicola in the midst of a school controversy; utilizing Indian names for sports teams. His disabled grandfather regales him with Penacook moral-based stories while his great-aunt is the true caretaker for the family. Mito, a Harvard MBA, Chris' father, struggles through an alcohol rehabilitation program with the hopes of rejoining the reservation as their leader. The book addresses the "circle of giving" and his family "always being known as a family that works for the people," as the best hunters they feed all the tribal members before they ate. *The Heart of a Chief* sensitively portrays family situations for other adolescents on the reservation and the hardships these young people endure.

Embracing Cultural Receptivity

An openness towards families fights the "deficit" model; a model which is the antithesis of a stance affirming the innate strengths of families (Family Resource Coalition of America, n. d.). Beginning teachers must embrace cultural receptivity through a reflective response based on a deep exploration of family stories of striving for social equity, fighting racism, and changing family dynamics.

Dong (2005) notes, "Multicultural literature can serve as an entry point to validate expression of cultural knowledge, perspective, and differences that their diverse students live by everyday (p. 381). Furthermore, the authors believe that a commitment on the part of the beginning teacher to connect and explore multicultural children's literature daily adds to the richness of classroom discourse extending student learning about various cultures.

References

- Bruchac, J. (1998). *The heart of a chief*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2004). *Confronting racism, poverty, and power: Classroom strategies to change the world*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Dong, Y. R. (2005). Bridging the cultural gap by teaching multicultural literature. *The Educational Forum*, 69, 367-382.
- Family Resource Coalition of America (n. d.). *Premises of Family Support*. Chicago, IL
- Gay, G. (2002, March/April). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 106-116.



- Gestwicki, C. (2004). *Home, school, and community relations: a guide to working with families* (5th Ed.). Clifton Park, New York: Delmar Learning.
- Grant, C. A. & Gillette, M. (2006). A candid talk to teacher educators about effectively preparing teachers who can teach everyone's children. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57, 292-299.
- Hancock, M. R. (2004). *A Celebration of literature and response: Children, books, and teachers in K-8 classrooms* (2nd Ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Harrington, J. N. (2004). *Going north*. New York: Ferrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (1992). *Model standards for beginning teacher licensing, assessment and development: A resource for state dialogue*. Retrieved June 13, 2006 from <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/corestrd.pdf>
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002). *Professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education*. Washington, DC: NCATE.
- Ryan, P. M. (2004). *Becoming Naomi Leon*. New York: Scholastic Press.
- Van Sluys, K., Legan, N., Laman, T. T. & Lewison, M. (2006). Critical literacy and preservice teachers: Changing definitions of what it might mean to read. *Journal of Reading Education*, 31, 13-22.
- Villegas, A. M. & Lucas, T. (January/February, 2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 20-32.
- Wolf, B. (2003). *Coming to America: A Muslim family's story*. New York: Lee & Low.
- Yang, B. (2004). *Hannah is my name*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press.

Additional Sources of Children's Literature: Books Heightening Sensitivity towards Families

- Alvarez, J. (2001). *Cuando tia Lola vino (de visita) a quedarse (How Aunt Lola came to (visit) stay)*. London: Random House Children's Books.
- Bunting, E. (2001). *Jin Woo*. New York: Clarion.
- Bunting, E. (2002). *One candle*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cofer, J. O. (2004) *Call me Maria: A novel in letters, poems, and prose*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Garay, L. (1997). *The long road*. New York: Tundra Books.
- Jordan, D. & Jordan, R. (2000). *Salt in his shoes*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Joose, B. (2002). *Stars in the darkness*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Mak, K. (2002). *My Chinatown: One year in poems*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Steptoe, J. (2000). *In daddy's arms I am tall: African Americans celebrating fathers*. New York: Lee & Low.
- Walter, M. P. (2002). *Ray and the best family reunion ever*. New York: HarperCollins.