

Using Texts to Accurately Represent Africa's Cultures and Promote Healthy Personal and Social Identities among Children

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countries in Africa has significantly increased (Anderson, 2017). In 2000, Africans made up 24% of all the foreign-born Black population in the United States. This figure went up to 39% in 2016 (Anderson & Lopez, 2018). Because of this immigration pattern, there are more African immigrant students in preschools and K-12 classrooms. Many of these students are second-generation Americans. They are U.S.-born, and they have limited experiences with their home culture. They may have briefly visited their parents' countries or not at all. What they know about their cultures of origin is what they learn from their homes and schools. African

Introduction

What picture or word comes to mind when you hear Africa? Is it a picture of Simba, Tarzan, jungle, safari, giraffes, or zebras? Is it poverty, famine, war, malaria, or charity? What factors or experiences have influenced your associations between Africa and the said words or pictures?

Many are surprised to learn that Africans are not all Black people, and Africa is not a single country. It is the second biggest continent in terms of landmass, and it has a bigger land area than Europe and North America combined. It consists of 54 countries, each representing unique cultures that the world could learn from and appreciate. However, if at all, Africans are often misrepresented or under-represented in popular books and media. They are often presented as a single group of people; hence, other peoples' formed notion of Africans represents a single story (Adichie, 2009). This single story needs to change because it does not represent many Africans' lived experiences.

Misconceptions about African Cultures and Microaggression

In the United States, the number of immigrants from different

families preserve their language and culture through their daily home experiences and gathering with other families from their countries. Children learn to be proud of their heritage through these activities. However, outside these contexts, they often receive a different message.

One of the authors had spoken to a couple of girls whose parents are from Zambia and Zimbabwe. These girls shared that their classmates asked if they were neighbors with giraffes and elephants, if their grandparents have real houses, and if people in Africa wear clothes. These girls came home upset that day. They had a deep conversation with their parents about what they could tell or show their peers if they gave such comments. One of the authors' graduate students from Cameroon shared a similar experience when she was student teaching in the United States. Her fifth-grade students asked if they have computers, cars, and stores in Cameroon and if they run across giraffes and elephants in the streets.

It is surprising to the authors that even college-educated adults seem to hold inaccurate concepts about people from Africa. This limited knowledge could appear as inappropriate comments against Africans. A Zimbabwean friend of the first author shared

something that happened when she was having a statewide meeting of early childhood educators. They were passionately talking about how they could work with children who speak another language at home, such as Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and African. Hearing that they had included “African” as a language, this friend said, “There is not an African language!” The continent boasts more than 1,000 languages and dialects.

African immigrants in the United States also receive other forms of hurtful comments from well-meaning adults. For instance, while in flight, someone told one of the authors, “I am surprised that, coming from Africa, you speak English that well.” Another received an email saying, “To Whom It May Concern,” even though the sender knows his name.

The above anecdotes are examples of the microaggressions that African immigrants and their U.S.-born children experience because of the images people have formed of them. Microaggressions may be in the form of jokes or simple comments that seem small and unimportant to the microaggressors (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020). Still, they send derogatory messages to the recipients, often members of marginalized groups (Sue et al., 2007), like Africans. The microaggressors are often unaware that they are sending these messages either because they do not have accurate knowledge or feel their comment is natural and harmless because the idea has been deeply ingrained in them.

Children should be guarded against hurtful experiences because of their differences. Even subtle experiences with racism have a lasting impact on their developing self-perceptions and worldviews (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). It is often assumed that young children are unaware of racial differences and that they do not discriminate based on gender, relative wealth, and ethnicity, among others. Young children do notice differences. They quickly learn from their environment to attach values to those differences and mimic the dominant society’s discriminatory behavior unless those biases and behaviors are challenged (Neitzel, 2018).

Identity Development and Multicultural Awareness

It is essential for all children to develop multicultural awareness, which involves appreciation and understanding of their culture and those of others without creating a feeling of superiority or inferiority toward their own identities (Morrison, 2018). Developing healthy, knowledgeable, and confident personal and social identities is the first of the interconnected core goals of anti-bias education. When children have developed healthy identities, they are positioned to succeed in the other goals. They learn to find joy in human diversity, recognize hurtful behavior, and stand up for themselves and others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

Many children learn about their African peers through popular media such as movies, books, and advertisements. For instance, films like *The Lion King* and *Madagascar* and their sequels are shown worldwide. Millions of families with young children have

watched or are planning to watch them. Such blockbuster movies inspire related books, television shows, toys, clothing, and many accessories that have become children’s favorites. What depictions of Africa and Africans do these movies show? How do these solidify the world’s stereotypical images of Africa and the Africans? Similarly, advertisements for charity causes in Africa show only poverty, food insecurity, chaos, and the likes. These are not representative of all Africans’ lives and experiences.

Even a few of the favorite books for read-aloud in the early childhood classrooms also strengthen stereotypes of Africans. For instance, in the *Giraffes Can’t Dance*, one can read: “Now every year in Africa, they hold the Jungle Dance, where every single animal turns up to skip and prance” (Andreae, 1999, p. 4). This book tells a beautiful and rhythmic story about the animals found in the safari; however, without thoughtful discussions about the setting, it may unintentionally make children believe that people in Africa are neighbors with giraffes, hippos, lions, and other animals.

The values gained from sharing multicultural literature with children are so powerful and so persuasive that we cannot dispute them (Norton, 1985; 2013). By engaging with texts, children get to understand geographical and natural history, discover the impact of sociological change, and read about great achievers of all backgrounds. As children identify with past and present achievers from their cultural group, they become proud of their heritage and improve their self-concept and sense of identity.

Children’s inaccurate or incomplete assumptions of their African immigrant peers can easily lead to prejudice, which provides an excuse for not learning about them (Follari, 2015). According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2020), “Invisibility erases identity and experiences – visibility affirms reality” (p. 27). African immigrants’ authentic home experiences and culture need to be made visible in young children’s classrooms for the African immigrant students in our school systems to develop a sense of pride and affirmation of their roots. Seeing their many stories, other children would avoid the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009). Instead, they will develop a deeper understanding of their differences and similarities with their African immigrant peers. Having formed an accurate understanding of the different African cultures, especially those represented in their classrooms, these children will avoid unintentionally providing inaccurate comments or asking hurtful questions.

Teachers’ Crucial Role

Early childhood educators are uniquely positioned to create cultural bridges that allow them and their students to adopt new ways of learning and understanding (Howard, 2018; NAEYC, 2022). To do this, teachers must acknowledge the differences among their classroom members (Follari, 2015). Doing so allows them to intentionally plan for experiences and environments that help their students become aware, respectful, and appreciative of differences. Teachers must also acknowledge that their own experiences and contexts influence their instructional decisions (NAEYC, 2022). Because most teachers in the United States, especially those in the early grades,

are White, middle-class, and female (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021), they may not have a nuanced understanding of the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Thus, they need to exert a conscious effort to improve their cultural competency, which is one of the ways they can develop self-awareness while accepting other cultures and their values (Westerberg, 2016).

In addition to a lack of nuanced understanding of the experiences of other groups of people, early childhood teachers may have explicit and implicit biases towards children whose backgrounds are different from theirs. Unlike explicit bias, which they can reflect on and actively address, implicit bias can cause a host of unintentional negative outcomes like microaggressions in daily interactions. In a study conducted by Gilliam et al. (2016), early childhood educators who watched a video of diverse children unintentionally focused their attention on the Black child and expected this child to display challenging behaviors. This research finding demonstrates implicit bias-in-action. Implicit bias also affects the grading of student work, especially in the early years from kindergarten to 12th grade. Moreover, teachers interpret the behaviors of Black students as troublesome, thereby responding with harsher punishment (Westerberg, 2016).

The antidote to stereotypes, particularly those influenced by unconscious or implicit bias, is continually learning about group differences and multicultural viewpoints, thus, fostering true understanding (Marks, 2015). Early childhood professionals play a crucial role in changing the experiences of African children in U.S. classrooms. To be successful in this role, teachers need to educate themselves about Africa and the African cultures represented in their classrooms. Having improved knowledge will help them pick out books and implement engaging learning experiences that will not unintentionally send ill messages to the African children. Understanding African cultures will also enable them to answer students' questions more accurately.

Resources to Improved Teachers' Understanding of Africa

The following are two websites that offer teachers and children helpful information related to Africa and its people.

- **UNESCO** (<https://en.unesco.org/general-history-africa>). This web page promotes not just the African culture but also breaks down how young children, especially those of African descent, can learn about their cultures. This website exposes teachers to using children's favorite comic and cartoon characters to bring to life the continent's rich nature. The information-packed website helps teachers be culturally competent in their learning and teaching young children about Africa, thereby bridging the gap that Africa is all about wildlife, poverty, and wars, as consistently shown in the popular media.
- **Britannica** (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa>). This website has informative content about Africa's geologic history, land, people, and economy. It includes vivid videos and images that teachers could use. The website contains extensive discussions of each part of Africa, the countries

located there, the history and characteristics of the people, and cultural development. However, the article also contains a concise 2-minute summary of all the information and facts about Africa for individuals who want a quick dose of information without reading the whole piece (Smedley et al., 2021).

Using Authentic African Texts in Early Childhood Settings

Teachers help their students to continually learn about Africa and its people by including authentic African texts in the classroom. Doing so gives the children access to information that more accurately represents Africans' lived experiences, thus counteracting the development of stereotypical thinking about this group of people. Integrating other students' backgrounds into the classroom environment and curriculum appropriately can create a welcoming space where children feel a sense of pride in their diversity (Westerberg, 2016). Through texts authored by those who have a firsthand experience of the African cultures, African immigrants' children see their people's varied lives and experiences as parts of a larger human story. These texts mirror their home culture and reading them leads to self-affirmation. Also, engaging with these authentic texts serves as windows or sliding doors for other children as they walk or look through in imagination into the world that the authors have created or recreated for them (Sims-Bishop, 1990). Books reflecting multicultural families, people, and environments can broaden children's discoveries of their world. Authentic African texts are not as available as those written by famous American authors and published by major book companies; however, public libraries have some excellent titles. Because teachers can check out twenty books for an extended period from most libraries, making these texts available to the children should not be difficult.

Strategies to Engage Children with Authentic Texts

There are many ways children of different ages could meaningfully engage with authentic African texts. When deciding which to implement, teachers must consider their students' current needs and interests.

Picture Book Sharing. This strategy involves oral interaction between the teacher and a child or a couple of them, which is an excellent way to introduce the diverse African cultures to infants and toddlers. In addition to the language dimension of the activity, the teacher could direct the child's attention to the pictures and print. For instance, the book *A Triangle is for Adaora* by Ifeoma Onyefulu (2000) is a powerful addition to the collection of books on shapes. This book introduces young children to things of different shapes coming from various African groups. Teachers encourage children to engage in the activity thoroughly and independently explore books by creating a devoted area for book sharing in their classrooms. This area includes comfortable seating, floor cushions, a low bookshelf, cloth baskets, and a display shelf with book covers shown (Otto, 2019).

Interactive Read-Aloud. This strategy is among the preschoolers' and kindergartners' favorite activities in school. In

this activity, children do not just listen to a text being read; they are actively involved by asking and answering questions, making predictions, etc. Interactive read-aloud permits the teacher and children to construct knowledge and enhance literacy skills (Wiseman, 2011). Through this activity, teachers scaffold children's understanding of the book being read by strategically asking questions, modeling strategies for comprehension, and teaching vocabulary and concepts by inserting a short definition of uncommon words or a description of unfamiliar pictures (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Asking higher-order-thinking (HOT) questions during an interactive read-aloud of an authentic African text facilitates a deeper understanding of the Africans and their cultures among children. These questions do not have one clear answer. The children's prior knowledge and experiences would influence their responses. HOT questions allow children to connect their real-life experiences and the information presented in the text and critically evaluate their current understanding. When discussing these connections within the context of group discussion after an interactive read-aloud, children learn from their peers and vice versa.

Literacy Station. Placing authentic African texts in the literacy station, especially after introducing these to the children through an interactive read-aloud, extends and deepens their understanding. The literacy station includes a library and writing station. It allows children to make choices and collaborate with their peers (Morrow, 2020). Teachers offer the children opportunities to increase their awareness of Africa's cultures by including texts about them in this area. "Children in classrooms with literature collections read and look at books 50% more often than children in classrooms without such collections" (Morrow, 2020, p. 283). Through interacting with the authentic African texts – independently or in small groups in the literacy station, children move away from the single story about Africans that popular media perpetuates.

Teachers can further sustain children's engagement with the text read to them by turning the literacy station into a work station (Diller, 2003). Literacy work stations offer children multiple opportunities to deepen their conceptual understanding and practice their previously learned literacy skills. Involving the African parents in the development of the literacy work station would ensure that the experiences represent accurate information and not strengthen stereotypical thinking among the children. Families could bring artifacts and introduce the materials to the children through a minilesson.

Graphic Organizers. This strategy enhances the interactive read-aloud experience for kindergarteners and primary school-aged children. Simpler versions of the graphic organizers using pictures or simpler vocabulary words are also great for preschoolers. A K-W-L chart is an excellent tool for identifying children's misconceptions before reading a book. These misconceptions are good discussion points during and after reading a book. Writing the accurate concepts under the L column of the chart will help children remember the accurate information. Bubble maps are great for populating information in various categories about a topic. Through the different circles in the bubble

map, teachers and children could expand their understanding of a specific African group of people. A Venn diagram helps children identify how the Africans depicted in the text are like or different from them. Further, they could compare texts on a similar topic from various African cultures. Examining multiple sources of information, including texts, gives children "opportunities to authentically explore their questions" (Strachan & Block, 2020, p.42). Students enhance their understanding of Africa and the Africans in an engaging, informative, and positive manner through such activities.

Finally, inviting African immigrants (if there are any in the area) to talk about their home culture and their people's stories is an excellent way to deepen children's understanding of them. Having a live interaction with the children allows questions to be answered and more authentic stories to be told. The guests may even have artifacts from their home culture to share.

Sample Book List

The table following presents a selection of authentic African texts that represent varied cultures. In addition to the things unique to the African contexts shown in the books, the ones like other children's experiences are included in the description. These similarities make children identify with their peers. When reading these books, children would see that, like them, the children in the African context depicted in the book love to play; however, they may have different toys and play other games.

By thoughtfully introducing and implementing meaningful learning experiences involving texts that depict authentic African experiences and culture, teachers help children – Africans and non-Africans alike, to form healthy, confident, and knowledgeable personal and social identities.


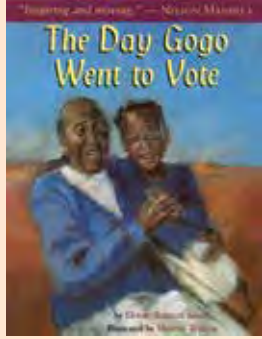

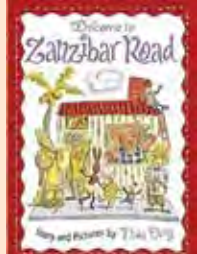
Conclusion

After engaging with several authentic texts on Africa and Africans, children may fully understand that Africa is not a single country, and its people represent varied and rich cultures. Like other civilizations, they have progressed with the advancement of technology. Although, when introducing authentic texts representing the different African cultures, teachers should be careful not to generalize the information. They must ensure that they have thoroughly studied the cultures depicted in the books before introducing them so they can answer children's questions accurately. Doing so will also help teachers catch inaccurate, stereotypical, or hurtful comments and provide children with learning experiences that would help them develop a sound conceptual understanding of the African cultures in the texts. The stories' contexts must be discussed (i.e., how is it like where the story happened). Multiple texts should be made available so children can see that even within one country, children have varied experiences. It is also vital for children to realize that, like any other country, African countries are beautiful in diverse ways, and parts of some African countries have unique challenges such as war, extreme poverty, malnutrition, and political unrest.

Table 1. Selection of Children's Books Addressing African Stories

Title	Description and Culture Depicted	Title	Description and Culture Depicted
<p><i>A is for Africa</i> by Ifeoma Onyefulu (Nigeria)</p> 	<p>This book features snapshots of different African crafts and costumes, occasions and fun, and day-to-day life that correspond to the letters of the alphabet.</p>	<p><i>Grandpa Cacao: A Tale of Chocolate, from Farm to Family</i> by Elizabeth Zunon (the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire)</p> 	<p>The book is about a father telling his daughter about the family's cocoa farm in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire and chocolate (Grandpa's Kente cloth - only worn on special occasions, chocolate from the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, orally passing traditions to children)</p>
<p><i>A South African Night</i> by Rachel Isadora (South Africa)</p> 	<p>The book depicts two sides of African life. The night-time, when the city goes to sleep and at the same time many animals come out to feed and hunt in a distant place. (Some Africans are white, different clothes people wear, houses, city streets, parents holding their children's hands when walking, different animals over 200 miles away from the setting of the story).</p>	<p><i>I Lost My Tooth in Africa</i> by Penda Diakite (Mali/USA), Illus. by Baba Wague Diakite (Mali)</p> 	<p>Amina is hoping to lose her wiggly tooth in Africa so she can get a special gift from the African tooth fairy (folklore).</p>
<p><i>Baby Goes to Market</i> by Atinuke (Nigeria)</p> 	<p>Baby goes to market with mummy and receives lots of gifts from the traders (market scene, clothing, the way a baby is carried, vehicles, everyone's fondness for children).</p>	<p><i>Look at This! (Home, Play, Clothes)</i> by Ifeoma Onyefulu (Nigeria)</p> 	<p>The books show actual pictures of common objects used at home, toys, and clothing in different African settings.</p>
<p><i>Grandma Comes to Stay</i> by Ifeoma Onyefulu (Nigeria)</p> 	<p>Grandma has come for a visit, and Stephanie will be spending the whole time with her (food, houses, tying the head-gear, market, drum, unique and similar clothing, festival, involvement of grandparents in raising the children)</p>	<p><i>My Life in Kenya</i> by Alex Woolf (British)</p> 	<p>Based on the true story of a Kenyan girl who takes us through what her life is like, discussing her native language, food, and struggles she faces daily.</p>

Title	Description and Culture Depicted
<p><i>Not So Fast Songololo</i> by Niki Daly (South Africa)</p> 	<p>The book depicts life in South Africa but with a modern look of a boy helping his grandmother with her shopping in the city, and his grandmother bought him new shoes because his old ones were bad. (Names, a child's day with his grandmother, different vehicles, city market)</p>
<p><i>Once Upon a Time</i> by Niki Daly (South Africa)</p> 	<p>This is a book about an African child facing schooling challenges unique to her experience (e.g., walking a long distance to school) and like many other children (learning to read).</p>
<p><i>One Plastic Bag</i> by Isatou Ceesay (Gambia) & The Recycling Women of the Gambia</p> 	<p>Based on a true story about Gambian women's decision to recycle plastic bags into crocheted bags to clean their community (collective effort for the common good, perseverance).</p>
<p><i>Somewhere in Africa</i> by Ingrid Mennen (South Africa) & Niki Daly (South Africa), Illus. by Nicolaas Maritz (South Africa)</p> 	<p>A little boy in an African city loves to read books about African animals, but he has not seen one in person. An African child's experience is contrary to what many inaccurately assume (e.g., animals are all over Africa).</p>

Title	Description and Culture Depicted
<p><i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> by William Kamkwamba (Malawi)</p> 	<p>Based on a true story, the boy saw a need in his community and created windmills for power out of scrap and trash. The life and culture of an African village are explicit throughout the text (farming, perseverance, village houses, value of schooling).</p>
<p><i>The Day Gogo Went to Vote</i> by Elinor Batezat Sisulu (Zimbabwe), Illus. by Sharon Wilson (Unknown)</p> 	<p>This book tells a beautiful story about Gogo casting her vote in their country's first election. (Zulu and Xhosa language: Gogo for grandmother, child accompanying his grandparent, voting machine, cars, accommodation for the elderly)</p>
<p><i>The Water Princess</i> by Susan Verde (America), Illus. by Peter H. Reynolds (Canada)</p> 	<p>Georgie's village lacks water. She must travel far to get water every day. (Endurance, family, children helping with the family chores, games, village houses, artifacts, and clothing)</p>
<p><i>Welcome to Zanzibar Road</i> by Niki Daly (South Africa)</p> 	<p>The story is about neighbors and friends helping each other. Neighborhood dynamics (helping each other for the common good, animals)</p>

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