



Classroom Idea-Sparkers



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Teaching Tolerance and Reaching Diverse Students Through the Use of Children's Books

This Idea-Sparker was submitted by Hani Morgan, Assistant Professor of Education, The University of Southern Mississippi.

Schools in the United States are more culturally diverse than ever before, and this trend is expected to continue (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). Students of color constitute more than one-third of the school population today. By 2020, it is estimated that they will represent almost half the population. The racial, ethnic, and religious diversity in U.S. society sometimes creates challenges and conflicts for educators. Eck (2001) states that nations characterized by religious diversity, such as the United States, have a history of hostility and mistrust between people of different backgrounds. One of the reasons that problems relating to cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity exist in schools involves the social and cultural distance between students and teachers (Hernandez, 2001). Schools have not hired enough teachers whose backgrounds represent these diverse students. A report from the U.S. Department of Education (2003) shows that 84 percent of teachers are white and 75 percent are female. As a result, many teachers have different frames of reference than their students do.

The Need for Culturally Sensitive Children's Books

One way to prevent conflicts related to differences in ethnic, racial, or religious background is by using culturally sensitive children's books. It is important for teachers to start using these books with very young children. Research shows that by age 5, some students have already developed high levels of racial intolerance towards others (Bigler & Liben, 1993; Doyle & Aboud, 1995). Children's books are more than just entertainment; they lead children to develop ideas about different cultures (Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005). Children are more likely to accept statements from a book as fact than adults.

Selecting Culturally Sensitive Children's Books

Although teachers can choose from many culturally sensitive books, some children's books are stereotypic and offensive; obviously, these should not be used. Roberts, Dean, and Holland (2005) argue that too many books present inaccurate depictions of Native Americans, for example. Other authors, such as Tunnel and Jacobs (2008), describe how other ethnic groups have been misrepresented. Even children's books written in recent years can be stereotypic because authors sometimes ignore the latest research (Roberts et al., 2005).

In order to avoid using books that inaccurately portray a given group, teachers should do research to find out how that group was stereotyped in the past. The suggested research papers listed at the end of this article and some of those used as references can be a good place to start. These research articles themselves often have lists of books that are considered authentic, and a similar list is included in this article. The website listed at the end of this article also offers examples of culturally sensitive children's books. In addition to using these resources, teachers can explore the latest research at education conferences.

Some Basic Guidelines

- The book should present accurate facts about specific groups.
- The characters should reflect the full complexity of men's and women's roles.
- The social issues of a group need to be described authentically and honestly.
- The illustrations should show an accurate cultural setting.

Using Culturally Sensitive Children's Books: Three Research-Based Strategies

Reading Aloud to Students. Students in elementary school often prefer read-alouds. When approximately 2,000 sixth-graders were asked what style of reading they most enjoyed, 62 percent reported a preference for read-alouds (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). When teachers read aloud, it often motivates students to read the same book that was read to them, and students report that when teachers read to them, they often make a difficult book understandable by expressively using their voice and motioning while reading aloud (Ivey, 2003).

Teachers motivate students to read a book by reading it aloud, because many students may not start reading an unfamiliar book without being introduced to something appealing about it. This is similar to going into a store and being approached by a skillful salesperson who makes a customer see the value of a product that would otherwise not get the customer's interest.

Reading aloud also helps students to become better readers, because teachers very often engage students to analyze, predict, and hypothesize as they read a story by pausing and asking students questions. This process helps students to do this step on their own when they read silently.

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Students need time in school that is reserved for personal reading. During this time, which educators refer to as SSR or sustained silent reading, students choose the books that interest them. In order for SSR to be successful, Tunnel and Jacobs (2008) offer several suggestions:

1. The teacher also needs to read during this time. When students see their teacher reading, they get the message that reading is interesting and rewarding. Research has shown that the reading program is more likely to fail when teachers do not read during SSR (McCracken & McCracken, 1978).
2. Students can read any book; they are not required to finish it, but they must report each book read during SSR.
3. The teacher needs to make rules for possible interruptions. For example, if a student finishes a book in the middle of SSR, the student needs to know exactly what to do to avoid distracting others. Some teachers may allow students to walk around quietly looking for other books; other teachers have different rules.

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning is an excellent strategy to use with culturally sensitive books because it may lead not only to cross-cultural friendships but also to academic gains (Nieto, 1996). When students work together to achieve a goal, they often feel like part of a team. If teachers group students of different cultures together, they very often develop a sense of friendship as a result of helping each other to reach a goal. Teachers can place students in groups and assign them activities based on a children's book.

Suggested Videotape

*A very good resource for teachers and administrators providing many examples of cooperative learning strategies, as well as the theories behind this form of teaching, is the videotape by Spencer and Laurie Kagan titled: **Cooperative Learning and Multiple Intelligences, Elementary School Edition.** Sandy, UT: The LPD Video Journal of Education.*

Suggested Children's Books

Tunnel and Jacobs (2008) consider the following as fine multicultural children's books:

Asian American

Say, Allen. (1993). *Grandfather's journey.* Houghtlin Mifflin.

Yee, Paul. (1990). *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the new world.* Macmillan.

Hispanic American

Buss, Fran Leeper. (1991). *Journey of the sparrows.* Lodestar.

Canales, Viola. (2005). *The tequila worm.* Wendy Lamb/ Random House.

African American

Cline-Ransome, Lesa. (2000). *Satchel Paige.* Simon & Schuster.

Taylor, Mildred. (1990). *Road to Memphis.* Dial.

Native American

Roberts, Dean, and Holland (2005) recommend the following books for authenticity and respect towards American Indian cultures.

Herbert Scott, Ann. (1996). *Brave as a mountain lion.* Clarion.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. (1993). *Cherokee summer.* Holiday House.

Suggested Website

The following website includes many more examples of multicultural books on many groups: www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com

Suggested Articles

Harris, V. (1990). African American children's literature: The first one hundred years. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59(4), 540-555.

Yokota, J. (1999). Japanese and Japanese Americans: Portrayals in recent children's books. *Book Links*, 8(3), 47-53.

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Call for Idea-Sparkers

Do you have a great idea that you would like to share? Do you know a colleague who has a great idea? Please share the exciting things that are happening in your classroom. Send ideas via mail, fax, phone, or E-mail. Photos and illustrations are welcome. Please include your name, address, where you have used this idea, and a description of the activity. Send your Idea-Sparkers to:

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