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# What to do when you can't find you:

## Exposing children to culturally reflective literature

by Rosalyn Butler

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It's a typical Friday morning. The students are excited because it's their day to visit Ms. Farmer, the school librarian. We walk into the library, placing our books in the overflowing drop box, and follow Ms. Farmer to the designated story spot.

As she begins her story of the trials and tribulations of three home-building pigs, I peer into the children's animated faces. Are they really connecting with the story? Is the theme of the book something that goes on in their lives? Have they held straw, twigs, and bricks in their hands? Do they know how to use a hammer? Do they encounter wolves trying to blow them out of their homes?

I recall the books of my childhood and wonder how much of that literature included the images and events of my day-to-day life. Where were the characters that looked like me? Where were the challenges that mirrored those in my family and community?

As an African-American teacher of young children, I'm committed to holding the mirror that reflects the diversity of our class, school, and community. I want all children to find themselves in the stories and books I share.

### Understanding culturally reflective literature

I watch my 11-month-old niece sitting on her mother's lap and gazing at the pictures of Spike Lee's *Please, Baby, Please*. She's not able to read the words, but seeing the African-American child in the book provides her an image of a child that looks like her.

I share Angela Johnson's *When I Am Old with You* with my kindergarten class. The group responds not only to the story of a child's relationship with an aging grandparent but also to the universality of the experience. The African-American child and her granddaddy are distinct individuals. They are also universal figures, recognizable to everyone who has shared the bond of family love across generations.

A rich literature diet provides variety—traditions and experiences that are both familiar and strange,

characters that look like ourselves and others, and ideas that challenge and comfort. The best books allow us to imagine beyond the boundaries of our day-to-day experiences, to explore realities that are different from our own. A classroom of children of different nationalities, races, abilities, and genders has forced me to find (and develop) literature and curriculum that suits this mix—and instills a sense of pride and value in each child.

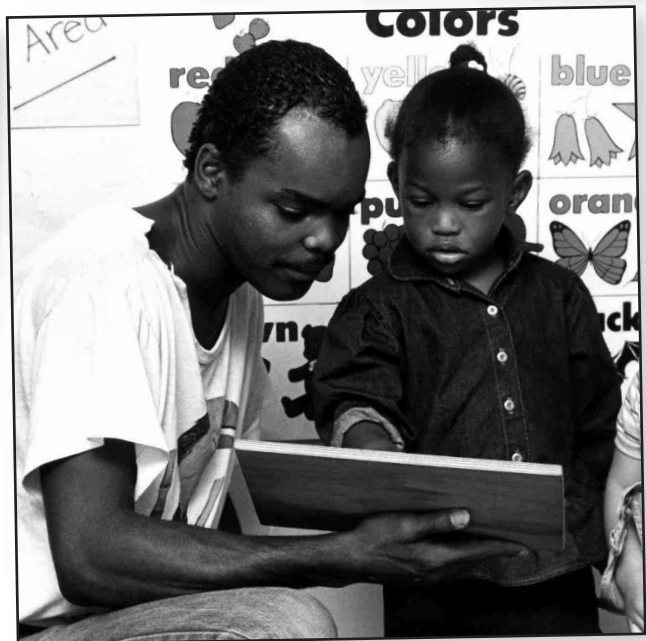
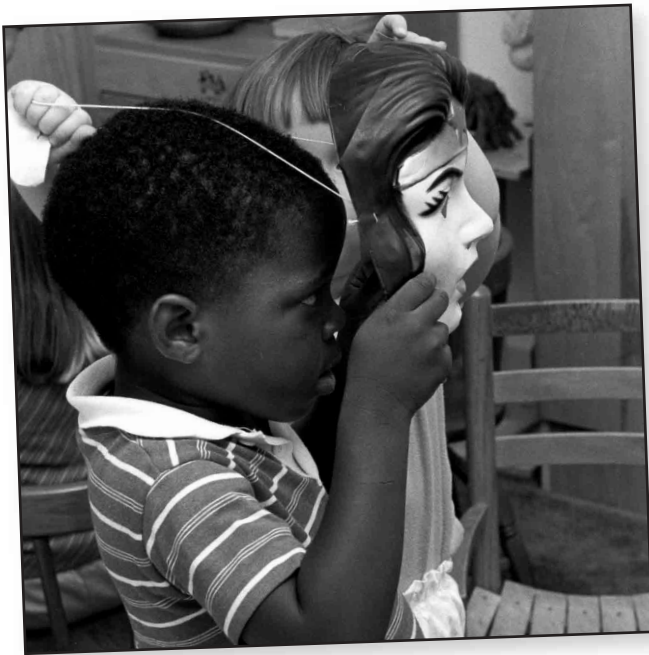
But what if every book we share is inhabited by characters that are unfamiliar and dissimilar? What if every fictional adventure is not connected to a child's reality? How would it feel to always be on the outside, looking at cultures and traditions you don't share? Too often children are not given the opportunity to make "powerful connections to works that draw on what they already know and...validate the importance of that knowledge" (Romero and Zancanella 1990).

When young readers frequently encounter characters with whom they can connect, they will engage in and share experiences—and begin to appreciate the ways literature impacts their lives (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001). While I would not support a diet of books featuring only one culture or race, I'm sure every child needs regular experiences with characters that promote identification, personal value, and pride.

### Four goals of multicultural literature

In *Children's Literature Briefly*, Jacobs and Tunnell (2004) point to four important goals of multicultural literature:

- presenting a positive and reassuring representation of the reader's own cultural group,
- instilling appreciation of diverse lifestyles influenced by environment and tradition,
- encouraging children to recognize that members of the human family have more similarities than differences, and



- fostering awareness, understanding, and appreciation of people who seem different from the reader.

As I try to meet these goals, I know I must actively choose good books and authentically address the images presented. Through literature, I work to offer every child an understanding of their peers' struggles, triumphs, and contributions to culture and society. If a child's upbringing does not include being around people of a different race, then diverse literature will "help children of all ethnic groups understand and relate" (Walker 2002).

### **Choosing positive African-American literature**

In addition to the literary criteria applied to any book, I rely on Norton's (1995) criteria for evaluating African-American literature. Of course, these criteria apply to literature that portrays any ethnic or racial group.

- Are the characters portrayed as individuals—with their own thoughts, emotions, and ideas—instead of as representatives of a group?
- Does the book exclude stereotypes of appearance, behavior, and character traits?

- Does the book authentically portray physical diversity in both text and illustration?
- Will children be able to recognize the characters in the text and illustrations? Are people of color shown as simply darker versions of Anglo characters?
- Are the ethnic or racial cultures, customs, and values accurately portrayed?
- Are social issues and problems depicted frankly, accurately, and without oversimplification?
- Do non-white characters solve their problems individually or with the assistance of family and friends, and without the intervention of white authorities?
- Are non-white characters shown as equals of white characters?
- Does the author avoid glamorizing or glorifying non-white characters—especially in biographies?
- Is the setting authentic, whether past, present, or future? Will children be able to recognize the setting as urban, rural, or fantasy?
- Are the factual and historical details accurate?
- Does the author accurately describe contemporary settings?
- Does the book rectify historical distortions or omissions?
- Does dialect have a legitimate purpose and does it ring true, as opposed to being used as an example of substandard English? Are non-English words spelled and used correctly?
- Does the author avoid offensive or degrading vocabulary to describe characters, activities, traditions, and lifestyles?
- Are the illustrations authentic and free of stereotypes?
- Does the book provide positive role models for girls and avoid subservient female characters?

The books that reach children authentically depict and interpret their lives and their history, build self-respect, encourage the development of positive values, make children aware of their strengths, and leave them with a sense of hope and direction (Greenfield 1995).

## Finding good books

The importance of unmasking children to positive African-American images is clear. Unfortunately, the vast majority of children's literature focuses on the experiences of white males. Equally disappointing is the small number of African-American authors and illustrators. "Though lack of self-esteem and lack of

self-image have long been identified as key proponents in the dearth of African-American academic performance, only an alarming 51 published children's books out of over 5,000 were written or illustrated by African-American artists in 1990" (Lane 1998).

Researchers have documented that children's books are bereft of Asian, Hispanic, African-American, disabled, and female characters (Pirofski). Of African-American children's literature particularly, the selection is small—less than 2 percent—compared to the total number of children's books published every year (Rand and Parker 2001).

## DO THEY KNOW HOW TO USE A HAMMER?

Where do I look for good books? My first stop is the library. A children's librarian has access to book lists, catalogs, reference books, and annotated bibliographies. I schedule library trips with enough time to peruse new books and review old favorites. If your local library's multicultural resources are scarce, make noise. Let the library system know that you expect to see materials that look like you!

Another source for books and materials is the Internet. The information highway has many wonderful Web sites that feature children's literature. If you're not sure where to start, go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and type in "African-American children literature."

A favorite Web site is [www.blackbooksgalore.com](http://www.blackbooksgalore.com), a quality site of African-American literature. Look for Black Books Galore! A Guide to Great African-American Children's Books, a series of almost a thousand books for African-American children. Other Web sites include [www.blackexpressions.com](http://www.blackexpressions.com), [www.aalbc.com](http://www.aalbc.com), and [www.justusbooks.com](http://www.justusbooks.com).

## The rewards of reflective literature

As a teacher, I'm aware that all children's images and self-pride should be fostered. This article focuses on African-American literature because it's what I'm familiar with, and what I love, but I believe everything in this article can be adapted to any child from any background.

In the classroom, I offer boxes of books that the students can pull from and read. Nurturing the minds of young children through reading is a vital

and essential tool for self-enhancement. It enables them to see themselves and others in a realistic environment and perhaps helps them develop tolerance toward others from different backgrounds.

Dowd (1992) says "...from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture, or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice, and kindness."

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## Recommended books that celebrate African-American families

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- Buckley, Helen E. 1994. *Grandfather and I*. New York: Scholastic.
- Greenfield, Eloise. 1990. *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl*. New York: Lippincott, Williams, and Watkins.
- Hamanaka, Sheila. 1994. *All the Colors of the Earth*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hoffman, Mary. 1991. *Amazing Grace*. New York: Dial.
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- Johnson, Angela. 1990. *When I Am Old With You*. New York: Orchard Books.
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- Nolen, Jeradine. 1999. *In My Momma's Kitchen*. New York: Scholastic.
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## About the author

Rosalyn Butler graduated from Texas State University with a degree in early childhood education. Currently she is a pre-kindergarten teacher at McBee Elementary School in Austin, Texas. When she's not in the classroom, Rosalyn enjoys reading, assembling latch hook rugs, and traveling.