

# Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in early childhood classrooms. Picture books that depict the variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within U.S. society (known generally as multicultural picture books) allow young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds. This paper discusses the possibilities and the pitfalls involved in the selection of multicultural literature for use with young children, examines two books featuring Mexican American protagonists to illuminate issues and problems in the images the books present of Mexican Americans, discusses critical race theory as a way of understanding the possibilities and pitfalls of choosing multicultural picture books, and makes recommendations for educators and teacher education programs based on what is known about children's literature and critical race theory.

Children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in early childhood classrooms. Fiction, poetry, and nonfiction offer young children a multitude of opportunities to gain information, to become familiar with print, to be entertained, and to experience perspectives other than their own. Picture books that depict the variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within U.S. society (known generally as multicultural picture books) allow young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds. In this paper, we will (1) discuss the possibilities, which we conceptualize as positive, and the pitfalls involved in the selection of multicultural literature for use with young children; (2) examine two books featuring Mexican American protagonists to illuminate issues and problems in the images the books present of Mexican Americans; (3) discuss critical race theory as a way of understanding the possibilities and pitfalls of choosing multicultural picture books; and (4) make recommendations for educators and teacher education programs based on what we know about children's literature and critical race theory.

## Children's Literature and Early Childhood Education

The growing role of children's literature in the lives of young children may be seen in the numbers of books published per year. In 1940, 984 books for children were published. In 1997, there were 5,353 such books (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001). In a study of picture books reviewed or recommended in *Young Children* (the National Association for the Education of Young Children's practitioner journal), Reese (2001) found a similar increase. During the 9-year period from 1945 to 1954, 37 children's books were recommended, while 904 were recommended between 1990 and 1999. This increase reflects a growing interest in children's literature and a growing awareness of what it can bring to the early childhood classroom.

## Uses of Children's Literature: Aesthetic, Psychosocial, and Instructional

Children's literature can serve several purposes, some of which are aesthetic, psychosocial, and informative/instructional.

Rosenblatt (1995) categorizes readers' involvement in a text along a continuum. At one end is aesthetic reading, in which the person is drawn into the story and participates through identification with characters. The primary goal is enjoyment or entertainment. At the other end of the continuum is efferent reading, in which the reader is primarily interested in gaining information. In their relationships with books, young children may operate all along Rosenblatt's continuum, using books for both enjoyment and learning.

Literature is also seen as having several psychosocial uses for young children. In general, literature is said to provide characters and events with which children can identify and through which they can consider their own actions, beliefs, and emotions. Traditional literature in particular, such as legends and fairy tales, is sometimes seen as expressing common childhood psychological concerns (Bettelheim, 1977). Through the characters and situations in books, children are introduced to what the world may look like through others' eyes, and they can be given a chance to further develop their own constructions of self and the world.

Nonfiction, or informational books, help to foster an interest in inquiry and involvement in the world (McElmeel, 1995); they inform, instruct, and enlighten (Freedman, 1992). Nonfiction literature is expected to make clear distinctions between fact, theory, and opinion. Content must be up-to-date, avoiding stereotypes (Elleman, 1992) and outdated scientific content. An increasing number of informational books are written and illustrated in a manner that provides aesthetic as well as learning experiences.

One of the most persuasive rationales for sharing literature with young children is that it benefits language and literacy development. For years, researchers, teacher educators, parent educators, and parents have recognized the value of reading to children, and numerous studies document the beneficial effects of reading to preschool children (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). For instance, Wells's (1985) correlational study on the effects of picture book reading found that the frequency of listening to stories between the ages of 1 and 3 years was significantly associated with literacy and oral language skills as measured at age 5 by the children's

teachers. Textbooks for future educators often include statements such as: "Reading aloud to children is one of the most useful ways of introducing them to the act of reading" (Krogh, 1994, p. 410).

The term "emergent literacy" began to appear in the early 1980s, as researchers sought to reconceptualize what young children know about reading, writing, and print before they begin formal schooling. Children as young as 1 and 2 years old are in the process of becoming literate (Sulzby & Teale, 1991), and the period of emergent literacy is said to continue until children read and write conventionally. This process can take place in the home, community, day care, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, or formal kindergarten settings. The concept of emergent literacy casts the child as a "constructor of his or her own literacy" (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Children create meaning from environmental symbols such as McDonald's golden arches (Goodman, 1987), as well as the illustrations and conventional print found in books.

Contemporary recognition and appreciation of the child's emerging literacy is such that Saracho and Spodek (1993) assert, "All early childhood teachers, at every level, must now be considered teachers of reading, even if they do not offer formal reading instruction" (p. xi).

### **Picture Books for Young Children**

Picture books are the genre of choice for sharing with young children, whether teachers read aloud or the children use them independently. In a textbook frequently used with undergraduate preservice teachers, Temple, Martinez, Yokota, and Naylor (1998) identify three types of picture books: (1) wordless books, which rely solely on illustrations to tell a story; (2) picture storybooks, in which illustrations and text work together to tell the story; and (3) illustrated books, in which the text supplies most of the information but the illustrations augment what is said or serve as decoration (p. 171).

Words and illustrations do not just tell stories. They also combine to create potentially powerful images of human beings in picture books. The child sees people—male and female, adult and child—represented in illustrations that help them form impressions

of whatever sorts of people are being portrayed (Lukens, 1990). In a sense, then, any given picture book featuring people may have a didactic outcome, even if teaching was not the book's intent.

## Multicultural Literature

When teachers share books with young children, they offer, among other things, exposure to ways of thinking about other human beings. For the child, illustrations and text combine to create particular views of individuals as well as groups of people—complete with messages about what those people are like.

Prior to the 1960s, people who were not European or European American were virtually invisible in children's literature, or they were depicted in negative and/or stereotypical representations (Aoki, 1993; Nieto, 1997). Harris (1993a) calls this trend "pernicious" (p. 60). This invisibility gained national attention in 1965 when the *Saturday Review* published an article by librarian Nancy Larrick titled "The All White World of Children's Books."

Sociocultural changes during the 1960s and 1970s fostered renewed interest in literature for adults and children that reflected "the diverse life experiences, traditions, histories, values, world views, and perspectives of the diverse cultural groups that make up a society" (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 185)—in other words, "multicultural literature." Taxel (1995) describes a trend toward addressing "the interests, concerns, and experiences of individuals and groups considered outside of the sociopolitical and cultural mainstream of American society" (p. 155). Initially, European Americans were the exclusive producers of new images of people outside the mainstream. This situation changed gradually—some would say glacially—in the ensuing four decades. With varying degrees of success, one can now find children's picture books written or illustrated, or both, by African Americans, Asian Americans, Latina/Latino Americans, and Native Americans. Interest has also grown in children's books with accurate, respectful portrayals of gay/lesbian people, women, people with disabilities, and religions other than Christianity. A great many of these books are put out by small presses and face barriers to wider use that will be mentioned later

in this paper. Overall, there is still much room for progress.

Sims Bishop (1997) notes that multicultural children's literature can serve as a mirror and a window. A child may see his or her own life reflected in a book. Or he or she may have an opportunity to see into someone else's life. Historically, children's books have given European American middle- and upper-class children the mirror but not the window. They could see themselves in the stories they read and heard, but they were unlikely to see anyone much different from themselves. Conversely, children outside the mainstream have had few literary mirrors that affirm their identities, although they had plenty of windows on life in the dominant culture of the United States. Multicultural literature can reflect their experiences and identities, while offering all children a window into lives different from their own.

To take seriously Sims Bishop's (1997) mirror/window metaphor is to see that literature reflecting diverse perspectives is important not only for children from groups outside the mainstream of U.S. culture but for all students (p. 3). Advocates of anti-bias curricula assert that classrooms with young children need to stock books that not only accurately and positively portray the backgrounds of the families in the classroom but also extend children's awareness beyond to the significant groups in their community and the nation (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989, p. 12), in order to facilitate the children's budding understanding of the diverse world in which they live.

## Literary Criticism and Multicultural Children's Literature

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1990) undertakes an in-depth examination of the presence and absence of images of Africans and African Americans in the adult American literary canon. A related body of critical literature has developed that examines children's literature for bias, stereotyping, and other sociocultural misinformation. Taxel (1995) and others consider such criticism of children's books to be essential "[g]iven the complicity of children's literature, and the rest of society's cultural apparatus, in providing legitimacy for racial and gender-related injustice and oppression..." (p. 163).

These critics often focus on well-known children's books—including some winners of prestigious awards—to illuminate their points about Eurocentrism and related problems (Atleo et al., 1999; Moore & Hirschfelder, 1999; Kohl, 1995; Slapin & Seale, 1992). Using primary sources for historical and cultural information, they give voice to viewpoints not often heard in the world of children's literature. They raise issues of accuracy and authenticity, questioning the perspectives, and sometimes the motives, of European American authors and illustrators who tell stories about or on behalf of marginalized peoples. They also strive to enlighten the public about literature that offers accurate information and authentic insider perspectives.

This criticism is likely to be found outside the widely recognized journals. In fact, mainstream publications may be reluctant to include reviews that put forward what they consider "extraliterary" (i.e., political) criticism (Reese, 2000). In contrast, reviews in *Multicultural Journal*, *The New Advocate*, and *Multicultural Review* are likely to include examination of cultural and historical accuracy and authenticity in books they review. A number of textbooks (Harris, 1993b; Lehr, 1995) with similar purpose are aimed at future educators.

### Popular but Problematic Books: The First Pitfall

Limited availability of criticism that addresses accuracy, authenticity, and related problems often leads to a major pitfall for teachers seeking multicultural books. Teachers are likely to be caught by the unexamined assumption that a book is multicultural and worthwhile if it has non-European-American characters or themes and is critically acclaimed in well-known journals. For example, Native American scholars Reese and Caldwell-Wood (1997) found several problems when they examined popular picture books written and illustrated by European Americans, in which Native American people or ideas play a central role. They found that the texts and illustrations together present a set of images of Native Americans, and thus a particular way of thinking about them, that is inaccurate and potentially misleading. The books in question received favorable reviews in the *Horn*

*Book* and other mainstream journals, and they have enjoyed years of popularity.

One such book is *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, which features text purportedly by the late Duwamish leader Sealth (Seattle) and illustrations by contemporary European American illustrator Susan Jeffers. In 1992, it was among the top-selling books in the country—a rare achievement for a children's book. Its strong message of environmental consciousness may be the basis for its appeal. This award-winning picture book has two significant problems: one with the text, the other with the illustrations.

The text of *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* has an interesting history. It is identified as part of a speech widely attributed to Chief Seattle of the Duwamish tribe of the North American Pacific Coast. The text presented in the book may, however, have strayed far from the original speech, which Chief Seattle delivered in January 1854. His message underwent several rewrites before becoming part of Jeffers's book. According to a state librarian at Washington State Library, different versions of the speech have appeared through history (Ellen Levesque, personal communication, September 29, 1993). The first one appeared in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887, in a column written by Dr. Henry A. Smith. Because Seattle did not speak English, his words were translated into Chinook Jargon, and then into English. Smith reconstructed the speech from notes taken at the time.

In the late 1960s, poet William Arrowsmith rewrote the speech in a more poetic style. Later, screenwriter Ted Perry produced another rewrite for "Home," a historical epic about the northwest rain forest televised in 1971 (Jones & Sawhill, 1992). Perry constructed this third version as if it were a letter to President Franklin Pierce. In fact, there was no letter from Chief Seattle to President Pierce.

*Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* uses a shortened form of the Perry script, which was exhibited at Expo '74 in Spokane, Washington. None of these permutations of the Duwamish leader's original message is documented in the picture book, so readers and listeners are left with the impression that they are privy to Seattle's actual words.

Reese and Caldwell-Wood also see the illustrations as problematic. The Duwamish homeland is the north-west coast of the United States, and their clothing, homes, and means of transport reflect that location. Jeffers's illustrations, however, seem instead to represent Plains cultures, reflecting a common misconception among non-Natives that all Indians typically wore large feathered headdresses and fringed buckskin, lived in tipis, and rode horses. Moreover, all the Native people in the book are transparent, ghost-like figures. In contrast, Jeffers's illustrations of a modern European American family show them as solid and lifelike. This style suggests that Native Americans, in contrast to European Americans, no longer exist as a viable people; they are only memories. In summary, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, although extraordinarily popular, not only seems historically inaccurate but also perpetuates stereotypes of Native Americans. The early childhood teacher who reads it to a class is presenting erroneous cultural and historical information.

Reese and Caldwell-Wood also consider authenticity in *Arrow to the Sun* (McDermott, 1978) and *Knots in a Counting Rope* (Martin & Archambault, 1987; illustrated by Ted Rand). They are not alone in their criticism (Slapin & Seale 1992). In *Arrow to the Sun*, author/artist Gerald McDermott misrepresents Pueblo social life, religious beliefs, and ceremonial practices (Reese & Caldwell-Wood, 1997); the protagonist in *Arrow to the Sun* goes through a series of trials in the kivas, but kivas are places of ceremony and instruction, not places of trial. This depiction is a serious misrepresentation of Pueblo culture. Perry Nodelman (1988), who is otherwise not especially critical of the book, notes that McDermott's uses of line, shape, and color in his supposedly Pueblo symbols differ in important ways from authentic Pueblo kiva art (pp. 94-95). This remaking of traditional art is visually engaging (it won a Caldecott Medal), but it fails to reflect the reality of either Pueblo design or religious belief (Reese & Caldwell-Wood, 1997, p. 175).

In *Knots on a Counting Rope*, Ted Rand's illustrations suggest primarily that the story is set in the Navajo nation, but his work reflects inadequate research into the culture. The book shows a mix of material culture from several different nations. For

example, traditional Navajo men in the story are shown with hairstyles typical of the Atsina, Blackfeet, Mandan, and Piegan nations. Also, Pueblo people are shown at a horse race wearing traditional ceremonial clothing inappropriate for everyday wear (Reese & Caldwell-Wood, 1997, p. 177).

These three books are evidence that critical acclaim and representations of non-European-American cultures do not guarantee a book's status as good multicultural literature. No matter how engaging the stories, even subtle inaccuracies contribute to cultural misunderstanding and to potential discomfort for children whose cultures are inaccurately portrayed. Both the mirror and the window are thus distorted.

## Two More Pitfalls

Observers of early childhood classrooms notice two other problems that frequently occur when educators look for multicultural picture books. One is the assumption that a single book about a group can adequately portray that group's experience. We see this situation, for example, in a classroom where observance of African American History Month begins and ends with reading aloud from a book about Dr. Martin Luther King.

The other pitfall is the mistaken belief that one can easily find a wide range of good-quality multicultural literature in libraries and bookstores, so that one has only to visit either venue to locate authentic and accurate representations of non-mainstream groups. Such books exist in growing numbers, but they are not so readily available as one might hope.

The following examination of two picture books featuring Mexican Americans attempts to highlight both of these pitfalls.

### Picture Books Depicting Mexican-Americans

After the 1990 census, Mexican Americans were identified as the fastest-growing ethnolinguistic group in the United States. At that time, they constituted 5% of the country's entire population and 60% of the

Hispanic-origin peoples in the United States (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993, p. 207). These figures are not, however, reflected in the number of children's books portraying Mexican American people. According to a study by Barrera and Garza de Cortes (1997), the annual average number of Mexican American children's books has risen from approximately 6 between 1940 and 1973 to 19 in the period between 1992 and 1995 (pp. 129-130).

In the following two sections, we consider two picture books with main characters who are Mexican American: *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting (1994), illustrated by Ronald Himler; and *A Gift from Papa Diego* by Benjamin Alire Saenz (1998), illustrated by Geronimo Garcia. For each book, the plot will be summarized and the text/illustration relationship examined to find what each book offers children in the way of a mirror or a window on Mexican American cultural experience.

### *A Day's Work*

When *A Day's Work* begins, Francisco and his grandfather stand with other day laborers in a parking lot, waiting for work. Francisco is a boy of indeterminate age, perhaps between 8 and 10. In the second paragraph, he reveals three facts to this group of strangers: first, that his father has died, leaving his family in financial trouble; second, that his grandfather has recently arrived in the United States to help them; and third, that he plans to use his own English skills to help his Spanish-speaking grandfather find work.

Without telling his grandfather, Francisco decides to lie to an employer about his grandfather's skill as a gardener. He and his grandfather hurry to the employer's van, and the boy pushes away another man who tries to get in with them. The employer, Ben, takes them to an embankment to pull weeds and drives away. The two work all day in the hot sun. As they are congratulating themselves on a beautiful job, Ben returns and is outraged to find that they have pulled all his ice plants and left the weeds. Over Francisco's protests, Abuelo offers to repair the damage and remove the weeds without pay. Ben sees that Abuelo is honorable, allows them to come back the next day, and hints that he might hire the grandfa-

ther for more than just day labor. Reflecting that "he had begun to learn the important things, too" (p. 32), Francisco takes his grandfather's hand and leads him homeward through a golden cityscape.

Himler's watercolor and gouache illustrations are expressive and evocative, with a kind of gravity that sometimes hints at threat or overwhelming situations. When children look at these illustrations, they see Mexican Americans who:

- Wait for work
- Scramble for work
- Lie to get work
- Push others out of the way to get work
- Are taken somewhere to work
- Work close to an area of high-priced homes
- Work hard and make a serious mistake
- Rest after working, not knowing they have made the mistake
- Are scolded by an employer
- Feel ashamed, dismayed, at fault
- Seek to correct the mistake
- In adulthood, assert moral leadership
- Are allowed by the employer to correct their mistake
- Face the consequences of their actions, thereby winning the employer's respect
- Are at a disadvantage if they do not speak English
- In childhood, mediate between adults who speak English and those who speak Spanish
- Walk home together
- Are males in a male work world

*A Day's Work* is entirely in English, with the exception of the words *abuelo*, *senora*, *gracias*, *bueno*, and two two-word phrases. The text refers to *Abuelo's* having come from Mexico but does not specify what part of the country. There is a reference to the tortillas Francisco's mother sends for their lunches and to the chorizo the boy wants to buy with their earnings. *Abuelo* praises Francisco's English skills. We see the kind of role reversal some immigrant families experience, in which a child who is able to speak English becomes a go-between for the family and the dominant culture (Wong Fillmore, 1991). One also sees the boy taking the lead in finding work, to the point where he lies and pushes away a full-grown

man in order to get it. Although Francisco's mother is mentioned, readers see and hear only males in this representation of Mexican Americans—hard-working manual laborers.

### *A Gift from Papa Diego*

*A Gift from Papa Diego* is the story of 6-year-old Diego, who lives in El Paso, Texas. He loves and identifies closely with his paternal grandfather, who lives far away, across the border in Chihuahua. This book is a bilingual parallel book; each page has both English and Spanish versions of the unfolding story. Little Diego lives with his parents and his teasing older sister in a house with a yard. He wants nothing more than to be with his abuelo on his 7th birthday. When a conversation with his father shows that he's not likely to get that wish, Little Diego begs for a Superman costume because he believes it will help him fly to Papa Diego. On his birthday, his family wakes him with a traditional song and he goes off to school imagining how he will fly to Chihuahua if only he receives that costume as a gift. That evening, he does get the costume, but his hopes are dashed when (of course) it does not help him fly. He retreats to his room. When his father invites him to rejoin the family, he does—and finds Papa Diego in the kitchen. Their reunion is joyful.

At the end of the book is a page of notes about the places in the book, a glossary of Spanish terms, and an author-illustrator biography page. The illustrations are photographs of three-dimensional painted terracotta creations. The mood is light, cheerful, but with a solid, substantial feeling. Children who look at these pages see Mexican Americans who:

- Think about things and explore the world
- Have father-son talks about family issues
- Hug each other
- Wear a tie to work
- Read
- Imagine and daydream
- Long to cross a border that separates them from loved ones
- Have family conversations while preparing food
- Experience sibling rivalry
- Play the guitar and sing to a loved one
- Greet each other with affection

- Act on a mistaken idea, with no harm done
- Do kind things for others
- As adults, are sources of love and guidance
- As children, play, go to school, and interact with family members
- Eat together as a family
- Are in all stages of life: infant/child/parent/grandparent
- Are female, are male
- Write books or illustrate them

*A Gift from Papa Diego* contains detailed, culturally specific information about language and customs, both in the story and in the glossary at the end of the book:

- the Spanish text and the Spanish phrases embedded in the English text,
- the mention of four specific foods,
- family discussions of Chihuahua and the U.S.-Mexican border, and
- the special birthday song Little Diego's family sings.

All are cultural markers, indicators that in fact this story is about a Mexican American family. Males and females alike have important roles. The story seamlessly shows how central their culture is in their daily lives.

*A Day's Work* integrates a few Spanish words and refers to two specific foods. It does not mention a specific area of Mexico or relate specific customs (such as the birthday song in *Papa Diego*). It counters the "lazy Mexican" stereotype and offers a look at the socioeconomic problems faced by Mexican American immigrants, particularly those who do not know English. Its principal focus seems to be on working to survive, and on the moral lesson about honesty.

### **The Second Pitfall: Believing a Single Book Is Adequate**

We believe the contrast between the two books shows what a difference an insider perspective can make. It is in the authors' approaches to language that we see the most striking contrast between the two books. With text in two languages and embedded references to the desirability of speaking both, *Papa*

*Diego* overtly supports—even invites—dual-language fluency. In *A Day's Work*, Francisco is praised for his English skills, and Abuelo “doesn't speak English *yet*” [italics added]. None of the employers, including Ben, seems to know any Spanish. Spanish fluency is presented as unimportant or even unnecessary. In fact, not knowing English is implicitly the root, so to speak, of the trouble Francisco and his grandfather have. Abuelo cannot tell that Francisco has lied to persuade Ben to hire them, and he cannot communicate with Ben about the gardening job. He is completely dependent on his grandson to negotiate these transactions. Bunting's portrayal of Abuelo's predicament may—intentionally or not—be situated within the politicized discourse on language in the United States.

*A Day's Work* is actually a socially conscious morality tale, presented as a story about a boy and his grandfather. Every major review of *A Day's Work* stresses the moral lesson about not telling lies and about making reparations after creating a problem. Teachers report using the book specifically to generate discussion about honesty. Bunting is known for her portrayals of people, particularly non-European-Americans, who live in poverty; it seems likely that in *A Day's Work* she means to make a statement (arguably a positive one) about Mexican Americans in U.S. society. *A Gift from Papa Diego*, on the other hand, is a story about a boy and his grandfather—a story about love and familial devotion. We contend that Saenz and Garcia's picture of Mexican American culture has more depth and complexity than does the one created by Bunting and Himler. Both are pictures of Mexican Americans, but if one were looking for a detailed portrayal of Mexican American life, *Papa Diego* would seem to be the preferred option.

One of the authors had a conversation with a Latina student who objected to *A Day's Work*. She felt that its outsider perspective resulted in images that fed into the stereotype of Mexican American men as manual laborers. Although it seemed sympathetic, it still made them none too bright. Not being able to tell a weed from a desirable plant, she said, made Francisco and his grandfather look unnecessarily and unrealistically stupid. She asserted that a Mexican American child reading or hearing this book would likely feel embarrassed. Unimpressed by the fact that

*A Day's Work* was named “A 1994 Americas Commended Title” by the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, she decided its problems outweighed any merits it had, and she would use several other books in her classroom instead (A. Herrera, personal communication, March 23, 2000). Whether or not one agrees with this future teacher's rejection of *A Day's Work*, her response shows awareness of critical issues and a commitment to providing authenticity and accuracy.

She also avoids a common error teachers make when choosing multicultural picture books: the assumption that a single book can adequately portray any group's experience. We would not propose that *Papa Diego* alone is adequate to portray Mexican Americans for young children, of course; Little Diego's family's white-collar lifestyle is by no means the whole story of Mexican American life. One would need to seek out other titles to create a collection that provides an adequate window and an undistorted mirror.

### Availability: A Third Pitfall

Mention of the search for titles brings us to discussion of another pitfall of selecting multicultural picture books: the belief that accurate and authentic books with insider perspectives are readily available. Recognition and availability are significant factors in finding and using multicultural children's books. Availability has little to do with literary content but may affect whether a teacher even knows a book exists.

For instance, when preparing this paper, Jean Mendoza needed copies of *A Day's Work* and *A Gift from Papa Diego*. She had the following experiences:

- The local library system had four copies of *A Day's Work*, all of which were checked out until the following week. Two nearby towns also had copies on the shelf.
- The local library had one copy of *A Gift from Papa Diego*, and it was on the shelf. Mendoza became the first patron to check it out.
- The person who answered the phone at a local bookstore exclaimed, “Beautiful book!” when asked if they had a copy of *A Day's Work*. They

had more than one copy in stock. She did not need to look up this information in the computer.

- The bookstore employee who was so enthusiastic about *A Day's Work* had never heard of *Papa Diego*. She looked it up in the computer and said, "We don't stock it, but I can order it for you."

These experiences are by no means unique. Nor are they surprising, given the nature of the publishing and book-selling businesses. Eve Bunting's position in the world of children's literature is such that her books get instant recognition. She has published over 100 books from the 1970s to the present. Ronald Himler is also well known; he sells his book illustrations on his Web site. Bunting and Himler do their work for major publishing houses. *A Day's Work* is put out by Clarion Books, a division of publishing giant Houghton Mifflin Company.

Benjamin Saenz and illustrator Geronimo Garcia do not garner the same recognition. *Papa Diego* is the first children's book for Saenz, primarily a writer of poetry and adult fiction. Garcia works as a commercial artist in Texas. Cinco Puntos, their publisher, is a small press with a deep connection to Latina/Latino communities. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) recently withdrew a \$15,000 grant to Cinco Puntos when the NEA discovered one of their titles was by Subcomandante Marcos, controversial leader of the Zapatista resistance in Chiapas, Mexico (Hilgers, 2001). According to their online catalog, they nonetheless plan to put out another book by Marcos.

Both *Papa Diego* and *A Day's Work* were favorably reviewed in *Horn Book* and other major publications. A librarian at the local library was impressed enough by *Papa Diego* to order a copy, but it remained on the shelf while all copies of *A Day's Work* were in use. A bookstore employee told one of the authors that the store can keep a book for only six months; after that it is returned to the publisher. If the book is not visible, despite positive reviews, potential buyers will not be able to browse through it during their selection processes, and chances are they will not know it exists.

We have discussed three problems teachers may encounter when seeking multicultural picture books for young children. Highly acclaimed books that

portray groups other than European Americans, such as the Native American themed books mentioned earlier, may perpetuate stereotypes and mistaken ideas. Similarly, as shown in the discussion of two books about Mexican Americans, a single book is unlikely to give an adequate picture of any given culture. Finally, a teacher's search for high-quality multicultural books may be hampered by lack of author/illustrator recognition and lack of access to good books from small presses with tiny marketing budgets.

### Critical Race Theory: A Lens on Children's Literature

Stereotyping, bias, and cultural misinformation continue to appear in text and in illustration in children's books. Why is this the case, even in newer literature? Why do reviewers fail to note problems with accuracy and authenticity? Why do problematic books remain on the shelves of libraries and bookstores, while more authentic titles are absent or unrecognized? Why do teachers continue to select and use books with cultural misinformation?

A developing theoretical perspective explains why such problems recur. Scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) and William F. Tate (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) use critical race theory (CRT) as a framework for discussing the impact of race and racism in all aspects of education. CRT has its roots in critical legal studies, which examine extralegal social, economic, and political factors that affect the legal system. Delgado (1995) describes the endemic nature of racism in American society. Racism, according to CRT, is not a series of isolated incidents. It is embedded in American society, institutionalized, so deeply ingrained yet often so subtle that the society's members often cannot see it. In particular, people of the mainstream do not see it. In effect, European American middle-class people learn, from early childhood on, not to recognize racism and to ignore or dismiss the voices that raise discussions about it or any other form of oppression. As a result, those voices are muted and marginalized—including those of European American middle-class people who speak out.

It should be noted that critical race theory does not assume that individuals in groups outside the mainstream are insightful about the role of race, power, and privilege in their own lives. Given the often subtle nature of racism and other oppressions, any member of society could fail to see them in a given situation.

Critical theorists McCarthy and Crichlow (1993) point out that minorities do not have central control over the production of images about themselves in society. According to CRT, then, bias and cultural misinformation are part of children's literature because people outside the mainstream have historically not been in control of image production. Nor have they been in positions of power when it comes to distribution or evaluation. European Americans, who own the largest publishing houses and continue to dominate the key decision-making positions, are likely to be blind to the role of race and privilege in the choices they make. What will be published, who will illustrate it, how it will be marketed—those decisions are not, for the most part, in the hands of people from groups outside the mainstream.

Criticism of children's literature, too, has historically been the domain of European Americans. Review journals such as the *Horn Book* and *School Library Journal* are run by European Americans. Works by European American writers and illustrators continue to dominate the lists of winners of the two oldest prestigious awards, the Caldecott and Newbery Medals. A slowly growing field of awards focused on non-mainstream books is able to bring attention to other works: the Coretta Scott King Award, the Tomás Rivera Award, the Pura Belpré Award, and, most recently, the New Voices Award are examples.

Teachers and others who select books for young children also are predominantly European American. According to critical race theory, they are likely to have trouble seeing deeply embedded problems in the literature they choose, and they are equally unlikely to hear the voices of those who may be raising concerns about stereotypes, bias, or racism in particular works.

## Recommendations

### Critical Race Theory as a Tool

Critical race theory, as a tool of both deconstruction and construction, has a powerful potential role in

helping early childhood professionals and teacher educators deconstruct oppressive structures and discourses. It can lead to awareness of how to construct equitable relationships within society and work toward deconstructing unearned privilege and ending marginalization.

Implementation of anti-bias curriculum is a significant current of reform in early childhood education today. The anti-bias curriculum has its roots in a theory that oppressions such as racism and sexism arise from and are perpetuated by ignorance about and fear of difference. It takes an activist stance on bias, justice, and fairness, based on the assumption that modeling, intervention, and teaching can move children toward attitudes necessary to get on well in an increasingly diverse world. It directs the teacher to critically examine the classroom environment and make changes that affirm diversity. The anti-bias paradigm locates the site of social change in the early childhood classroom and curriculum.

Although Louise Derman-Sparks and the other authors of *The Anti-Bias Curriculum* (1989) do not intend it as a recipe book for “doing multiculturalism,” it is often used that way by teachers who want to have classrooms without bias. It is relatively simple to put culturally affirming posters on the walls and dolls with different skin tones in the dramatic play area, but much more is necessary. We argue that the more powerful site of change resides within the teacher or caregiver and his or her knowledge of privilege, power, and institutional racism. The educator is the one who facilitates the classroom atmosphere, who decides how to intervene when children exhibit biased behavior, who selects the literature, who directs children's attention toward (or away from) images that further their understanding of other people and themselves.

### *For Understanding Children's Literature*

Critical race theory affords a different perspective on illustrations and text than is traditionally taken with children's picture books. Hade (1997) notes, “The meanings we hold about race, class and gender (many of which may be stereotypes) mediate how we interpret text” (p. 235). Thus one must attend closely to the “less-discussed premise that cultural awareness and understanding are prerequisites for the develop-

ment and use of multicultural literature” (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993, p. 205).

Critical race theory can facilitate “reading against the grain” at a deep level, providing both a rationale and the skills for selecting books that give voice to people who have been marginalized. Reading against the grain is described as “a way to examine the unexamined, question the unquestioned, and hold up to scrutiny the unspoken assertions the text is making about the way lives are lived in society” (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 1998, p. 43). It entails interrogating the literature based on such questions as:

- Are characters “outside the mainstream culture” depicted as individuals or as caricatures?
- Does their representation include significant specific cultural information? Or does it follow stereotypes?
- Who has the power in this story? What is the nature of their power, and how do they use it?
- Who has wisdom? What is the nature of their wisdom, and how do they use it?
- What are the consequences of certain behaviors? What behaviors or traits are rewarded, and how? What behaviors are punished, and how?
- How is language used to create images of people of a particular group? How are artistic elements used to create those images?
- Who has written this story? Who has illustrated it? Are they inside or outside the groups they are presenting? What are they in a position to know? What do they claim to know?
- Whose voices are heard? Whose are missing?
- What do this narrative and these pictures say about race? Class? Culture? Gender? Age? Resistance to the status quo?

The roots of this type of reading against the grain go back several decades. In 1948, for example, the National Council of Teachers of English published *We Build Together*, which featured “Criteria for Judging Books about Negroes for Young People” (Rollins, 1948, p. 4), a list of questions much like those listed above. The Council on Interracial Books for Children created *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-free Textbooks and Storybooks* in 1980; it serves as a model for similar documents today.

The point of reading against the grain is not to find “perfect” multicultural books. There is no such thing, nor is it likely that there are any books that are free of ideology. The purpose is to help illuminate the places that bias, stereotypes, and misinformation might be hidden—hidden, perhaps, even from the authors and illustrators who produce the images.

#### *For Early Childhood Teacher Education*

A key factor in being able to pose and answer these questions is the teacher’s knowledge of self and racism (and other oppressions). McIntosh (1998) and others assert that people who live with unearned privilege learn to be blind to it. Assumptions about others and self may be deeply ingrained, and interrogating them takes both courage and purpose. One must not underestimate the challenges of deconstructing one’s own problematic attitudes and beliefs, or of guiding others to do so. Multicultural children’s literature “is only as culturally enlightened as the people who create it and use it” (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993, p. 235). Future educators need to notice and identify the problems within books such as *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* or the differences between *A Gift from Papa Diego* and *A Day’s Work*. They need to be able to talk about what they notice with others who also select and present literature as a medium for instruction.

This discussion points to a need for early childhood teacher education programs that provide students with significant opportunities to read and discuss the critical perspectives on ideology, representation, and identity in literature, particularly multicultural literature. This goal may best be realized as a separate course designed to use literature (especially children’s literature) as a vehicle to explore issues of bias and power relations in U.S. society.

Here is where critical race theory can be most useful in the teacher training experience. Statistics show that, nationally, the overwhelming number of young women and men in early childhood teacher education programs are European American. They are likely to have grown up in insulated environments that did not provide the opportunity, the necessity, or the tools for interrogating relations of power and privilege.

We suggest that colleges of education reconceptualize the foundations on which early childhood professional preparation rests—shifting from the child-developmental paradigm that has dominated to one that has as a major component the teacher’s developing understanding of self, including awareness of the role that race and privilege play in identity. Such a model has precedents in other professional clinical programs, including social work or counseling psychology, which often require a “didactic therapy” or self-awareness component in addition to extensive coursework on theory and practice, as well as practicum experience.

### For the Present

Such change will be a long time coming. Meanwhile, inaccurate and inauthentic images remain in the picture books in libraries, bookstores, catalogs, and classrooms. What can be done now?

Early childhood teachers and teacher educators constitute a community that uses children’s literature in educational contexts, and members of this community must read the critical literature about multicultural books. In her textbook *Children and Books*, Zena Sutherland (1991) writes, “The professional teacher, librarian, reviewer, or editor should know both the books themselves and the critical literature, since criticism entails making judgments that ought to be informed and objective” (p. 25).

As teacher educators, we recommend telling preservice teachers, “You would not knowingly share literature with children that gave them false information about science or math, because it would damage their understanding of the world. You have a similar obligation not to condone or present false or misleading information about groups of people in the literature you share. In fact, you have an obligation to actively present the alternative: accurate, authentic images of all the people of the world. This practice is in the best interests of all your students—those who grow up ‘in the mainstream’ of U.S. society and those who belong to other groups.”

If preservice and novice teachers are to interrogate literature effectively, they need to be aware of critical reviews that touch on issues addressed in critical race theory, the majority of which are found outside of the

mainstream publications. They can look to journals such as *Multicultural Review*, *Multicultural Education*, and *The New Advocate*. They can also become familiar with more specialized publications such as *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *African American Review*, and *Asian Perspectives*.

Teacher educators can also acquaint their students with smaller publishers such as Cinco Puntos (focusing on Latino/Latina literature), Lee and Low (owned by Asian Americans), and resources such as Oyate (focusing on Native American literature) as potential sources of books with insider perspectives. Teachers need to know they need not settle for images that mislead and miseducate. For example, we advocate replacing the outsider perspectives and inauthentic portrayals of Native American life in *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, *Knots on a Counting Rope*, and *Arrow to the Sun* with books such as *The Good Luck Cat* by Joy Harjo and *Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Smith (both Muscogee Creek). These books provide substantial views of contemporary Native Americans as people who live in modern houses, hold down jobs, have pets, and honor their culture in a manner different from that of most other Americans.

### Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the changes we suggest is to produce teachers who construct equitable and socially just relationships of power and can help their students do so, as well. It may be impossible to do this on a large scale without the significant reforms to teacher education mentioned above. Individual teacher educators can, however, take action in the present even without institution-wide support. Some theorists have identified a continuum of awareness in whites’ racial identity and related behavior (Lawrence & Tatum, 1998), and teacher educators can use this and related knowledge when working with preservice teachers around matters of race, power, and privilege (Sleeter, 1998). Of course, teacher educators must also use the same knowledge to inform their own understandings of race and privilege in society. It should not be assumed that only European Americans need to develop this awareness. Cross-cultural understanding is essential all around. Individuals in any segment of society can be ill-informed, or well-informed, about any other group. For teacher educa-

tors and preservice teachers alike, new awareness can have an impact on the literature they choose and the ways they share it with young children.

Armed with this awareness, they can say, "I can't see all the pitfalls yet, but I am awake to the possibilities of using this literature in early childhood settings. I don't always know what to look and listen for now, but I will find out. Now I know where to look, and I know how to look closely. Then I will make choices based on what I see and hear, for the good of all the children whose lives I touch."

## Note

<sup>1</sup> A revised version of this paper is available in the fall 2001 issue of *Early Childhood Research & Practice (ECRP)*, available at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>.

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- Knots on a Counting Rope* by Bill Martin, Jr., & J. Archambault. Illustrated by Ted Rand. Holt, 1987.

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## Appendix

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### Recommended Children's Books

- A Gift from Papa Diego* by Benjamin Alire Saenz. Illustrated by Geronimo Garcia. Cinco Puntos Press, 1998.
- The Good Luck Cat* by Joy Harjo. Illustrated by Paul Lee. Harcourt Brace, 2000.
- Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Smith. Illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu. Morrow Junior Books, 2000.

### Problematic Children's Books

- A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting. Illustrated by Ronald Himler. Clarion Books, 1994.

