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## Learning About Cultural Diversity through Literature

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### Introduction

Racial and ethnic demographics are changing. Minority students are in the majority in twenty-three of America's twenty-five largest school districts. Minorities also are in the majority in entire states, including California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Florida (Gay, 1989). In some of these locations, white teachers may interact with minority children for the first time (Birrell, in press A). Teachers with limited multiethnic experiences may be unprepared for the complexities of teaching in schools that are unlike those they attended as children. Unfamiliar ethnic behavior and speech patterns, differences in cultural and historical perspectives, and varying backgrounds and life experiences may hinder teachers' ability to develop interracial relationships and establish classroom cultures that are culturally inclusive (Ogbu, 1992).

Because increased racial tension in America has affected students (Cusick 1983), much has been written about the need to promote ethnic sensitivity in schools (Banks, 1988; Gilbert & Gay, 1985; Haberman & Post, 1990). Studies suggest that teachers must enter the profession better prepared to encounter cultural diversity and to promote ethnic sensitivity in the classroom (Birrell, in press B; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Zeichner, 1993). One promising strategy for promoting cultural sensitivity in school is to use multicultural children's literature (Taxel, 1993). The idea is not new. However, given the effects of increasing racial tension in America's schools, the need for literature that includes the experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse Americans seems greater than ever (Estrada & McLaren, 1993). Furthermore, women, people of color, and ethnic minorities have been under represented in literature, and this has limited children's ability to develop social constructs of the world from multiple viewpoints and has inhibited their empathy for those whose background, language, and behavior are different from their own (Wexler, 1982).

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### Multicultural Books in the Classroom

One of the most effective and appropriate ways to develop cultural awareness is through literature. However, no longer does an African folktale, a Korean Cinderella story, or a "Let's Visit China" book suffice. The richness of story, the power of illustrations and photographs, and the variety of themes enables teachers to bring much of the world into the classroom.

In selecting multicultural literature, teachers need to consider the following: (1) authenticity in the depiction of diverse cultures, (2) author and illustrator background, (3) quality of the literature and illustrations, (4) avoidance of bias and stereotypes, and above all, (5) messages that are relevant to students' lives and that have the power to positively shape their cultural consciousness. In the remainder of this article we identify multicultural books that can encourage cultural sensitivity in teachers and students.

### Description of Themes

#### Artistic Contributions

Poetry, music, dance, and art reflect ethnic cultures and provide readers with a different perspective. Some worthwhile titles include *Rising Voices* (Hirschfelder/Singer; poetry and essays of young Native Americans), *Neighborhood Odes* (Soto; Hispanic urban poems), *Pass It On* (Hudson; collection of African-American poetry for children), *Tamarindo Puppy* (Pomerantz; pleasant rhymes in English and Spanish), *A Coconut Kind of Day* (Joseph; poetry that reflects daily life in the Caribbean), *Dancing Tepees* (Driving Hawk Sneve; poetic celebration of tribal and family traditions), *Caribbean Carnival* (Burgie; songs of the West Indies with vibrant illustrations), *Arroz con leche* (traditional Hispanic children's songs), *Alvin Ailey Dancers* (Pinkney; history of the famous modern dance company), *Look What We Brought You from Viet Nam* (Shalant; crafts, games, and stories from new American immigrants), and *Totem Pole* (Hoyt-Goldsmith; celebrates the arts and traditions of Northwest Coast Indians).

The following biographies and autobiographies that detail the aesthetic contributions of various ethnic groups and individuals are also recommended: *Children of the Clay* (Swentzell; photographs and text that describe a family who makes pottery), *The Piñata Maker* (Ancona; the life of a Mexican village piñata maker is told in Spanish and English), *A Young Painter: The Life and Paintings of Wang Yani* (Zhensun/Low; biography of China's extraordinary young painter), *The Real McCoy* (Towle; the story of an African-American inventor of the automatic oil cup for trains).

### Civil Rights Movement

Both information books and realistic fiction, as well as biographies of important leaders, help tell the story of the hard-fought battle for human rights. Included in this group are books about racial discrimination, the Holocaust, Japanese internment during World War II, and the Japanese occupation of Korea. Suggested titles are *Road to Memphis* (Taylor; family saga of racial discrimination in the 1940s), *Martin Luther King, Jr., Free at Last* (Alder; biography of the famous civil rights leader), *Plutie and Little John* (Edwards; inequality and discrimination in the lives of two young men from different racial backgrounds), *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (Choi; a family's ordeal during the Japanese occupation of Korea), *The Journey: Japanese Americans, Racism, and Renewal* (Hamanka; illustrations and text depicting World War II internment), *Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen; family chronicle of the Holocaust).

### History and Lifestyles

Informational books can provide descriptions and general facts about the history, customs, lifestyles, challenges, and accomplishments of ethnic groups. Some titles to consider include *From Abenaki to Zuni* (Wolfson; illustrated guide to twenty-eight tribes—their customs, habitats, and other useful information), *A to Zen* (Wells; alphabet picture book of Japanese events and ideas), *Family Celebrations* (Patrick; describes how families around the world celebrate events), *A Migrant Family* (Brimmer; a photographic essay on the lives of migrant workers), *Menorahs, Menzahs, and Other Jewish Symbols* (Chaikin).

### Contemporary Children's Stories

These stories illustrate that the daily lives of all children are often similar, but that their lives are influenced by institutions, geography, politics, and cultural background. The books portray contemporary settings and show what it is like to grow up in another culture. Suggested titles include *Chi-Hoon, a Korean Girl* (McMahon; contemporary family life), *Love, David* (Case; challenges of a mixed-race girl growing up in South Africa), *Somewhere in Africa* (Mennan/Daly; challenge stereotypes in this picture book about contemporary urban South Africa), *Hello, Amigos* (Brown; photographic essay of Hispanic family life), *Pueblo Boy: Growing Up in Two Worlds* (Keegan; adapting to tribal tradition and contemporary/modern American life), *Day of Ahmed's Secret* (Heide/Gilliland; young boy in modern Cairo finds success despite a hard life), *Life among the Volcanoes* (Castaneda; describes the challenges of a Mayan girl in a modern Guatemalan village), *Rice without Rain* (Ho; political awakening of young people in rural Thailand).

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##### Self-Esteem

Realistic fiction can facilitate feelings of self-worth and dignity. Particularly valuable are those stories in which young people learn to value their heritage. Titles to consider include *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder; story of singer Josephine Baker's spunky childhood), *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman; a young girl finds self-confidence and courage), *Black Snowman* (Mendex; African-American youngsters learn ethnic pride from an unusual storyteller), *312 Valentines* (Cohen; gifted and talented black student seeks his own identity), *Shabanu—Daughter of the Wind* (Staples; challenges of adolescent girl in contemporary Pakistan), *Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (Bao Lord; girl who emigrates from China learns to love American life), *Local News* (Soto; short stories depict Hispanic life in an urban neighborhood), *Bearstone* (Hobbs; a young Native American learns loyalty and courage in today's world).

##### Folktales, Fairytales, and Legends

Folktales, fairytales, and legends add to the awareness of the richness, diversity, and the sense of tradition of the many cultures in our world. While some deal with stories of the creation and with scientific phenomena, others tell pour-quoi stories and trickster tales. Other cultures tell versions of fairytales that are different from the ones we are familiar with. These variations are interesting and informative. Useful titles include *Raven* (McDermott; Pacific Northwest tale of how raven found the sun), *The Rainbow People* (Yep; Chinese folktales that sustained immigrant laborers), *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (Aardema; repetitive animal story describes disastrous chain of events), *Lon Po Po* (Young; Chinese Little Red Riding Hood), *Her Seven Brothers* (Goble; Cheyenne legend of formation of the Big Dipper), *Twenty-five Mixtec Cats* (Gollub; Mexican village healer triumphs over black magic).

##### Conclusion

Our rich ethnic diversity is making the world a smaller place for today's children. More and more, minority groups are changing the cultural climate of our nation. As teachers appropriately select and use multicultural children's literature that realistically portrays minority cultures, they may better prepare all children to live in an America that celebrates diversity.

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