Chameleon
Readers

Teaching Children to
Appreciate All Kinds of
Good Stories

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CHAPTER 10

Chameleon Readers: 
Notes toward an Authentic Multicultural Literacy Program

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OVERVIEW

W

hatever method is used to teach reading, a careful consideration of diverse cultural traditions of storytelling is called for. This chapter focuses on the implications this diversity has for reading materials, assessments, and writing programs. Reading materials should more adequately include all kinds of good stories. Assessments of story comprehension should be tailored to suit various kinds of stories and students. Educators should rethink efforts to switch all children into a European storytelling style. Writing instruction will be more effective if a variety of storytelling forms is valued. We address implications of diverse storytelling styles for social interactions between teachers and students and among students themselves. Educators are asked to assume that each child is well versed in a storytelling style and to work with that child’s skill, instead of labeling the style deficient from a European point of view. We also address possible objections to multicultural literature programs in general and to the kind of program envisioned in this book. Finally, evidence is provided that the curriculum strategies recommended here can be very effective in a variety of ways.

WHAT DO ALL THESE IDEAS MEAN FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE?

The field of reading is historically and currently the site of hard-fought battles over method. A focus on developing a well-thought-out multicultural literacy curriculum can easily slip from central consideration in the face of such battles. The debate between traditional and whole language approaches has not di-
rected attention specifically to cultural issues, such as those faced by African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Ladson-Billings articulates the need for a culturally relevant approach to teaching that recognizes and celebrates African and African American culture in order to foster and sustain students' desire to choose academic success in the face of competing options. In this chapter, we suggest some ways of expanding on this notion in order to address the diverse needs of the many kinds of children now in American schools.

Implications for Materials, Assessment, and Writing

Reading

Stories Read to and by Children. For children on the cusp of literacy, instruction in reading should from the outset be a deeply meaningful process. For children who display a narrative structure not familiar to a teacher, it would be a good idea to read stories that conform to that structure.

Educators may want to engage in extended celebrations of various cultures—one at a time and in enough depth to get a real feeling for each one—through art, music, dance, and, of course, stories, pointing out aesthetic values that transcend specific forms. It is only through repeated exposure to different examples of a particular form of story that the form itself becomes apparent. A single-shot exposure without provision of background information about the culture that gave rise to the story is likely to backfire, leading to dismissal of the form rather than acceptance and enjoyment.

In Chapter 9, our survey of existing texts touted as being multicultural reveals a varied assortment. There are numerous European North American stories with illustrations of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. There are also stories with strange mixes of basal reader language and supposedly ethnic values. Some "hybrid" stories have genuine cultural themes but are written with unmistakably traditional story grammar structure by European North American authors. Finally, there are a few authentically structured tales from various cultures and countries, but these are often presented with no background information that would facilitate understanding for those who do not share the cultural background giving rise to the story.

Harris (1991), who reviewed African American children's literature within an historical perspective, recommends adoption of those texts that constitute an authentic body of literature written about and for African American children. Almost without exception, such books, Harris notes, are written by African American authors, although they need not be (Gates, 1991).

A well-considered multicultural literacy curriculum mindful of cultural differences in narrative structure would include numerous stories written by African American, Asian American, Native American, European North American, and Latino authors. These stories should be read to and by all children in all grades. Enough of each kind should be available so that children could come to appreciate the form of stories told by cultures not their own. Why not devote a full fifth of each school year to stories of each of these major groups? Such an
approach would allow all children sufficient exposure to stories and cultures that they do not share, while ensuring that all children would share a home background in narrative that is recognized as valid in school for part of the school year.

Educators should think in terms of three goals in selecting stories to be read to and by children:

1. Match each child’s particular sense of storytelling at least some of the time.
2. Challenge European North American children by extensive exposure to traditions other than the European one, and do this by going into the cultural backdrop of these other traditions in some depth.
3. Challenge children from backgrounds other than the European North American one by exposing them to that tradition in such a way that they come to understand and appreciate it.

Mindful of these goals, educators who decide to include numerous stories about African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Asian Americans, and American Indians will find an invaluable resource in Journeys to Self-Esteem: Children’s Books with Themes of Cultural and Social Empowerment by Ewa Pytowska and Gail Pettiford Willett (available by contacting Savannah Books, 1132 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138). The authors have collected numerous books from those cultural traditions and sorted them by appropriate grade level. Another similar reference work is Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers by Miller-Lachmann (1992) (available from R.R. Bowker, New Providence, New Jersey).

Discussing Stories Read to and by Children. By and large, U.S. schools operate under the assumption that the kind of story that resembles European fairy tales is the only literate kind of story there is. Such an emphasis is in accord with recent research on reading comprehension (for example, Pearson & Fielding, 1991). This research concludes that “ideas that are identified as important in a story grammar or central story content analysis, especially if they are implied but not stated, should receive instructional focus” (p. 826), although efforts should be made to see whether such instruction, applied to texts written expressly for such purposes, transfers to real short stories and novels, which often do not conform to story grammar sequences. As should be clear by now, this kind of focus on story grammar structure will work for many stories from the European North American tradition, but may not work well for stories from other traditions. Alternative kinds of story structures should also receive instructional focus. See Chapter 3 in particular for ways to provide alternative frameworks for discussion.

Talking to children about different forms of stories will provide them with the rich metalinguistic vocabulary they need to work with their own stories, while enabling them to understand those from different cultures. An exchange of information with children and parents of various cultures represented in the classroom would enrich everyone’s understanding of stories from these cul-
tures (see Delpit, 1986, 1988). Talking about the kind of tradition that gave rise to specific stories is imperative for understanding stories from cultures not your own. Delpit’s (1986, 1988) argument that children from non-European North American backgrounds need to have the rules of that tradition made explicit for them needs to be extended. All children need explicit instruction in diverse communicative approaches in order to be prepared for reading the important world literature of our time.

Assessing Story Comprehension. Assessments should reflect an awareness of the kind of information a child is likely to extract. At present, schoolchildren are often asked to reconstruct sequences of events as a means of assessing comprehension of stories (Baker, 1982). Reconstructing a sequence of events is also often used in basal reading systems as a means of ostensibly “increasing reading ability” (Harris & Sipay, 1990). However, in light of what we know about Latino children’s narrative structure, for example, heavy reliance on this kind of assessment needs to be reconsidered.

The movement in literary criticism to recognize the role of readers in responding to literature (for example, Beach & Hynds, 1991) may need to be invoked here. That is, comprehension of a story can be construed as a kind of response to a story, as can recalling it. Simply because children of different cultures recall the same story in different ways (John & Berney, 1968) does not by definition mean that some have “correctly” understood that story while others have not.

The Problem with Switching Children’s Oral Storytelling Style. Some educators may feel that it would be simpler just to switch children into the European North American storytelling style that so dominates American society today than it would be to do the kinds of modifications of curriculum we are proposing. Unfortunately, such an approach would not seem congruent with currently available research findings.

First of all, consider developmental research. Children acquire basic narrative structure at home with their parents during their infancy and preschool years (see, McCabe & Peterson, 1990, 1991). Parents in all cultures engage in discussions of past events with their children or in front of their children (Miller et al., 1990; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984).

Second, consider research on attempts to change narrative structure. Carole Peterson and I conducted two experiments that attempted to facilitate narrative development in a variety of ways, most employing adults to talk with preschool and kindergarten children one at a time for six weeks to a year, for hours, about past events. Not only were these efforts unrealistic in terms of potential curriculum efforts, they were unsuccessful. These two intervention projects failed to advance the children’s narrative structure in any of the many ways we have available to assess that structure (McCabe, 1989). We learned from these projects that “teaching oral narrative structure at school” was a tremendously daunting and perhaps fundamentally misguided task. Moreover, Grover Whitehurst and his colleagues have been remarkably successful at
facilitating vocabulary and syntax, but not narrative (Whitehurst, Angell, Crone, & Fischel, 1994).

With children living in America watching as much television as they do, one might expect all children to tell stories in a similar way, even if the original culture of their parents diverged from mainstream American culture. Surprisingly, such is not the case, as we saw in preceding chapters. Evidently, television is not a source for oral storytelling structure, at least when children talk about events that have really happened to them.

Writing: Expanding the Child-centered Approach

Having children dictate or write their own stories would seem an ideal forum for coming up with stories that have a structure the child comprehends. Unfortunately, numerous research efforts have documented cases where children who do not come from European North American families are misunderstood, for example, process writing conferences (Michaels, 1991). Teachers may not know what questions to ask to help children extend their stories, tripping them up or cutting them off instead of helping.

In essence, teachers need to accept and appreciate a great variety of children’s early productions. Try to figure out what kind of story they are telling, dictating, or writing rather than judge them deficient because their sense of storytelling does not match your own. In early elementary school years, children’s struggle with the mechanics of print—decoding, letter formation, spelling, and so forth—is sufficiently daunting that they need the pull of communicating to go to the trouble of learning all those mechanics. I will revise whatever I write many times, so long as I feel that I am doing so in order better to convey what I have to say to an appreciative audience.

Process writing programs (see Graves, 1983) advocate having children write personal narratives of real experiences. After twenty years of listening to and reading both factual and fictional children’s stories, I can understand and sympathize with this position. Children’s factual stories, as I noted earlier in Chapter 4, are more compelling because their own particular experience of reality forces them to be original. In contrast, children’s fictional productions are typically rehashes of stories they have heard or watched. Such a phenomenon is not limited to the verbal narrative realm; when children draw pictures while observing real things they are often strikingly original. When they draw pictures from memory, however, young children tend to be schematic. Nevertheless, when children are telling stories about things that really happened to them, it seems to me that particular care must be taken not to usurp their authority.

Trying to write literary forms not indigenous to one’s own culture is tremendously difficult. For example, unless one appreciates the fact that Japanese parents routinely train their children to engage in empathic extension of what they hear and, when speaking, to avoid garrulousness that would be insulting and offensive to empathic listeners (Minami & McCabe, 1991), one would not completely understand the communicative compression that is the essence of haiku. Although the form of haiku is often taught in American class-
rooms, examination of the results of such instruction reveals that European American students tend to see this simply as short sentences consisting of the prerequisite number of syllables, not condensed expression. Consider the following haiku I collected from fifth-graders in Vermont:

American:

I can feel the wind.
I smell smoke walking in woods.
I hear birds in trees.

Swimming

You get very wet.
You can have a lot of fun.
You get very cold.

Contrast those samples with the following haiku by Japanese children (translations into English from Gakken, 1989, by Masahiko Minami, 1990, focus on meaning rather than syllable counts):

Japanese second-grader:

A foot-race
My heart is throbbing;
Next is my turn. (Kumon, 1989)

Japanese fourth-grader:

Although it is cold,
The Statue of Liberty
Stretches herself.

Both of the Japanese samples distill a story into a short but true poem, and the reader is invited to imaginatively extend their provocative pieces, whereas the European North American efforts simply describe general experiences, with many filler syllables (such as I, you, can, get).

Thus, without provision of information about communicative values underlying various literary forms, efforts to emulate the literary forms of cultures not one's own may not succeed even when those forms are as short as and have as clearly prescribed rules as does haiku, with its requirement of three lines consisting of 5, 7, and 5 syllables each.

A promising route of instruction would be to encourage children to tell their own stories the way they want to in view of the fact that such stories are so critically a matter of self-presentation and sense-making. To convey to children that somehow they are not getting their own stories straight would seem to lead to alienation.

We often take our own culture, whatever that may be, for granted and expect others to do the same. Teachers from the European North American tradition may find it strange to think of explaining that this tradition values making things very explicit, talking about one thing at a time, giving lots of actions in a sequence. Yet this kind of explicit instruction may be just what is needed for
children who have not been in circumstances that gave them the opportunity
to figure out those rules more or less unconsciously.

The current educational focus on sequencing actions and representing
problem-solving in narrative instruction needs to be supplemented with other
kinds of foci in writing instruction. For example, the development of connec-
tions among characters and the use of metaphors should be seen as at least as
important to narrative as the arrangement of events in a sequence. Other kinds
of suggestions for alternative foci in writing instruction appear at the end of
each of the chapters detailing specific traditions.

Implications for Social Interactions

This book has tried to show that experience can be packaged in very different
ways by different cultures. Cultural differences in how to tell a story are as
much a part of “accent” as are differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and
syntax. Yet few people hear differences in storytelling style as something im-
ported from another language. Instead, they sometimes dismiss stories from
different cultures as “not making sense,” as if that property were an objective,
culture-free one.

Most of the time such dismissal results in a failure to communicate between
two peers. However, when such failures to communicate occur in circum-
stances such as in a school (Michaels, 1991), courtroom (Barry, 1991), or clinical
assessment (Perez, McCabe, & Tager-Flussberg, in preparation), the impact of
being misunderstood is more profound due to the disproportionate power of
teachers, lawyers, and psychologists over children. For example, clinical psy-
chologists rated Latino narratives such as the one on page 129 as significantly
more “illogical” and “incomprehensible” than European North American nar-
ratives, and were inclined to make a diagnosis of developmental delay on the
basis of such narratives (Perez, 1992). Thus it is vital that adults who work with
children come to recognize and appreciate cultural differences in storytelling
style.

Sarah Michaels (1991) has recorded numerous interchanges between Euro-
pean North American teachers and European North American students and be-
tween African American teachers and African American students in which
teachers pick up narrators’ intentions, ask appropriate questions, and help stu-
dents round out and organize their narrative accounts. Unfortunately, she also
has documented incidents in which European North American educators who
have been accustomed to discourse with discrete topics tend to misunderstand
children whose culture allows them to use a narrative discourse consisting of a
series of implicitly associated personal anecdotes, dismissing these as “ram-
bling,” or “not talking about one important thing” (Michaels, 1991). Minami
(1990) found that the beautifully ordered simplicitly of Japanese children’s nar-
ratives struck some American educators as “boring” or “unimaginative.”

Furthermore, many studies (for example, Finkelstein & Haskins, 1983;
Newman, Liss & Sherman, 1983; Singleton & Asher, 1979) document the trou-
bling fact that simply placing children of different cultural backgrounds in the
same classroom is no guarantee that they will interact with each other at all, let alone interact positively. Various programs (for example, Slavin, 1985; Weigel, Wiser, & Cook, 1975) that encourage cooperative learning have been devised to promote such cross-cultural exchanges. However, unless educators themselves understand that there are diverse ways of communicating and in some way inform their students about such differences, there may very well remain barriers to cross-cultural communication among children even in these contexts. That is, children often form impressions of personality characteristics on the basis of other children’s discourse style (Hemphill & Siperstein, 1990). In observations of a diverse classroom of 6-year-olds, Rebecca Keebler (personal communication, March 4, 1993) recorded one African American girl commenting on how frustrating it was when her European North American classmates continually criticized her, her family, and her friends for their performances in Sharing Time Narratives.

**DORA:** But some people say, “It’s [the stories told by herself and her friends] not true. It’s not true.” It made me feel bad.

**REBECCA** (observer): Kids say something’s true and everybody says, “That couldn’t be true.” “How about this?” or “Why about that?” “Right (said sarcastically).”

**DORA:** And, “How come this is true? It can’t be true!” Like on Carl’s story, Sally said, “Well how come your cousin never brushes his teeth?” And Charles said, “Well, BECAUSE. He never brushes his teeth. He brushed his teeth with a toothbrush and shaving cream.” So he didn’t know what toothpaste was. Sally said, “That’s not true, that’s not true.”

**REBECCA:** Why do you think that makes you feel bad, when people ask you if it’s true and then don’t believe you?

**DORA:** Because it hurts a lot of people’s feelings when they say that . . . like my sister. She told a story when she was 4 years old in her class. The whole class except for her teacher. She told a story about a cat and everybody said, “That’s not true. You’re joking. You’re not telling the truth.” And that made my sister cry.

The reaction of teachers is also critical. One African American man in his thirties can still recall enthusiastically recounting a story for his third-grade classmates with great audience success. All the children loved it. He used many embellishing devices including metaphor, humor, vocal tone, gestures, imitations of players in the story. At the end, his European North American teacher said, “I know you enjoyed it, Class, but remember that wasn’t all true. He was pretending.” Later on, in private, the teacher more directly scolded him for his embellishment.

Another example of cultural misunderstanding occurs in the following narrative I collected from a 9-year-old European North American girl, Alice, who was drawing her favorite animal, a cat. The story concerns her interactions with her African American art partner:

He was teasing about CATS. He was saying like I’m going to bomb all the cats and I’m going to make a picture of a pool with a cat in it and the pool will explode. He said the worst things—like airplanes dropping bombs on kittens and
bad things like that. I just go, well nothing [like that] happens in real life so you can't make ME sad. Stuff like that.

Such small incidents of miscommunication occur often in numerous classrooms. Without some sort of information to the contrary, Dora and her friends and family were left with the impression that the European North American children were being mean rather than simply repeating the rules for storytelling that they most probably had heard from their parents. The young man felt his story had been completely misunderstood. Alice was left with the impression that her partner was trying to be mean rather than attempting to have fun conversing with her.

Educators may want to serve as translators for children from different traditions, and discussions centered on books would be one opportunity to do so. Teachers could discuss the fact that African American storytelling traditions place great emphasis on the value of telling dramatic stories. As was mentioned in Chapter 6, Zora Neale Hurston (1935/1990, p. 8) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988, p. 56) bring to our attention the fact that "lies" is a traditional African American word for figurative discourse, tales, or stories. Similarly, teasing in general is a common language game among African Americans, and is frequently either the point of a story or part of what is recapitulated (Labov, 1972). For example, *Irene and the Big, Fine Nickel* by Irene Smalls-Hector is a story that involves teasing games played by African American children and could serve as a vehicle for discussing such games. Children could be encouraged to notice the strategy the girls in the story use to make up with each other after the teasing goes too far for one of them, as we suggested in Chapter 6.

**Listen to Each Child; Assume Form but Little Else**

Issues of assimilation to mainstream culture at the expense of or while maintaining ethnic identity are quite complex. Some groups, some families, and some individuals seek assimilation with European North American culture more vigorously than others, and that will always be the case. Sensitivity to the fact that some children prefer to stress cultural heritage more than do others is critical.

Second, not all children from any one background will bring the same kind of oral narrative structure to school with them. Teachers must recognize that individual differences abound within any one culture, and must assess children on a case by case basis.

**New Immigrants from Cultures about which Little Is Written**

There are many cultures in the world and here in America about which there is little formal information regarding story form or traditions. Characterizing cultural differences takes time and a knowledge of linguistic methodology. This would be a very important task for university personnel to undertake. It would not be reasonable to expect teachers to do so while they are simultaneously performing their myriad other duties. Meantime, teachers can do the following with children from other cultures: