1. Assume that children’s narrative productions have narrative form instead of the lack of it.

2. Use writing instruction as a means of getting the child’s story on paper in such a fashion that you can reflect on it and see form and sense-making that was not apparent in the fast pace of oral conversation.

3. Try to give beginning readers stories that will make sense to them by drawing on local libraries. Ask librarians to order tales from the cultures of children in your classrooms. If even librarians cannot locate such stories, set up an exchange of information with children, parents, and community leaders of various cultures represented in the classroom. Transcribe what stories they recall as favorites in the country of origin.

4. In some communities, there are local individuals famous for their storytelling abilities. Invite these individuals into the classrooms and ask permission to record their performances. Set up a station where children can listen to these stories. Perhaps, also with permission, you could provide written versions of the stories for children to follow along with.

5. Try to organize a celebration of cultures underrepresented in current curriculum materials by asking children to bring in art, music, dance, food, and stories from home. Ask parents or community leaders to point out aesthetic values.

Possible Objections from Teachers Who Already Include Multicultural Materials in Their Classrooms

1. “These stories would make sense to anyone. They are good stories. It is just that in these books the children are rainbow colored.” We hope the preceding chapters have convinced readers that authentic children’s literature from any one culture will challenge children who have not grown up with extensive experience speaking the form of discourse from which the stories derive. Recall Paula Gunn Allen’s comments in Chapter 2 that stories that are authentic translations of Indian tales should not easily make sense to European North American readers. It is only by listening and reading many such stories that understanding may begin.

2. “I bring in adults from different cultures and ask them to tell us stories, but I don’t have to worry about their form because I just use them as conversation starters.” We would see this as a lost opportunity. Moreover, even more directly than complete exclusion from the classrooms, such marginalization of stories from their own culture would seem to convey the message that they do not really count. In a world as interconnected as the world of the twenty-first century will be, all cultures will in fact count a great deal. Moreover, valuing all kinds of stories in American classrooms would seem one way of making it clear that all kinds of students are valued as well.

3. “Kindergarten and first-grade children need to be taught narrative. They have a particular need for instruction in sequencing.” Again, we would
point out that in the case of cultures, such as the European North American
one, for which we have extensive developmental information available, the
form of oral story valued by the culture is something the child has been us-
ing for a couple of years prior to entering school. We would remind read-
ers that we know of many failed attempts to change oral narrative structure
and no successful ones. Moreover, we have considerable reservations about
the wisdom of switching children because we believe that all traditions
have compelling stories. Our country could be very rich indeed if we drew
on the accumulated forms of wisdom of all the traditions represented in
our classrooms today.

4. "Translations of Western European or American stories into Spanish (or
Cambodian or Portuguese) will work, and at least I understand those sto-
ries." Maybe teachers understand the stories, but the most critical thing is
that the children understand the stories enough to see the point of decod-
ing. Comprehension of the narrative thrust of the material would seem to
entice children to go to the extraordinary trouble they have to take to mas-
ter decoding.

Possible Objections from Those Who Have
Reservations about Multicultural Literature

In anticipating or answering some of the questions to be faced in discussing the
ideas of this book, I found myself adapting various arguments for and against
bilingual education (see Snow, 1990) with particular attention to the narrative
level of language, which has not been addressed in prior arguments on the
topic. Note that I do not propose to debate bilingual education itself here; in
fact, English-only programs could easily be modified to address the concerns I
am expressing.

1. "Won't reading stories to children that match their sense of story result in
a kind of ghettoization of them as readers?" A true reader can and, more
importantly, will read anything, and the goal is to get all children reading
and enjoying what they read. Children will learn whatever it takes to find
out the end of stories that engage them. Moreover, while we recommend
starting children out by reading stories that match their sense of what a
story should be, we also advocate eventual instruction of all ethnic groups
in stories from other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the exchange of stories should not be one-way, as it is
now, for the most part. European North American children will miss a great
many excellent stories if they confine themselves to the Western tradition.
In order truly to understand literature from other cultures, however, it is es-
tessential to understand general cultural differences, and to have practice
reading stories from those cultures over the years.

2. Other people might argue that "prior immigrant groups were given main-
stream stories to read and they did just fine." However, prior immigrant
groups (such as German, Italian, Irish, and Jewish) shared a Western tradition. Collections of fairy tales from these various European backgrounds show remarkable similarity in content as well as form. For example, in many European countries there is some version of a story about a worthy sibling (one of three, the other two of which are unworthy) who marries an animal. The animal is then restored to its prior (and temporarily eclipsed) royal status. In France, there is “Beauty and the Beast.” In Germany, there is “The Three Daughters and the Frog King.” In Italy there is “The Prince who married a Frog.” The overlap is that specific. Moreover, Catherine Snow (1990) also makes the point that many immigrants in the early part of this century failed to achieve the high levels of literacy required in today’s marketplace.

3. Some individuals might argue that it is a hopeless cause to maintain instruction in stories from different cultures because assimilation to mainstream values has traditionally been quite extensive after only two or three generations. However, American Indians and African Americans have been in this country for hundreds of years and yet they have maintained a distinctive sense of storytelling, so this argument is not completely true. Moreover, forcing ethnic groups to assimilate more than they wish to verges on the unethical. Forced, albeit more-or-less unconscious, assimilation to mainstream storytelling also has been remarkably ineffective. That is, most educators know very well the grim statistics documenting the fact that many American Indian, Latino, and African American children fail to achieve literacy.

4. Of course, most readers will be familiar with the zero-sum arguments that today’s students will learn about other cultures at the expense of knowledge of the Western European canon. That debate is not a dominant concern of this book. However, it is a mistake to think of instruction in reading and literature as a product (that is, mastery of a fixed set of literary works), instead of induction into the process of lifelong appreciation of literature. Furthermore, studies have documented that on the school-aged level, many of the stories that would be “bumped” are a distinctive basal reader genre that does not conform even to the standard European North American story grammar structure (see, Beck et al., 1984).

5. Related to this argument is the idea that if the goal of instruction is to train children in the white Western literary canon, then they might as well spend their time reading stories of that form. To this criticism, we would argue that learning to make sense of experience in many different ways is a valuable exercise in developing thought. One of the best ways of training children to understand each other is to get them to read things from truly different perspectives and to identify with heros and heroines of many different cultures and kinds of experiences. Finally, we repeat that European North American children will miss many good stories on all levels from various cultures if they do not ever have the opportunity to encounter these stories or the ability to understand them if they do.
What Evidence Exists that Such Curricular Interventions Will Succeed?

Instruction about Story Structure

First of all, numerous studies have found that explicit instruction in aspects of story structure effectively increases children's comprehension (see Pearson & Fielding, 1991, for review). Children in kindergarten and elementary school show improved comprehension of the stories discussed, as well as generally improved comprehension of other stories. However, these efforts have virtually all pertained to instruction in story grammar—the precipitation and resolution of protagonists' goals. We are encouraged by the effectiveness of these past interventions but would like to see such efforts extended to the less European aspects of story structure discussed throughout this book.

We also wish to stress that in literature rules are made to be broken. Children play with all sorts of rules in the process of acquiring them. Teenagers, especially gifted ones, consciously flaunt conventions of storytelling in their story writing (Freedman, 1987). Published fiction writers are known for their deliberate, masterful violation of many so-called rules of writing. We urge instruction in all the many European and non-European rules of storytelling to be mindful of this paradox.

Culturally Relevant Instruction

Past work (for example, Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) has documented increased effectiveness in reading instruction that is tailored to be culturally compatible with children in terms of educational process (administration of praise, means of discussing stories, and so forth). But perhaps one of the best documentations of the potential for including stories from a child's own culture in their reading assignments comes not from educational research, but from a clinical psychology treatment program termed "Cuento therapy" (Constantino, Malgady, & Rogler, 1984, 1986). In that project, the authors used Puerto Rican folktales (cuentos) to reduce anxiety and aggression among high risk Puerto Rican children, aged 5 through 8 years. Stories selected were those that best expressed thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors representative of Puerto Rican culture, and they stressed themes such as social judgment, control of aggression, and delay of gratification. Although prior studies had found it difficult to involve Latinos in therapeutic services, this program did not. In the successful treatment conditions, therapists and mothers read either original or modernized versions of the stories bilingually to children. They all subsequently discussed the stories and dramatized parts of them. The clinical effectiveness of this twenty-week program was evident at its completion: children in cuentos therapy had significantly lower scores on the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, fewer reports of aggression by teachers, and significantly higher comprehension scores (using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised Comprehension subtests). The effect of lowered anxiety was also evident at a follow-up assessment done a year later. The authors did not stress the benefits of such a program on children's literacy skills, although the benefits of parental bookreading are quite well-known (see, Wells, 1985).
It is also worthwhile noting that Nielsen rating of the Top Ten primetime shows among African American viewers are completely different from the Top Ten overall. The most popular shows in African American households not only feature African American characters, but are what have been called "black lifestyle shows" centered around life and activities in African American households (Doug Alligood, The Boston Globe, May 3, 1994).

Oral storytelling skills that minority students bring from their homes to school can and should serve as a foundation for the development of their academic and literacy skills. This kind of additive program has been implemented by the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii, a primary grades program that aims at producing normal school achievement for urban Hawaiian children of low socioeconomic status. KEEP is comprised of a language arts program and a behavior/classroom management component that facilitates the smooth operation of the language arts component. The program acts on the premise that teachers from European North American backgrounds need to understand and appreciate minority children's early socialization patterns and home narrative discourse practices. Furthermore, teachers are expected to help those children learn without molding them into the patterns of European North American children (Au, 1993; Au & Jordan, 1981; Jordan, 1984). In KEEP, educators facilitate students' academic success by combining new areas of linguistic knowledge with the communicative skills that they already have acquired in their homes and local communities. That is, KEEP teachers use an instructional method similar to that found in "talk story," an important speech event for Hawaiian children in their local speech communities. By establishing culturally compatible classroom practices through culturally responsive instruction, therefore, narrative discourse practices children acquire at home can facilitate their effective participation in school activities. (See Minami & Ovando, 1994, for further discussion of these issues.)

Teaching Tolerance

Finally, and of most direct relevance to the issue of promoting communication among children of different cultures, is a project done by Phyllis Katz and Sue Zalk (1978). They selected urban and suburban second- and fifth-grade European North American children who were determined to be highly prejudiced against other races and asked them to participate in one of four short-term intervention techniques, all of which attempted to modify their racial attitudes: (a) One condition involved increased positive racial contact; two African American and two European North American children solved a puzzle cooperatively. (b) One group involved training children to differentiate minority group faces. (c) A third group involved reinforcement of the color black. (d) The fourth condition was a storybook reading one—children were asked to listen to a fifteen-minute story, which was accompanied by slides, and then answer a few questions about it. In the critical condition, white children were shown slides of African American characters who triumph over adversity to take a sick grandmother to the hospital, whereas in the control condition the children heard the same story but saw slides of European North American characters.
Of critical importance for a number of arguments we have been making is their finding that the condition in which children read one fifteen-minute story with African American characters and the one in which they were taught to differentiate minority group faces were considerably more effective in lowering negative racial attitudes than were the group interaction and reinforcement conditions. Again, just putting children of different backgrounds into the same room or even into cooperative learning environments is not sufficient to ensure understanding, let alone appreciation. But even one very short story—probably not an authentic one—is sufficient to produce measurable results. Remarkably, the results of this single-shot story condition were still measurable four months later. Moreover, second-graders in this condition reported more African American friends four months later in addition to showing reduced general prejudice.

The Issue of Initial Resistance. Katz and Zalk (1978) reported another important finding that educators will need to consider in implementing a genuine multicultural literacy curriculum. Twice as many of the white children who saw slides of African American characters exhibited restlessness as did those who saw European American characters. This kind of initial resistance to stories from different cultures is one that Xiaofang Xu (1993) also found when she read stories from four cultures to predominantly European North American preschool children. However, Xu found that if she not only did not stop reading such stories to the children, but even read more of them, the children came to appreciate them far more. In other words, as Xu paraphrased a Chinese proverb, "Familiarity breeds proficiency."

The kind of resistance documented in this research is resistance of children who by and large find European North American stories at home and at school and are, perhaps for the first time, reading stories about people from cultures other than their own. The resistance of children who are not European North American to stories from that tradition has not been documented so far as we know. But it is likely to occur and to be of a different sort than the one deriving from the unfamiliarity previously described. It is not hard to imagine such children given a steady diet of books from the dominant culture becoming familiar, even proficient, with that story form but drawing the conclusion that books in general had little to do with their lives.

An even more powerful emotional impediment to a serious multicultural literature program is the fact that direct discussion of race, racism, and prejudice disturbs many teachers and parents, as well as students (Amster, 1994). However, within the parameters of the kind of program we have been advocating so far lies considerable leeway for the directness with which these issues are faced. Some educators may feel comfortable selecting books that talk directly about these explosive issues. Others may prefer to select books that emphasize positive aspects of the lives of people in many cultures, both abroad and within the United States. The most important point to keep in mind is that in powerful stories written by authors from various backgrounds, characters are distinct individuals easily recognized as such and individuals with whom
readers will empathize. Teachers may want to inform or even involve parents in selecting materials for a multicultural literature program.

Two strategies for overcoming resistance to story forms unfamiliar to children are (1) consistently dramatizing stories, and (2) bringing in accomplished storytellers from the communities under consideration, particularly parents who are good at this activity. The former strategy would involve each child in informal dramas done regularly so that each child would literally be included in the stories in question. The second strategy would stimulate parent-school connections with communities that may, for a variety of reasons, mistrust the schools. Thus, children who may not feel at home at school could be encouraged to do so by this means of including their parents and/or stories from their community. For children unfamiliar with the story forms in question, the drama of a live storyteller can be considerable, and very engaging.

Conclusion

Despite having worked on the research on which this book is based more-or-less nonstop for years now, and despite the fact that I as main author have attempted to include in this book all information I know of about cultural differences in storytelling traditions, it seems likely that I have only scratched the surface of the rich set of storytelling traditions represented in the United States, not to mention the world, at the present time. Even though I have talked to hundreds, maybe thousands, of individuals about the ideas discussed here, I keep encountering new “treasure troves” of stories from a particular culture sitting in someone’s basement or in someone’s memory, loved but forgotten for years. I hope readers will send me word of these omissions so that someday this book can be twice the size it is now. Many things need to change to improve relations among various cultural groups in our vast country, but I truly believe that if our school curricula included the best stories from all our traditions we would have wiser, more communicatively competent individuals running the country in a few years’ time.

EXEMPLARY INSTRUCTION

Janet McClurg (Abouzeid & McClurg, under review) works with high school-age students in a rural Virginia school district. She works with twenty boys and ten girls who have been sent to this alternative school because of unacceptable behavior in the regular public school. The children are African American and European North American, ranging in age from 14 to 18 years. In the fall of 1994, Ms. McClurg decided to experiment with the narrative genre and the access to literacy it might provide her students. The teacher began by encouraging them to tell personal stories. Many of the initial efforts were elaborate scary stories, more fiction than fact. Ms. McClurg brought in a tape recorder and recorded personal stories from each student, which she later transcribed. The students seemed “enamored with reading their own words” (Abouzeid & McClurg, under review, p. 3), and these stories seemed far more grounded in real
personal experiences. One young man was inspired to draft his ideas in outline form before taping the next version. Students went on to use the computer for some personal transcriptions. They were given the assignment to collect holiday stories from relatives, which they were actually excited about. One student suggested that the class “should all sit in a group and tell stories,” which the teacher agreed to do. In other words, daily exchanges of real personal narratives became the core of Ms. McClurg’s curriculum.

Did it work? One student commented, “This is the most work I’ve done in five years,” a self-appraisal that was confirmed by prior teachers. Ms. McClurg reports newfound enthusiasm from students who literally had been so alienated from school that they had been thrown out of it prior to coming to her class. More important, when the students were given a choice of whether or not to keep their personal narratives (written and transcribed), they chose to keep almost all of them. Narratives—the personal stories of ordinary children—mean a lot to them. The importance of narratives continues beyond elementary school and can be tapped, as it was here, by ingenious teachers of even the most demanding students.

Summary

- Cultural differences in storytelling traditions and forms have many implications for classroom instruction.
- The stories read to and by all children should match their sense of storytelling some of the time, and challenge it at other times.
- Assessments of narrative ability must take diversity in storytelling form into account. Children should not simply be asked to switch into European North American form or written stories.
- Writing instruction could be improved if teachers accepted a wider variety of narrative and story forms as good ones.
- Cultural differences in storytelling traditions and forms also have many implications for social interactions in the classroom. Teachers and students alike make assumptions about the personality of children on the basis of their narratives and stories, and these assumptions can be quite mistaken when individuals do not come from the same cultural background.
- Educators are asked to assume form, instead of the lack of it, in children’s oral storytelling.
- Possible objections to multicultural literature programs in general and the kind advocated in this book in particular are addressed. There is evidence that this kind of program works in many important ways.

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