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Middle School Journal

November 2007 • Volume 39 • Number 2 • Pages 19-24

Weaving Multicultural Literature into Middle School Curricula

* *This We Believe* Characteristics

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Susan M. Landt

In recent decades much emphasis has been placed on using a diversity of high-quality literature for students to read. Previous decades offered students a limited fare of overwhelmingly white male authors for reading. The slow progress of incorporating a richer, broader range of literature into curriculum required focusing on "alternate" (non-mainstream) authors. Teachers and librarians needed to become familiar with the available possibilities. Therefore, focus on African-American, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Native American, and other non-mainstream authors was necessary to direct attention to their existence and highlight the quality of the selections. It is time that we move beyond this introductory phase and begin situating these works where they belong— within the framework of the appropriate genre for which they were written and within regular curriculum content.

Skimming through textbooks on children's literature, I invariably encounter a chapter on "multicultural literature," as if the books in this section are somehow inherently different from books in other chapters such as contemporary realistic fiction or historical fiction. Indeed, during the last decade, textbook companies often touted the fact that they added just such a chapter, designating the inclusion of a chapter on multicultural literature as an improved feature of



a new edition. This organization of topics suggests that literature by and about non-mainstream characters belongs in a separate, segregated section rather than being an integral part of good literature. The approach of isolating these works reinforces the position that they consist of stories about "others" and that "there is a standard out there from which individuals deviate" (Page, 2002, p. 30).

As a member and current chair of the Multicultural Reading Committee of the Wisconsin State Reading Association (WSRA), I am in the seemingly ironic position of encouraging teachers to incorporate books classified as multicultural into their curricula while simultaneously promoting the eradication of this category in children's literature. These ostensibly disparate positions actually represent analogous goals related to moving literature by and about people of diverse cultures from the periphery of the curriculum and into the mainstream of our educational system. According to Rochman (1995)

There's no doubt that some kinds of Eurocentric books have dominated the mainstream for a long time and that some cultures have been largely ignored. But the best way to promote them is together; not patronizingly as something cute and exotic and apart, but as good books. (p. 12)

Chris Crutcher—award winning author of young adult books—proclaims "Here's how I think multicultural works should be treated in the classroom: the same as any other works. There shouldn't be a multicultural 'unit'. Every unit should be multicultural" (Crutcher, 2006, p. 6).

View from the middle

Middle school students are acutely aware of their social surroundings. In the process of emerging from childhood they attentively observe one another, looking for clues to belonging. Striving for independence from adult authority, young adolescents endeavor to blend in with their contemporaries. From clothes to music, from posture to attitude, middle school students are exploring. While peers have considerable influence, teachers are still a significant factor in students' lives. What teachers say and how they say it, what they include and what they leave out all have an impact on students' perceptions of what is right and how things should be. Teachers, serving as models, affect students beyond the intended lessons they teach.

What is the message being sent when the only voices teachers advocate are from white middle class families? Middle school students, absorbing these unintended lessons, come to perceive white middle-class as normative and all other possibilities as atypical, different, unusual, other. This perception is reinforced when, in response to a holiday or a month dedicated to a specific group, teachers unearth the "appropriate" material to be taught and then promptly bury it until the following year.

How can teachers avert this tendency in their teaching without either expanding the curriculum or eliminating other valuable content? A solution entails effectively melding literature featuring non-mainstream individuals with content area curriculum. To help teachers proceed toward this goal it is necessary to do two things: first, provide information about high-quality authentic literature representing all people; and second, demonstrate ways to naturally feature a variety of good literature within curriculum. In previous work (Landt, 2006), I described important aspects of selecting multicultural literature. Here, I will share specific ideas for weaving a few exemplary selections into content area curriculum at the middle level.

Teaching point-of-view

Rather than isolating books into the category of multicultural literature, teachers can use high-quality selections that represent various perspectives throughout their teaching. An excellent example can be found in a pair of books written by Lisa Yee: *Millicent Min, Girl Genius* (2003) and its companion *Stanford Wong Flunks Big Time* (2005). In *Millicent Min*, we experience a summer through the eyes of a young girl as she struggles with her identity as student, friend, and family member. In *Stanford Wong*, we view the same time period and many of the same events through the perspective of a young boy grappling with his own issues of identity and self-worth.

Yee's tales are delightfully humorous and engaging. While lightly playing on the stereotype of Asian student intelligence, neither story focuses on the Chinese heritage of Millicent and Stanford; rather, Yee draws readers into the complex lives of two young adolescents coping with the difficulties of middle school.

Eleven-year-old Millicent is a certified genius. Prepared to graduate from high school next year, Millicent is out of place with both her age and grade peers. She attempts to re-invent herself over the summer by taking a college course and joining a volleyball team without revealing either her age during classes or her intelligence at volleyball. At the insistence of her family, Millicent reluctantly agrees to tutor Stanford, a boy her age that she professes to hate.

Stanford, having failed sixth grade English, is forced to forgo the basketball camp he was eagerly anticipating to take a summer English course. Trying to hide his academic failure from his friends, Stanford conspires with Millicent to keep their tutoring sessions a secret.

This combination of stories provides a unique opportunity for teachers to demonstrate the effect of point of view in writing. An author's choice of narrative voice "both limits and focuses the vantage point: the reader's way of perceiving the events of the story" (Atwell, 1998, p. 400). Having dual narratives of the same events from differing perspectives is an effective tool for facilitating students' understanding of the power and importance of an author's choice of voice.

There are numerous ways teachers might approach the task of teaching perspective with these

selections. *Millicent* and *Stanford* could be read consecutively, providing all students with the experience of living through the same events from differing perspectives. Alternatively, each book could be assigned to half of the class to be read simultaneously, thus promoting discussions between the groups. Another interesting tactic would be to divide the class by gender, assigning one half of the students of each gender to one of the books, creating a variety of perspectives available during discussions and a number of combinations for creating groups.

By introducing these high quality pieces of literature into the curriculum as teaching tools rather than isolating them within a segregated category for reading about "others," teachers model the philosophy that literature with non-mainstream characters is an integral part of the curriculum.

Creating collective background knowledge

An example of a more holistic way of integrating multicultural literature into content teaching focuses on *Cuba 15* by Nancy Osa (2003). This selection is rich with potential for the middle level classroom. It contains lessons on rights and responsibilities, information pertaining to U.S.-Cuba relations, opportunities for stimulating student interest in learning about probability, and examples of forensic speech tournament events.

An effective strategy for integrating this book in a middle level classroom is to use it as a read-aloud early in the semester. This will provide students with a shared pool of knowledge, which teachers can draw upon during the school year. The story can serve as a touchstone, providing images and information to stimulate interest or reinforce curriculum concepts. Weeks after reading the book, teachers can kindle collective memory with a reference to the story.

The story revolves around Violet, a typical 14-year-old American girl interested in friends, family, and her future, who discovers that turning 15 is more than just another birthday. Abuela, her Cuban grandmother, insists on treating her to a *quinceanero*, the traditional coming-of-age ceremony held for girls in Latin American countries. Violet's response includes horror at the thought of wearing "a ruffly dress the color of Pepto-Bismol" (Osa, 2003, p. 1). Fortified with "*Quinceanero for the Gringo Dummy*," Violet manages to negotiate details of the celebration with her family as she grapples with her self-image and her increasing desire to know more about the Cuban part of her heritage.

An immediate discussion on what "coming of age" signifies in Cuba can foster dialogue on its meaning in the United States and whether there are official forms of recognition in the U.S. A debate on when an individual reaches adult status might include obtaining a work permit, acquiring a driver's license, registering to vote, being allowed to drink, or enlisting in military service. Further conversation might focus on differences among families in recognizing a child's advancing adult status such as being allowed to stay home alone for a weekend, diminishing curfew restrictions, or use of the car. While students might want to concentrate on the privileges

that come with increasing maturity, *Cuba 15* also emphasizes related responsibilities. Violet finds that her family expects her to demonstrate greater judgment and dependability. She also discovers her own willingness to assume a leadership role in some family situations. Using Violet's situation as a starting point, students can discuss how they perceive their own increasing responsibilities.

Cuba 15 has potential for enhancing curriculum. Following are a few examples of ways teachers can make use of students' shared experience with this reading to facilitate student learning.

Spanish

By infusing Spanish throughout the story, Osa provides a wonderful opportunity for Spanish-speaking students to experience the pleasure of encountering words and phrases that may be familiar to them. It also provides early learners of Spanish opportunities to use their emergent language abilities. The Spanish words and phrases can be understood without knowledge of Spanish through the context of the sentences; however, students new to the language will enjoy putting their growing skills to use with each encounter. Through careful placement, Osa slowly leads readers into ever-increasing comfort with the Spanish words and phrases used in Violet's family. By story's end, readers will have absorbed the feel and rhythm of a bit of Spanish language.

Math

The game of dominoes is a passion for Violet's family in *Cuba 15*. While students may be familiar with dominoes as a children's game, it is likely that few of them have played the game in a serious fashion. A brief lesson on the basics and an introduction to the myriad versions of dominoes can spark student interest in this ancient and challenging game. Students' familiarity with dominoes then becomes a means for stimulating interest in learning about probability. The book, itself, does not include the concept of probability; the story serves to inspire curiosity. Teachers will need to make explicit the connection between dominoes and probability.

Dominoes Around the World by Lankford (1998) is a wonderful resource that provides specifics of how this game is played in a variety of cultures. The following Web sites have excellent information on the mathematics of dominoes as well as other resources pertaining to dominoes.

- <http://www.goshen.edu/>
- <http://mathforum.org/alejandre/frisbie/student.poly.html>
- http://j_carrillo_vii.tripod.com/dominoes.htm
- <http://icuban.com/3guys/domino.html>

History/Political science

Having encountered *Cuba 15* early in the semester, students share background knowledge that can be tapped when beginning a lesson on Cuba or U.S.-Cuba relations. Stimulating students' memory of the story should engender a range of collective responses based on remembered images. There is just enough Cuban history woven into the story to kindle interest in this insufficiently studied neighbor. Information about Cuba is doled out, as Violet attempts to understand her family's various reactions to their home country. We get to see her grandparents' wistful longing for their homeland, her father's refusal to accept anything Cuban because of the past, and her Aunt Luz's practical embrace of their heritage. References to Cuban political issues and American involvement are sprinkled within the story. While the point of the read-aloud was not to emphasize Cuba, the infusion of Cuban culture and history in the narrative provides students with images to support further learning.

Speech

Throughout the story, Violet and her friends are involved in forensic (speech) competition. Violet uses what she considers her family's peculiarities—perpetual domino tournaments, a cigar smoking aunt, and a penchant for dancing to Latin music—as material for her debut competing in the "original comedy" event in the school's speech club. The ongoing forensic competition displays an area of extra-curricular involvement not generally in the spotlight. A wise teacher might use this book to motivate student interest in a variety of public speaking forms, expanding beyond the standard five-minute speech.

Historical lessons

History teachers are familiar with the practice of fusing literature selections with their curriculum. *The Diary of Anne Frank*—a predominant choice—has facilitated deeper understanding of the Holocaust for numerous young students. While powerfully moving and understandable for students, it is but one of countless choices available. A recent publication by award-winning author Joseph Bruchac, *The Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War II* (2005b), should also be considered as an aid for the study of this period in history.

Bruchac, of Abenaki ancestry, breathes life into the account of the Navajo Code Talkers. Narrated from the vantage point of a grandfather speaking to his grandchildren, the book encompasses his life from when he was sent as a young boy to a mission boarding school, where speaking the Navajo language was forbidden, to his experiences as a code talker where that same language served his country in Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

While the book can be considered a story of war, Bruchac declares, "I tried very hard to neither glorify war nor demonize the enemy, but to see it all through Indian eyes, which is a very different way of seeing" (Bruchac, 2005a, ¶ 9). More than a tale about World War II, *Code Talker* reveals the history of American Indian children sent away to government boarding schools where

"everything that was Indian was forbidden [and ...] Indian language was a weed to be pulled up by its roots and thrown on the trash heap" (Bruchac, 2005b, p. 220).

Whether this book is used as a stand-alone assignment, or integrated within the curriculum along with other quality choices providing differing perspectives, it is sure to stimulate discussion among readers.

Additional historical suggestions

Run, Boy, Run by Uri Orlev (2003) is a story based on true-life experiences of a young boy in Warsaw during WWII. Alone at eight years old, Srulik escapes the ghetto to find shelter in the countryside. His resolve to survive under the harshest of circumstances makes for a compelling account of bravery and determination. Students will see another perspective of this troubling time period as they witness WWII through Srulik's actions and reflections.

Weedflower by Cynthia Kadohata (2006) offers another view of WWII, this time through the eyes of a young Japanese-American girl and her family. Sent to an internment camp on an Indian reservation in Arizona, 12-year-old Sumiko and her family confront a host of challenges from harsh weather, growing depression, and continued prejudice. By including this selection in students' choices for reading about WWII, teachers provide students with material capable of evoking deeper understanding of the complexity of this period in our history.

Another outstanding choice for investigating historical periods through the eyes of non-mainstream characters is *The Night Journey* by Katheryn Lasky (1981). In this narrative, Rachel, a 13-year-old American girl, persuades her great grandmother to reveal the story of the family's terrifying escape from Czarist Russia to avoid annihilation in a pogrom. A samovar, cookies, and courage are major players in this tale, which alternates between Rachel's perspective and that of her great grandmother's when she was a young girl.

Investigating science

Another pair of books worth considering are linked by their focus on middle school science projects—*Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo* by Greg Leitch Smith (2003) and *Project Mulberry* by Linda Sue Park (2005). Each features the Asian background of one of the characters. Julia's family, in *Project Mulberry*, has Korean heritage, which figures into the story as Julia resists the science project—raising silkworms—her best friend Patrick suggests because it is "too Korean." Shohei, in *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*, is of Japanese ancestry, while his adopted parents are of Irish descent. Throughout the story, Shohei's parents are determined to help him "get in touch with his Japanese heritage" until Shohei responds by helping them "get in touch with their Irish heritage."

The silkworm project involves specifics of each step from hatching the eggs to using the silk

thread for embroidery. Julia and Patrick carefully follow the scientific method in their endeavor to complete the project. Locating a mulberry tree—essential for feeding the silkworms—proves difficult, and the solution generates surprising recognition of prejudice. The science involved is described in detail, providing teachers with an intriguing model. Charting the progress of this project on large sheets of paper to hang in the classroom will serve as a reminder to students of the diligence necessary when conducting scientific experiments.

In *Ninjas, Piranhas, and Galileo*, Shohei and his friend Elias attempt to duplicate an award-winning science project involving measuring the growth of plants in response to a variety of music that one of Elias' brothers completed several years back. When their experiment fails, the question of scientific rigor and honesty are highlighted. Humorously written with several subplots—including an attempt to train piranhas to eat bananas—Smith's narrative is invitingly easy to read.

Once again, I would advise using both books at the middle level. Perhaps reading Park's book sometime before starting a unit on scientific investigation to provide students with images reinforcing the scientific method. Smith's story would be a great read-aloud once students are beginning their own investigations to emphasize the concepts involved in scientific honesty while providing fodder for discussions.

Additional recommended books

I have compiled a short annotated list of high-quality choices appropriate for middle level students (Figure 1), keeping in mind that "too many lists of so-called multicultural books function only as a well-meaning spotlight—shining brightly but briefly on one cultural island or another, providing overdue recognition, yes, but imposing a different kind of isolation, celebratory but still separate (Rochman, 1995, p. 14). In an attempt to counteract the effect of these selections appearing as a random list, I have grouped them into categories according to their teaching potential. I hope that the books on this list become a welcome, regular, and natural part of the curriculum within classrooms.

Figure 1

Additional recommended books

Coping with Cultural Differences
<p>Alvarez, Julia (2001). <i>How Tia Lola Came to Stay</i>. Miguel is struggling to cope with the changes in his young life—his parent's divorce and the move from New York to Vermont—when his quirky aunt from the Dominican Republic arrives for a visit. At first Miguel is embarrassed by her antics and inability to speak English, but he eventually is won over by her audacity and her love.</p>
<p>Jimenez, Francisco (1997). <i>The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child</i>.</p>

A collection of autobiographical short stories that reveal the hardships and desires of a young boy and his family as they travel through the yearly circuit of migrant workers.

Namioka, Lensey (1992). *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear.*

Yangtao, the youngest in his family and the only one without musical talent, experiences feelings of alienation after their move from China to Seattle. When Yang makes friends with a classmate who faces similar family pressure to excel in an area where he has no skill, the scene is set for this humorous and insightful tale about being true to oneself and family acceptance.

Shea, Pegi Deitz (2003). *Tangled Threads.*

Going from a refugee camp in Thailand to Providence, Rhode Island, requires Mia Yang to face many transitions and changes. Mia and her family, while happy to finally be in America together, struggle with the balance between Hmong culture and the expectations of their adopted country.

Predjudice

Carvell, Marlene (2002). *Who Will Tell My Brother?*

Based on a true story, a part-Mohawk high school boy takes on a crusade, begun by his brother, to eliminate the school's Indian mascot. Courage and determination are needed as Evan resolves to see this campaign through regardless of the opposition.

Flake, Sharon (1998). *The Skin I'm In.*

Maleeka, at 13, faces cruelty from classmates as she is teased about her dark skin. The arrival of a new teacher with a white birthmark on her face and a forthright attitude, teaches Maleeka to see beyond the surface of skin.

Gilmore, Rachna (2001). *A Group of One.*

The question of identity becomes central to Tara as she confronts her Indian heritage and her classmates ignorance. Both political and family issues send Tara on a search for truth and identity.

Children's Relationships in the Middle East

Carmi, Daniella (2000). *Samir and Yonatan.*

Samir, a Palestinian boy in an Israeli hospital, is filled with fear and loneliness. Slowly he begins to get to know the Israeli children in the ward with him as they connect through the commonality of tragedy.

Levine, Anna (1999). *Running on Eggs.*

Two young girls, one Jewish and one Arab, living in contemporary Israel, brave the disapproval and condemnation of family, friends, and neighbors as they daringly cross cultural and physical barriers to initiate a tentative friendship.

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Susan M. Landt teaches at St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin. E-mail: landsu@snc.edu

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