Using read-alouds with culturally sensitive children's books: A strategy that can lead to tolerance and improved reading skills

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Using research based reading strategies to enhance students' reading abilities may not be enough to motivate all students to read. To reach students from different backgrounds, it is important for teachers to select children's books that represent various cultures accurately. If students do not read about their cultural groups' contributions or see pictures of people that represent their cultural backgrounds, they will likely feel alienated, and this will hinder their academic performance (Gollnick and Chinn, 2006). Culturally sensitive children's books can also aid students to develop positive cross cultural attitudes because children's books are not just resources to teach reading; they also transmit values, norms, and attitudes (Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005).

Russell (2009) discusses that culturally authentic children's books help both minority and mainstream students and mentions that this kind of literature provides minority cultures with positive role models that lead these students to develop cultural pride. He also states that these books help mainstream students by reducing misunderstandings and stereotypes they have towards minority groups. Hansen-Krening (1992) and Tunnel & Jacobs (2008) express similar ideas relating to the power children's books have in aiding young students to develop tolerance.

Unfortunately, Children's literature has traditionally omitted or misrepresented the experiences of many minority groups (Nieto, 1996; Russell, 2009; Tunnel & Jacobs, 2008). The purpose of this article is to recommend the use of read-alouds along with culturally sensitive children's books. This article explains why this may be necessary in certain cases and why this strategy leads to academic gains.

Culturally Authentic Children's Books

Today, many culturally sensitive children's books are available, but teachers do not always take advantage of such books. Schools and libraries often keep many books containing stereotypical images and outdated information (Yokota, 1999). Furthermore, teachers often mistakenly believe they are making a good choice when selecting children's books that focus on a particular minority group not realizing that the way these books represent that group might be stereotypic (Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Barba, 1992).

It is hard to believe that stereotypical children's books are still published today, but research on books for young readers indicates this still occurs especially towards certain groups like Native Americans (Lindsay, 2003; Roberts et al., 2005). One reason this happens is because some writers do not keep up with the latest research (Roberts et al., 2005). Many children's books on Native Americans do not show a specific tribe in the illustrations but mix aspects of different tribes together (Reese, 1999; Roberts et al., 2005). Reese (1999) discusses an example of an illustration showing a totem pole made by the Northwest Indians next to a tipi used by the Plains Indians. These kinds of illustrations do not reflect the great diversity among Native American people and lead young children to develop erroneous and stereotypical ideas towards Native Americans. Authentic children's books on Native Americans include those that portray American Indians participating in ordinary tasks of living in a modern setting with accurate facts about each tribe (Roberts et...
Reading is a visual and cognitive process to extract meaning from writing by understanding the written text, processing information, and relating it to existing experience. Reading can be text driven (the text is interesting), task driven (the text is read because of the academic task that the learner faces) and purpose driven (the text is a step towards a purpose, which is outside reading). The process of reading is characterised with reading dynamics i.e. the progress of reading in time. Extensive reading means reading longer texts, usually for your own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding. It aims at developing speed of reading and guessing strategies. Intensive reading means reading shorter texts in order to extract specific information and to examine language, i.e. to work out the grammar of a particular sentence, to look for all the words related to a topic, etc. This is more an accuracy activity, aimed at accurate understanding of the text. At other times they may read articles, brochures, story books, etc. that are what a first language speaker would read. This is called authentic material. Such materials are more varied and richer in language, and consequently they might be too difficult for language learners.