

Achieving Multicultural Goals Through Children's Nonfiction

Marsha K. Savage
Tom V. Savage

Introduction

The advantages of using children's literature to achieve important educational goals have long been recognized. Well-written children's books can capture

Marsha K. Savage, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Education at California Baptist College in Riverside, California.

Tom V. Savage, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education at California State University, Fullerton in Fullerton, California.

student interest and motivation much better than textbooks (Norton, 1994). In addition, children's books are often written in a narrative format appealing to students who come from cultural backgrounds where narration and storytelling are common.

Typically, the type of literature recommended for this purpose is fiction. While a number of excellent fiction books can be used in the classroom, nonfiction is often overlooked because of the perception that it tends to be less interesting and motivating than fiction. In fact, since the inception in 1922 of the Newberry Award for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature, only four awards have been presented to authors of nonfiction. The same pattern seems to hold true for other awards such as the Boston-Globe Horn Book Award or the National Book Award (Meltzer, 1994b). Why? Fisher (1972) contends that a part of the problem is that writers of nonfiction for children are not viewed in the same light as authors of junior novels, and their works are considered as more "information books" than creative works. A children's book editor of the *New York Times* dismissed nonfiction works as "non-books" (Meltzer, 1994b). It appears that many judges of book awards for children do not believe that nonfiction books can have any literary merit (Meltzer, 1994b, p. 28). Meltzer (1994a) reacts to the charge that a nonfiction book is simply an information book by asking the question, "Information about what?" He points out that young readers need to be informed not only about how trucks run and how weather is formed, but on how character is shaped, how handicaps are overcome, and how the world works (p. 19). He also points out that "imagination, invention, selection, language, form... are just as important to the making of a good book of biography, history, or science as to the making of a piece of fiction" (Meltzer, 1994b, p. 25). Well written nonfiction books can be as captivating and engaging as fiction books and have some important advantages.

Nonfiction has the capacity to "raise questions in the minds of young readers. Teach them not so much facts and dates or formulas but the art and necessity of asking questions" (Meltzer, 1994a, p. 22). Whether it is a story of the Civil War or a moving biography of someone who met with critical acclaim, quality nonfiction encourages young people to think — and to inquire. Consequently, students begin to relate to the accounts and the people in a personal way. These are not contrived stories, they really happened. This focus on reality helps establish a record of the experiences of a particular group (Pugh & Garcia, 1990). Reading stories of real people helps students develop an understanding of the values, the perspectives, and the frames of references of individuals from a variety of cultures. Reading about real people and events can help students develop a sense of pride and provide them with some parameters for thinking

about their values and sense of purpose.

Another advantage is that nonfiction books provide a sense of identity or rootedness for readers by recounting the ethnic histories and accomplishments of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans as well as other cultural groups.

Several categories of nonfiction books should be considered for classroom use. One category is biographies and autobiographies which celebrate the lives of people who have overcome barriers and made important contributions. While some of these might be about famous individuals who are generally well known, such as Cesar Chavez or Martin Luther King, Jr., at least as valuable are the stories of those common or less known individuals who have not been considered important enough to be mentioned in mainstream textbooks. Many of these stories provide examples that are closer to the lives of the students in our classrooms and provide valuable insight into the culture of which they are a part.

For example, Elsie Kreischers' *Maria Montoya Martinez: Master Potter* (1995), published by Pelican Publishing Company, is an engaging account of the struggles of a sick little girl, born on an Indian reservation, who grew to become an award winning potter. Similarly, William Loren Katz's *Black Women of the Old West* (1995), published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, tells the often ignored stories of African American women who challenged bigotry and prejudice and helped transform the West as school teachers, poets, nurses, cowgirls, and business owners.

Another category of nonfiction literature is those books that provide glimpses and insight into other cultures. Examples include George Ancona's *Fiesta U.S.A.* (1995) published by Lodestar Books and Peggy Thompson's *Katie Henio: Navajo Shepherd* (1995) published by Cobblehill Books. Ancona's book contains beautiful photographs and stories of the celebrations of Spanish-speaking people in the United States. Thompson's engaging book includes photographs and accounts of people and their lives on the Navajo Reservation.

A third type of nonfiction book that can be especially valuable in the classroom is one that portrays children living in different cultural settings. These books help children relate their lives to the main character in the book. They can also help students develop a sense of identity and self-esteem, achieve academic success, and develop proficiency in English (Savage, 1990). Examples of these books include the beautifully illustrated *Konnichiwa: I am a Japanese-American Girl* (1995) by Tricia Brown, published by Henry Holt; Monty Roessel's *Songs From the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave* (1995), published by Lerner Publications; and Kathleen Krull's *The Other Side: How Kids Live in a California Latino Neighborhood* (1994), published by Lodestar Books. These

books illustrate the great potential of nonfiction books as powerful tools in accomplishing important multicultural education goals.

As noted earlier, the lack of recognition accorded to nonfiction children's books can make the identification of quality nonfiction books problematic. There is, however, one award given annually to multicultural nonfiction children's literature: The Carter G. Woodson Award, sponsored by the National Council for the Social Studies, honors Carter G. Woodson, a prominent African American educator and historian. In addition to his own writing and publishing, Woodson originated Negro History Week in 1926. Each year the committee solicits participation from over 150 publishing houses for nonfiction books that deal with minority, ethnic, and multicultural themes. These books are systematically reviewed, and those books that treat minority and ethnic groups accurately and sensitively are recognized. A secondary and an elementary book are selected to receive the annual award. Other especially worthwhile books receive merit awards (Savage, 1995).

Selecting Nonfiction Books

Just selecting nonfiction books that discuss a variety of multicultural topics is not enough. Teachers must plan carefully to make sure that powerful ideas are developed and misconceptions avoided. Simply reading a book is not enough, either. For example, students who read about people different from themselves may develop the perception that the people about whom they are reading are "strange" or "funny." Careful guidance from a knowledgeable teacher can assist them in understanding the concepts and the people (Savage & Savage, 1994).

Initially, the teacher must consider how the book relates to important multicultural goals. Some literature might focus on what Banks (1994) calls the contributions approach, where the focus is heroes, heroines, holidays, and discrete cultural elements, or the additive approach which does not change the curriculum in depth. The additive approach might extend a unit or add concepts without changing structure. Ultimately, however, teachers should include books that deal with what Banks calls the transformation approach. This approach is much more time-consuming and requires significant reflection because it changes the structure of the curriculum to "enable students the opportunity to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups" (p. 25).

Another important step when using literature is to identify the important concepts that might be useful for studying the experiences of people from

different cultures. Identifying these concepts provides a foundation for selecting books that will then allow the students to develop more than a superficial understanding of a cultural group (Banks, 1994). Some concepts that can be used include: shared culture, values, and symbols; ethnic identity and a sense of peoplehood; perspectives, world views, and frames of reference; ethnic institutions and self-determination; assimilation and acculturation.

One way that these concepts can be used in the classroom is by providing questions as advance organizers for students when they read a book. These questions might include:

- What is most important to the people in the book?
- How do people in this book relate to each other?
- How do the people help each other?
- What makes the people in the book proud?
- How do the people in the book view the world around them?
- How do they relate to other people who are from different groups?
- What can you find in the book to indicate that the people have changed to be more like other cultures who live near them?
- What can you find that indicates that the people in the book are trying to keep some parts of their traditional way of living?

When students have addressed some of these questions, they can then compare what they found with classmates' observations and compare the characters in the books with themselves. As they read additional books dealing with a particular cultural group, they can continue to refine and expand their understandings of the concepts. In addition, they can compare cultural groups. They can compare the values and the symbols of different cultures, consider how they are trying to preserve a sense of ethnic identity, and how they are adapting to the world around them (Savage & Savage, 1993).

Examples of Nonfiction Books

The following are reviews of some of the past winners and merit books that have received the Carter G. Woodson Award. Each review includes suggestions for including some of the concepts suggested by Banks. Many of the award-winning books are now translated into several languages providing the bilingual teacher with a variety of options for using them with all students.

Levine, Ellen (1995). *A Fence Away From Freedom*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. Level: Secondary.

This book which won the 1995 Woodson Award in the secondary category, tells the story of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. It helps the reader view an event from a variety of perspectives as it tells the stories of the internment through the voices of young children. Each chapter of the book is composed of a series of short stories told by young people who were sent to the internment camps. The chapters include: The Years before Pearl Harbor, Life in the Camps, Homeless Children, Japanese Peruvians in the U.S. Camps, and Life Outside the Camp. The voices speak with humor as well as with pain and tell of hateful discrimination as well as courage. Because these are the voices of young people, the book is accessible to the young people in our classrooms. Comparing the different accounts of these participants can help readers learn that there are multiple perspectives to any event. Viewing an event from those perspectives is important in arriving at a more complete understanding.

Lyons, Mary. (1993). *Starting Home: The Story of Horace Pippin, Painter*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. Level: Upper Elementary.

This 1994 award-winning book in the elementary category is one of a series of books written by Mary Lyons dealing with the topic of African American artists and artisans. It fits into the category of a biography about a generally unknown person who has not been mentioned in textbooks.

This book presents the fascinating story of Horace Pippin, a self-taught painter. Pippin was born in 1888 and exhibited a talent for drawing relatively early in his life. A fascinating aspect of the book tells of Pippin's experiences as a soldier in World War I. He was shot in his right shoulder and lost the ability to use his right arm. For 11 years Pippin was unable to draw or paint. How he overcame this handicap and was finally recognized as a painter is a captivating story that holds readers' interest. The book includes a number of color photographs of his paintings. In addition to learning about Pippin and his life, readers gain insight into issues of prejudice, African American culture, and American history. The element of Pippin's injury adds an additional opportunity to examine how courage and persistence can assist individuals in overcoming a disability.

Several of the concepts identified by Banks can be explored using the story of Horace Pippin. Ethnic identity is easily explored through the themes of many of the pictures that Horace painted. They include paintings of African American families in their homes, men harmonizing on the street corner, and other scenes depicting aspects of African American life.

The concepts of prejudice and racism are prominent in the story. Horace was placed in an all-Black regiment for his service in World War I. The training of

the regiment was cut short because of tension created in South Carolina where the regiment trained. One of the paintings displayed in the book, entitled "Mr. Prejudice," provides an excellent opportunity for discussion of issues of racism and prejudice.

Haskins, James. (1993). *The March on Washington*. New York: Harper Collins. Level: Secondary.

James Haskins has painted a vivid picture of one of the most significant events in the history of our nation — the March on Washington of August 28, 1963. Although the March on Washington is mentioned in most history books, Haskins provides a glimpse of this event through a perspective different from that normally found in textbooks. He presents it with passion and a dramatic flair that make readers feel as if they are there.

His story begins in the early days of the civil rights movement with people like Asa Philip Randolph, who had the dream for this march many years before it actually commenced. As the dream unfolds, Haskins introduces each of the major characters who contributed to the success of the event. As August 28 approaches, Haskins takes us inside the minds of those traveling to Washington, and we learn why the trip was so important to them. The climax of this drama is the final speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Surprising to many readers is that much of his speech was extemporaneous.

Haskins' book offers a chance to experience vicariously a signal event in the history of the civil rights movement. In this book which reads more like fiction than nonfiction, readers can trace not only the events but the lives of individuals who were instrumental in shaping American history.

This book is an excellent source for exploring a number of the concepts identified by Banks. Racism, prejudice, ethnic identity, and ethnic institutions play a prominent role. The topic of intraethnic diversity can also be explored by identifying the differences between key groups and leaders in the March on Washington. This book offers a good opportunity to deal with the concepts of knowledge construction and revolution since The March on Washington was a major revolutionary event in the history of civil rights in America. Students can look at the March on Washington from different perspectives and can be challenged to construct their own interpretation of this momentous event.

Echo-Hawk, Roger and Walter Echo-Hawk (1994). *Battlefield and Burial Grounds: The Indian Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company. Level: Secondary.

This book, a Woodson Merit book in 1995, helps students learn to view events

from multiple perspectives. One perspective is that of the Native Americans and their rights, and the other is the research perspective of anthropologists and museums. This book deals with the efforts of the Pawnee Tribe to reclaim the remains of their ancestors.

This book is especially useful for dealing with the relationships between different groups and how there is often a double standard applied to minority groups. The book also provides insight into another culture as it discusses the culture of the Pawnee and their burial practices.

Concepts of racism and prejudice are apparent in this book as it includes the work of earlier anthropologists who used skull measurements to provide evidence of the inferiority of Native Americans and Blacks. These earlier "scientific findings" can be compared to more contemporary efforts aimed at providing the superiority of one group over others.

Klausner, Janet. (1993). *Sequoyah's Gift*. New York: Harper Collins. Level: Secondary.

This 1994 merit award winner of the Woodson award is a well-written biography of the great Cherokee leader. Although Sequoyah is a name frequently mentioned in American history textbooks, this account provides great insight into his life.

Several dimensions of his life provide a basis for classroom discussion. One deals with his devotion to reading and writing. Sequoyah exhorted everyone to learn to read and to teach another in return. Another theme that can be discussed is how Sequoyah overcame hardship, deprivation, and physical handicap to make an important contribution. The issues of racism and injustice are easily discussed in the context of the removal of the Cherokees from their eastern lands on the infamous "Trail of Tears."

Codye, Corinn. (1990). *Vilma Martinez*. Milwaukee: Raintree Publishers. Level: Elementary.

This merit-award winner is the inspirational story of an Hispanic woman who was schooled in Texas in an environment that typically trained Hispanics for low-paying jobs. She overcame the prejudice, completed college in two and one-half years, and earned a law degree from Columbia Law School. This degree allowed her the opportunity to fight those who have discriminated against minorities. This book, written in both English and Spanish, chronicles the life of a woman who eventually became the lawyer for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. It is more than just her story, however. *Vilma Martinez* is inspirational for anyone who has faced prejudice

and adversity.

In addition to being a powerful resource for discussing the concepts of prejudice and racism, this book is useful for exploring the concepts of political and economic status. Readers can see how the economic status of a group is often reinforced by the majority culture. This story provides readers with insight into how political power can be used to change the economic and educational status of groups.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane (1992). *Hoang Anh: A Vietnamese-American Boy*. Holiday House. Level: Elementary.

This merit book uses excellent photography by Lawrence Migdale and well-written text to tell the story of Hoang Anh who immigrated to the United States about twelve years ago. This story of a young Vietnamese refugee is an excellent tool to help children and adults understand the experiences encountered by young children as they leave their home country to start fresh in a new country.

Concepts that can be discussed after reading this book include those of acculturation and assimilation. Readers can see how individuals from other cultures face pressures to adopt the language and the values of the dominant culture. This leads to cultural conflicts as the children grow up torn between two sets of cultural expectations. This book is also useful in helping individuals understand the frames of references and the perspectives of different cultural groups.

Jenness, Aylette and Alice Rivers. (1989). *In Two Worlds: A Yup'ik Eskimo Family*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. Level: Elementary.

As technology forces itself into Scammon Bay, Alaska, Alice Rivers is torn between the family structure to which she is accustomed and the lure of an easier life. Jenness, an ethnographer, has provided a poignant glimpse inside a culture often overlooked — the American Eskimo. As teachers and students research and study the various cultural groups within the United States, they should not omit this excellent resource.

This is an especially powerful book for dealing with the issues of acculturation and assimilation. Too often, groups of individuals lose their culture and sense of identity as they interact with the dominant culture. Readers are challenged to consider how the ethnic identity of a culture can be preserved.

Summary

Nonfiction is often overlooked when using children's literature to explore important multicultural concepts. However, it is a powerful tool because real people and real events often stimulate students to question and to think in a way fictitious characters cannot. Fortunately, quality nonfiction literature is increasingly more available for students at both the elementary and secondary levels. Teachers are encouraged to search for books that will be appropriate for their classrooms.

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Appendix I — Carter G. Woodson Award Winners

- 1974 *Rosa Parks* by Eloise Greenfield (Crowell)
- 1975 *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord. - The Life of Mahalia Jackson, Queen of the Gospel Singers* by Jesse Jackson (Crowell)
- 1976 *Dragonwings* by Laurence Yep (Crowell) - fiction
- 1977 *The Trouble They Seen* by Dorothy Sterling (Doubleday)
- 1978 *The Biography of Daniel Inouye* by Jan Goodsell (Crowell)
- 1979 *Native American Testimony: An Anthology of Indian and White Relations* edited by Peter Nabokov (Crowell)
- 1980 *War Cry on a Prayer Feather: Prose and Poetry of the Ute* by Nancy Wood (Doubleday)
- 1981 *The Chinese Americans* by Milton Meltzer (Crowell)
- 1982 *Coming to North America from Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico* by Susan Carver and Paula McGuire (Delacorte Press)
- 1983 *Morning Star, Black Sun* by Brent Ashabranner (Dodd Mead)
- 1984 *Mexico and the United States* by E. B. Fincher (Crowell)
- 1985 *To Live in Two Worlds - American Indian Youth Today* by Brent Ashabranner (Dodd, Mead and Company)
- 1986 *Dark Harvest: Migrant Farmworkers in America* by Brent Ashabranner (Dodd, Mead)
- 1987 *Happy May I Walk* by Arlene Hirschfelder (Charles Scribner's Sons)
- 1988 *Black Music in America: A History Through Its People* by James Haskins (Harper and Row)
- 1989 ELEMENTARY: *Walking the Road to Freedom* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books, Inc.)
SECONDARY: *Marian Anderson* by Charles Patterson (Franklin Watts)
- 1990 ELEMENTARY: *In Two Worlds: A Yup'ik Eskimo Family* by Aylette Jenness and Alice Rivers (Houghton Mifflin Co.)
SECONDARY: *Paul Robeson* by Rebecca Larsen (Franklin Watts)
- 1991 ELEMENTARY: *Shirley Chisolm* by Catherine Scheader (Enslow Publishing)
SECONDARY: *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston* by Mary Lyons (Scribner's Books for Young Readers/Macmillan Publishing Co.)
- 1992 ELEMENTARY: *The Last Princess: The Story of Princess Ka'iolani*

- of Hawaii* by Fay Stanley, illustrations by Diane Stanley (Macmillan Publishing Company)
SECONDARY: *Native American Doctor: The Story of Susan LaFlesche Picotte* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books, Inc.)
- 1993 ELEMENTARY: *Madam C. J. Walker* by Patricia and Frederick McKissack (Enslow Publishers)
SECONDARY: *Mississippi Challenge* by Mildred Pitts Walter (Bradbury Press)
- 1994 ELEMENTARY: *Starting Home: The Story of Horace Pippin, Painter* by Mary Lyons (Charles Scribner's Sons)
SECONDARY: *The March on Washington* by James Haskins (HarperCollins Publishers)
- 1995 ELEMENTARY: *What I Had Was Singing: The Story of Marian Anderson* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books)
SECONDARY: *Till Victory is Won: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* by Zak Mettger (Lodestar Books)
- 1996 ELEMENTARY: *Songs from the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave* by Monty Roessel (Lerner Publications Company)
SECONDARY: *A Fence Away From Freedom: Japanese Americans and World War II* by Ellen Levine (G. P. Putnam's Sons)