

A Mirror, a Window: Assisting Teachers in Selecting Appropriate Multicultural Young Adult Literature

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The purpose of this article is to describe a rubric created to assist teachers in selecting multicultural, young adult literature for use in their classrooms. Too often, teachers use the same texts year after year and are afraid of delving into the rich canon of multicultural literature offered because they are not sure how or what to select. This rubric assists teachers and students in choosing texts that respect the authority of the author and the culture they are depicting.

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As a reading teacher, I started each class with 10 to 15 minutes of silent reading and another 10 minutes of read aloud. My team teacher and I chose our read aloud books because they dealt with issues of literacy; *Just Juice* by Karen Hesse (1999) and *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli (1999) are two examples of books we read out loud to our students. These books were met with varying degrees of success. Interest wavered on a daily basis. However, when my team teacher brought in *Summer on Wheels* by Gary Soto (1999), several dynamics changed during read aloud. We did not choose this book for its literacy themes; we chose it because it was set in East Los Angeles, and it followed the journey of two Hispanic adolescents. We taught in East Los Angeles and most of our students were Hispanic. Read aloud suddenly became everyone's favorite time. Students' body language changed from disinterested slumps and spaced-out gazes to straight backs and full eye contact. Each time I closed the book to signal the end of read aloud, I was greeted with a chorus of protests. One student put it perfectly when he said to me, "Miss, this book is me! It's like a mirror of my life. Those kids, the descriptions of the rich cousin, the poor cousin, the crazy parents, they could be mine!"

This "aha" moment in my classroom in East Los Angeles seven years ago personifies the excitement students feel when they find a text that reflects who they are. It is a mirror for their life, and it is validating. My students in East Los Angeles soon began to search for books that acted as a mirror and began to explore books that depicted other cultures, looking for a safe window from which

to learn about others (Glazier & Seo, 2005). It was then that I became concerned for the quality of books they might find. Not wishing to censor their choices, I taught them to evaluate multicultural literature by looking for certain attributes that made books exemplary specimens for reading.

How can we evaluate literature so it can be that “mirror” for our multicultural students? What criteria can we use to ensure that the literature they are exposed to is of an authentic voice? For this article, a literature review was conducted on how to critique and select multicultural, young adult literature. These criteria were then combined to create a system to rate this type of literature for validity by both students and teachers. After the creation of this system, a selection of multicultural, young adult novels were read and rated against the rubric to see how they measured up.

Rationale

I am conducting this review in order to assist teachers and students who might be hesitant in choosing multicultural literature to use in their classrooms and in their own personal reading. Teachers often teach what is “familiar and safe—what they themselves were taught” (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006, p. 484). By creating a system of evaluation for this type of literature, I hope to ease them into the use and enjoyment of it. “Multicultural literature is important because it provides role models for children, and it is a way for children to expand their horizons” (Willett, 1995, p. 175). However, students are not always aware of the negative stereotypes perpetuated in the books they read (Willett, 1995). If a simple rubric can help them and their teachers identify the types of literature that do not perpetuate these stereotypes, then perhaps both students and teachers would begin to learn about and respect the different cultures that surround them. Multicultural literature can assist in easing the tension of wanting to find oneself personally in literature and can provide a safe place to stretch one’s own knowledge of other cultures (Athanasios, 2006). Sonia Nieto states that multicultural education is for all students (Nieto, 1992). So is multicultural literature (Bishop, 1997).

Authority and Authenticity

To begin this study of critiquing and selecting multicultural literature, an operational definition of the phrase will be helpful. The phrase *multicultural literature* can have many meanings; for the purpose of this study, it means a body of materials that “recognize, accept, and affirm human differences and similarities related to gender, race, handicap, and class” (Sleeter & Grant, 1988, p. 137). In addition, multicultural literature “emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society (Madigan, 1993, p. 169).

So where does one start when determining a selection process for multicultural literature? I chose to focus on two key aspects related in several

pieces of literature: authority and authenticity (Athanases, 2006; Bishop, 1993; Bishop, 1997; Cai, 2002; Gay, 2000; Johnson & Smith, 1993; Louie, 2006; Nilsson, 2005).

Authority

Authority in literature relates to the author of the novel (Bishop, 1997). When relating authority to the author, we are bringing up a crucial argument in multicultural literature: Can a person who is not of a certain group accurately portray that group in writing? Bishop (1997) states:

Given the history of race relations in this country, people who see themselves as members of oppressed groups are not always willing to trust people whom they identify as members of the oppressing group to tell their stories, particularly in light of a history of stereotyping, distortions, and patronizing of such groups in literature for children. (p. 16)

When defining African American children's literature, Johnson (1990) states that it is literature written by African Americans that hopes to "represent, interpret, and envision the lives, real and imagined, of African American people" (p. 3). Using both Bishop and Johnson's definitions of authority, one would believe that in order for an author to properly demonstrate authority, the author must be of the race or ethnic group he or she is writing about. Although Cai (2002) does state that "an author can write about a different culture and create a 'second self' that shares the perspective of the people from that culture," he later asserts that reader response theory believes that an author's cultural identity and perspective are highly relevant in regards to multicultural literature.

Johnson and Smith (1993) are the driving force behind a campaign for multicultural literature called Project Equal. When choosing literature to add to their program, they also consider authority to be an important factor. They generally select authors from the racial and cultural backgrounds and communities they depict because they feel that the stories told from an "insider's perspective" (p. 48) are able to more accurately reflect everyday life in that community. Authors coming from the perspective of whom they are writing about are able to place the reader inside the action, viewing events through the characters' eye (Nilsson, 2005).

On the other hand, Paula Fox (1991), a prominent young adult author, brings a dissenting view to the table. As a writer of historical fiction, including those that discuss issues of African Americans as slaves, she feels that she is able to "transcend [her] background and use [her] imagination to realistically portray a character with very different life experiences from [her] own" (p. 553). So can an author not belonging to a culture that he or she is writing about claim proper authority? Cai (2002), Bishop (1997), Hinton (2006) and Johnson & Smith (1993) say that it is possible.

Is it *discriminating* to state that an author is unable to write outside of his or her own background? After reviewing the research, one can reasonably state that authority should be given to an author who has engaged in research in order to present an accurate portrayal of the culture (Louie, 2006). Hinton (2006) has pre-service teachers look at both the positives and negatives of taking an insider or outsider stance in multicultural writing. It is her desire not to influence her students' opinions on the subject, but to let the authority of the author be simply one part in the overall evaluation of the book. This is a good strategy in evaluating multicultural literature.

Authenticity

Authenticity is another criterion to use in judging multicultural literature to ensure its validity for both students and teachers. Just like authority, it is also a controversial subject, especially when looked at in context of cultural authenticity, as most critics do. Cultural authenticity is the ability of the author to portray characters, setting, themes, and more, in an accurate light (Louie, 2006; Nilsson, 2005). Authority and authenticity are then intrinsically linked because without the ability of the author to accurately portray the story, stereotypes, distortions, and biases will appear. Cultural authenticity is a reflection of a political concern about who controls the way non-majority cultures are represented in books for children and young adults (Bishop, 1993). Bishop gives a compelling view as to why cultural authenticity is so important:

If literature is a mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read or are read to need to see themselves as part of humanity. If they are not, or if their reflections are distorted and ridiculous, there is the danger that they will absorb negative messages about themselves and people like them. Those who see only themselves or who are exposed to errors and misrepresentations are miseducated into a false sense of superiority, then the harm is doubly done. (p. 43)

The key criteria for teachers and students to have when assessing a book for cultural authenticity is information about the culture being depicted (Bishop, 1993; Louie, 2006; Nilsson, 2005; Willett, 1995). If students and teachers are able to distinguish between stereotypes and realistic portrayals of minority groups, they are already more than halfway to becoming adept critics of multicultural literature. However, "becoming informed" (Bishop, 1993) is an entirely different issue, and other authors do give different criteria to use when evaluating a piece of multicultural literature for cultural authenticity.

To determine the authenticity of a multicultural story, users should consider five elements of the story: characterization, citations and acknowledgments, setting, style, and theme.

Characterization

Characterization is one factor to consider when looking into cultural authenticity (Johnson & Smith, 1993). How believable are the characters? Do they grow and change naturally as a result of events in the story? Do the characterizations show depth, or are they one-dimensional portraits that border on caricature? Johnson and Smith (1993) argue that “Characters who lack depth and believability often reinforce societal stereotypes and provide students with inaccurate or incomplete pictures of a particular racial or cultural community” (p. 49).

Gail Willett (1995) writes her experience of trying to find books for her children that portrayed her culture (African American) correctly. Instead, she only found books where her culture was portrayed as little girls with hair sticking up in braids. She suggests looking at the descriptions of character’s skin color, character’s names, and the way in which characters address each other as a way to determine if the book is culturally authentic.

Citation and Acknowledgement

Joseph Bruchac (2000) also gives some innovative ways in which readers can assess the cultural authenticity of a novel. He suggests looking at both source citations and acknowledgements made by the author. He believes that if citations are not “clear and detailed” (p. 29) then the reader should be suspicious because all authors, whether from the culture being described or not, have to do some sort of research when writing a novel, especially historical fiction. He also suggests questioning the authenticity of a book that is termed as an “African story” (p. 29). If the story is generic in its cultural leanings and not tied to a specific tribe or region, the reader should also be wary.

Setting

Another factor to consider when evaluating a book for cultural authenticity is setting (Johnson & Smith, 1993; Nilsson, 2005). The setting of a novel can be both the geographical location and the time in which the story takes place. In a multicultural novel, the setting should seem natural to the culture being portrayed. However, when judging if a setting is natural, one should also consider if it is “typical” or “new” (Gay, 2002, p. 119). Many times a Mexican American family is presented only as being at a fiesta, with the women in the story wearing swirling, colorful skirts. Any generic setting used over and over again can be demeaning to the culture being depicted. “New” settings in novels would present the culture in a universal fashion.

Style

A reader can also determine cultural authenticity by judging the style in which a book was written (Johnson & Smith, 1993). The style of writing should try to approximate the language and idioms of the culture being presented without making an exaggeration of it. The style in which it is written should be accessible to readers from the cultural tradition depicted without barring other readers who may be unfamiliar with the verbal interactions (Johnson & Smith, 1993). Walter Dean Myers, a young adult literature author, is an excellent example of a multicultural author who has been able to capture the richness of the dialogue of African Americans that is easily communicated to both African American adolescents and other adolescents alike.

Themes

The last way in which multicultural literature can be evaluated for cultural authenticity is by judging the themes presented in the novel. Gay's (2002) argument about "typical" and "new" presentation of multicultural societies is relevant here as well. A "typical" theme of an Asian American novel is that of the super-achieving Asian child, just as a typical theme for a Mexican American novel is the fiesta. Authors need to apply universal themes, such as relationships, individuality, and family to all cultures in order to move away from the stereotypes so often presented in the theme of a story (Gay, 2002; Nilsson, 2005). Multiple dimensions of all cultures should be presented objectively, without bias. There is not one particular experience that is so universal to a cultural group that it is a defining image (Temple, et al., 2002).

Evaluation System

I set out to create a rubric that teachers and students could use to evaluate multicultural literature for both authority and authenticity, as shown in Table 1. The catch with this system is that the person must read the book in order to properly evaluate it. Just because a book does not pass the authority test (meaning that it was written by a person from the culture that is being depicted) does not necessarily mean that it is not a good example of multicultural literature in other ways. The book must also be evaluated for its authenticity through characterization, citations or acknowledgements, setting, style and themes. However, by reading the book and evaluating it based on these criteria, the reader will be able to pass his or her judgment on the book and pass his or her opinion on to others. The rubric was created to evaluate multicultural fiction books only. It is my belief that nonfiction books that describe cultures would need to be evaluated with a different set of criteria.

A struggle existed when it came time to set the authority category. However, when creating the rubric and showing it to educators and academics, almost all felt that making authority an “all or nothing” category (where the author must be from the cultural being depicted to receive full points) was too strict. Several respected authorities on the subject are able to give exemplary multicultural titles where the author was not from the culture being written about (Bishop, 1997; Cai, 2002; Hinton, 2006). Therefore, a middle category was formed to allow all authors access, so long as they present accurate depictions of the culture they are writing about.

I split cultural authenticity into the several factors that contribute to it. Characterization is ideal when characters are described as deep and show growth naturally and without exaggeration in relation to their culture. (Willett’s example of African American literature showing a little African American girl with braids sticking up all over head comes to mind here). A mediocre multicultural novel would have a few biases and stereotypes in its characters, while a poor multicultural novel would contain glaring instances of stereotyping and cultural distortions.

Citations and acknowledgments could easily have been another “all or nothing” criterion, but I chose to make it threefold in order for readers to keep in mind three types of multicultural novels: ideal, mediocre, and poor. In an ideal multicultural novel, the author would cite or acknowledge multiple works or people who contributed to the make-up of the book. A mediocre novel would only cite or acknowledge a few contributions, while a poor novel would contain no citations or acknowledgements by the author in relation to the creation of the book.

The setting of an ideal multicultural novel would be presented in a natural fashion without the use of stereotypes to describe it. An ideal novel would also present the culture in a universal setting, as opposed to the “stereotypical” setting that Gay (2002) mentions. A mediocre multicultural novel would relate the setting using a few stereotypes although the setting is in keeping with the content of the book. It is possible in a mediocre novel for the setting to be “typical” to the culture. A poor book would present the setting using overt stereotypes. The culture portrayed would be in an unnatural or “typical” setting.

The style in which a book is written is very telling of the type of multicultural book it is. If a book is ideal, then the style of dialogue discourse is natural to the culture presented, and the content is understood both by the readers who are of the culture portrayed and by other readers outside the culture. A mediocre novel would contain dialogue and discourse that could be out of sync with the culture portrayed, either by presenting stereotypes or in a way that is unnatural to the people in the book. The content of the book may be misinterpreted by readers who are of the culture presented or other readers. A poor novel would have dialogue and discourse that show explicit stereotypes or

are completely unnatural to the culture presented. The material presented is hurtful to the readers who are of the culture presented and is misunderstood by other readers.

Criteria	3	2	1
I. Authority			
	Novel is written by a person from the culture being depicted.	Novel is not written by a person from the culture being depicted but cultural accuracy is demonstrated across the book.	Novel is not written by a person from the culture being depicted and several cultural inaccuracies are found throughout the book.
2. Cultural Authenticity			
Characterization	Characters are believable, grow naturally, and show depth. Characters are described without exaggeration in relation to their culture.	Characters are somewhat believable but depth is questionable. Characters are described with a few stereotypes or biases.	Characters are portrayed as caricatures of the culture being presented. Characters are described with several stereotypes or biases.
Citations or Acknowledgments	Author cites or acknowledges multiple works or people that contributed to his or her own knowledge for the writing of the book.	Author cites or acknowledges few works or people that contributed to his or her own knowledge for the writing of the book.	Author does not cite or acknowledge any works or people in relation to the creation of the book.
Setting	Setting is natural in relation to the content of the book and described without using stereotypes. Setting is universal instead of "typical" to the culture.	Setting is related using few stereotypes. Setting is in keeping with the content of the book. Setting could be "typical" to the culture presented.	Setting is related using overt stereotypes. Setting is unnatural in relation to the content. Setting is "typical" to the culture presented.
Style	Dialogue and discourse of book are natural to the culture presented. Content is easily understood by both members of the culture portrayed and other readers.	Dialogue and discourse are slightly out of sync with the culture presented through some stereotypes. Content may be misinterpreted by the members of the culture portrayed and/or other readers.	Dialogue and discourse present overt stereotypes of the culture presented. Content is harmful to the members of the culture portrayed and/or misunderstood by other readers.
Theme	The theme is universal to all cultures and applied correctly to the culture portrayed.	The theme may be "stereotypical" of the culture presented or may not be applied correctly.	The theme is "stereotypical" of the culture presented and/or is applied in a hurtful way to the culture portrayed.

Table 1. The multicultural literature rubric

The theme of a book can demonstrate the type of care an author took in presenting a culture. If the themes used are universal and applied in a correct manner to the culture, that novel is most likely ideal. If the themes used are “typical” to the culture or applied in an odd way, that novel is most likely mediocre. And if the themes used are “typical” to the culture and applied in a harmful way, the novel is most likely a poor multicultural one.

After a book was scored using the six criteria given in the rubric, the reader would tabulate the score on a sheet that could look something like this presented in Table 2.

Criteria	Score
Authority	
Authenticity—Characterization	
Authenticity—Citations and Acknowledgments	
Authenticity—Setting	
Authenticity—Style	
Authenticity—Theme	
Total score	

Table 2. Tabulation sheet for the multicultural literature rubric

Note the absence of scoring criteria for the multicultural rubric. Rather than setting limits for the scoring (e.g., 15-18 is excellent, and so on), I have intentionally left this up to the readers to decide for themselves how to label books. The rubric simply presents a starting point for conversations about multicultural literature that both teachers and students can engage in, allowing the text to become “central to a conversation across cultures” (Glazier & Seo, 2005).

Application

To see if this system would work, I chose three multicultural, young adult novels to evaluate using my rubric. I decided to evaluate *Summer on Wheels* (Soto, 1999) (Table 3), the book I mentioned at the beginning of the paper to see if my students’ enthusiasm for the book matched the criteria I created to evaluate it. I also evaluated *The Joy Luck Club* (Table 4) by Amy Tan (1990) to get a popular, widely used classroom book perspective on the rubric. I finished with *Homeless Bird*, by Gloria Whelan (2001), a recent addition to the multicultural, young adult literature canon (Table 5).

Summer on Wheels seems to be an ideal multicultural book. It received a 3 in authority because Gary Soto is Hispanic, just like the boys he writes about in the book. It received a 3 in characterization because the characters are very believable, grow during the book, and show depth. Soto definitely does not describe them with exaggeration; they seem like real people. Citations and acknowledgments was the only category in which the novel did not receive a

perfect score. Although on the jacket Soto states that he wrote this book after going on a journey like this himself when he was young, he does not cite or acknowledge the “various” works or people that I specified in the rubric. The novel received a resounding 3 in setting. Soto used actual streets and freeways in East Los Angeles and throughout the entire journey through Los Angeles. My students were always exclaiming, “I know where that is!” *Summer on Wheels* also gets a 3 in style. The dialogue that Soto wrote for the boys sounded exactly like the way my students talked. I also felt that the fact that Soto used Spanish words and phrases made the book even more true to the Latino culture he was presenting. This criterion could be added to that category in the future. The last criterion, theme, also got a 3. Soto uses universal themes like the change, finding yourself and family, to show the reader what his young characters are going through. These universal themes are applied naturally. The overall score for the novel was 17 – one short of a perfect score.

Criteria	Score
Authority	3
Characterization	3
Citations and Acknowledgments	2
Setting	3
Style	3
Theme	3
Total score	17

Table 3. Evaluation of *Summer on Wheels* by Gary Soto (1999)

The Joy Luck Club received a perfect score. It received a 3 for authority because Amy Tan is Chinese American, just like the characters she writes about. She also lives in San Francisco, where the novel takes place. It gets a 3 for characterization because her characters exhibit all of the requirements, and then some: they are believable, they grow, they show incredible depth, and they are portrayed without exaggeration. Tan also gets a 3 for citations and acknowledgments because she includes a page before the novel that thanks all of those who helped her research this book. The setting of the book, like the setting of *Summer on Wheels*, is very true to life. It receives a 3 for its mention of more than just San Francisco landmarks and for its remarkable descriptions of China. The style of this book is really what makes it so amazing. Tan alternates between two generations of Chinese women, one young and the other old. Her depictions of each generation show the conflict between them in dialogue that also includes Chinese words and phrases (another reason to possibly add this to the criteria for this category). Obviously, this novel got a 3 in style. Finally, the themes of generational conflict, individualism, and the search of a cultural identity are universal. This book scored perfectly on my rubric.

Criteria	Score
Authority	3
Characterization	3
Citations and Acknowledgments	3
Setting	3
Style	3
Theme	3
Total score	18

Table 4: Evaluation of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (1990)

Homeless Bird is an excellent example of a book written from an “outsider’s perspective” (Hinton, 2006) and wonderfully portrays the culture being written about. Readers are swept into Koly’s world from the first page. Whelan mentions her research for the book both in the book and on her website. She used several sources to construct the setting, style, and characterization of the book but applies universal themes of love and family.

Criteria	Score
Authority	2
Characterization	3
Citations and Acknowledgments	3
Setting	3
Style	3
Theme	3
Total score	17

Table 5: Evaluation of *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan (2001)

Use of the Rubric

My intention in creating this rubric was to assist teachers in easing multicultural literature for young adults into their classrooms. In this day of state-mandated curricula and the use of the same novels year after year, multicultural literature, whether it is used for reading aloud or independent reading, can create armchair journeys for students wishing to explore new lands and cultures and can validate one’s own culture.

I am in the process of creating a database where teachers and students can look through and read reviews and see the scores of various multicultural books online. Please join me in the creation of this database by e-mailing or mailing your use of the rubric and your thoughts on its categories. It is my belief that this rubric gets teachers and students talking and thinking critically about literature. It is a jumping-off point for conversations where issues of race and its portrayal in literature can be safely discussed. Find that “mirror” for yourself and your students, and then take a peek through a window at others.

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