



## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

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*"He likes his name because he wants to be like his dad, but not just like his dad." The child looked seriously at me as he thought about the relationship between a father and son in the story. There was a short pause and another child added, "He wants to be big like his dad, so he likes the name Lightning." A third child's smile flashed as he remembered the line from the book, "He likes his name because they [father and son] light up the sky!"*

This conversation followed our reading of *Thunder Boy Jr.*, a book written by Sherman Alexie and illustrated by Yuyi Morales, the story of a Spokane boy who wants a name that's different from his father's (Thunder Boy). He's thrilled at the end when he's given a new name: Lightning!

These comments offer a tiny window into the power of children's literature in our classrooms. The children consider relationship and identity, express ideas and empathy, and break down the idea some of them hold that Native Americans only "lived a long time ago." They learn from each other, listening and building their vocabularies. The teachers at WSMS embrace the power of children's literature, developing their practices to support the school's initiative to create consequential anti-bias communities of learning.

Children's literature provides endless lessons about community, acceptance, and self-love; invitations for imagination, critical-

thinking, and creativity; and material for conversation, expression, and connection. As such, books are an important piece of WSMS's current initiative to create anti-bias community, and our faculty is committed to learning more about choosing and using literature in our classrooms.

Over the past year, we have been considering how our use of literature supports the anti-bias goals outlined in *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Julie Olsen Edwards and Louise Derman-Sparks. According to Olsen and Sparks, "Books are one of the richest resources for helping children meet the anti-bias education goals" (2010, p. 46). These goals include children building self-awareness and positive identities, understanding and appreciating differences, and recognizing unfairness.

One of the most important practices in developing anti-bias classrooms is the consideration of "visibility." Can every child see him/herself reflected in their classroom

### IN YOUR HOME LIBRARY, DO YOUR HAVE BOOKS THAT...

- Present accurate images and information, with no overt or covert stereotypes?
- Challenge unfairness and prejudice?
- Encourage children to take action when faced with unfairness toward themselves or others?



environment? In the classroom's literature? As children learn about the world, they consider who is and who is not important. They develop their understanding of power from who they see as the main characters of stories, the heroes, and the faces and bodies on book covers. As Olsen and Derman-Sparks explain, "Invisibility erases identity and experience; visibility affirms reality. When children see themselves and their families reflected in their early childhood setting, they feel affirmed and that they belong" (2010, p. 13). Literature is an opportunity for every child to see her social identities represented in the classroom and, furthermore, it opens her perspective to differences. Angela Bronson at Public Libraries Online explains, "Having children only see one type of race shown in picture books can affect them deeply. That is why I believe books should be used as 'mirrors and windows'—reflecting who kids are, but also showing them someone who is different to expand their views" (*Mirrors and Windows: Diversity in Children's Picture Books*, 2017).

Choosing literature gives teachers the opportunity to break down stereotypes. However, it is a challenge to find children's books with accurate, unbiased representations of people. "The majority of children's books tend to only show dominant culture representations of who people are and how they live," (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 46) and "...more than 90 percent of all pictures show a white character" (*Mirrors and Windows: Diversity in Children's Picture Books*, 2017). To our advantage, authors and illustrators are

beginning to depict more kinds of characters in the literature they create; teacher's choices have begun to grow. There are also non-fiction books that highlight specific aspects of difference, such as books about skin color, hair, family composition, and specific disabilities. It has become our responsibility to be careful critics of the books we select, to ensure we aren't supporting stereotypes or any myths about minorities that have been accepted for too long.

Literature is also a tool for teaching about unfairness, history, and society. Whether a child notices the hurt feelings of a character who is excluded, or the strength of a character who stands up for her friend, he can practice thinking about fairness and relationship. Young children have a strong sense of injustice, and when given the chance to hear stories where someone is wronged or something is unfair, they are quick to point it out. As educators, we can encourage this thinking and conversation with both fiction and non-fiction.

### WHAT WE'RE DOING AT WEST SIDE MONTESSORI SCHOOL

Over the past couple of years, WSMS faculty discovered a shared passion for children's literature. Cailyn De Bie (3Wpm) began a book committee that involved several teachers recommending new literature for the school library; Robyn Mernick (4E) shared her knowledge of author studies and children's literature with the faculty; and Stefanie Eckert (3Wam/3Wpm) shared her perspective, having earned a Masters in Library Science. These interests aligned with the



work of SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) and the Diversity Council, two groups focused on raising awareness about best practices to create anti-bias communities for ourselves and our students.

These faculty members and many more joined forces to learn more about what our school needed and what we could provide. We held a faculty meeting with a focus on holidays that invited teachers to explore a range of the library's books, from books explaining national holidays—such as a very dated *Columbus Day*—to books about religious holidays, like *The Best Eid Ever* by Asma Mobin-Uddin. Last year, the Diversity Council worked collaboratively on assessing the quality of books in the library; we paid careful attention to language, illustrations, and covert messages about groups of people that are often present in some well-loved stories. We used each other to ask questions. For example, a Twos teacher noticed that the original *Curious George*

## SOME FAVORITE BOOKS AT WSMS:

- *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits (K)
- *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (K)
- *Yoko* by Rosemary Wells
- *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz
- *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis
- *All Families are Different* by Todd Parr (and everything else by Parr)
- *And Tango Makes Three* by J. Hoffman
- *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis

story shows George shackled as he's taken from Africa. He wondered if the group felt as he had about this imagery. What message is in this illustration? Is it appropriate for children? Are we being too critical? We tackled many questions together, and worked with a shared sense of purpose.

Over the past four months, Cailyn De Bie and Stefanie Eckert have been reviewing books in the library, looking for gaps, and considering how we could make the collection more accessible to teachers and families. Cailyn describes their intentions: "Children's passion for books is both timeless and universal, not to mention critical for development. When teachers and families are easily able to access literary content that their child(ren) need or desire, we have the opportunity to foster that innate love." Aside from the well-sorted non-fiction section, teachers want to find books in the fiction section that represent and reflect the diverse society we are part of. For example, while studying families

at the beginning of the year, we could find books such as *Who's in a Family?* by Robert Skutch and *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman. These books are wonderful displays of how families are all different. What we couldn't immediately find were the story books, the fiction, that include families with twins, with separated parents, with an adopted child, or with single parent families, to name a few. Teachers need to make sure their libraries always have books that represent different kinds of families because our classroom, our school, and our world include diverse family compositions. To address this problem and make the library more accessible, Stefanie explains their efforts: "Over the summer we researched some of the current library management apps on the market. We chose the Libib app since it offered the most comprehensive package. It is an easy-to-install app for all devices, and most books can quickly be scanned into our digital collection. Now we're working on scanning all of the books in the main library. Once that is completed, everyone in the WSMS community will easily be able to search our collection for books by any subject or any author."

The faculty at WSMS have taken on this great task with enthusiasm; however, it's not easy work. It sometimes requires looking critically at old favorites, or discarding a book with wonderful language due to the content of the illustrations. We have found many good resources to help teachers review the literature, so that we challenge ourselves to make the very best choices. One source draws our attention to the sexism and racism that must be countered. "Both in school and out of school, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes—expressed repeatedly in books and other media—gradually distort children's perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for librarians or teachers to convince children to question society's attitudes; but if children can learn to detect racism and sexism in books, they can transfer that skill to



other areas" (*10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism*, 1998). Other sources remind teachers to look at the date, the illustrations, the type of language used by characters, and the settings. We help one another by reviewing classroom libraries and asking, "Who is represented? How are groups represented?" We also take into consideration the mixed-ages we have in the classroom; not every book is meaningful to both a five-year-old and a two-year-old.



Given the range of ages in our classrooms, we've designed a program specifically for the five-year-olds in After Lunch Bunch. This weekly program invites the older children to explore literature and ideas that their younger classmates may not yet be able to grasp. For example, the year began by considering the power of names and identity. The group read *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits. It is a story of a Korean child moving to America and beginning school. We talked about how they might feel to move to a new place with a new language. (Scared. Sad. Excited!) The children practiced empathizing with Yoon through role playing. They shared ideas for how they would help children who were moving from 'far away' feel welcome in their new school. Here are some of their ideas:

- *Being their friend.*
- *Telling them, "Welcome!"*
- *I would show them around the whole city, if my mom and dad let me.*
- *I would let them sleep at my house, if they had no home.*
- *You could say, "Please come in! Come join America and join friends!"*

Again, these comments—the thinking and expression children generate in response to literature—remind us that this is a real opportunity. Literature helps children understand their own feelings and experiences, while it also gives them windows into the

experiences of others. This is at the heart of anti-bias education. As Dr. Montessori insisted, looking to the child is the best way to understand our own practice as educators. Based on the responses we're hearing from children, this work with literature is essential, and we work toward every WSMS child offering every other child the sincere exclamation of "Welcome!"

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