

# Multicultural Cinderella: A Collaborative Project in an Elementary School

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*This project was the result of a collaborative effort between the School of Library and Information Science and College of Education at the University of South Florida and the Egypt Lake Elementary School in Tampa, Florida. Versions of the Cinderella story from around the world were used in reading classes to stimulate awareness of cultural diversity and to serve as reading enrichment for 21 elementary students. According to feedback from students, reading teachers, library media specialists, and principal participants, the project resulted in students' increased interest in cultures and learning of general content information. Formal research studies based on this exploratory project are recommended.*

## Multicultural Literature and Diversity Needs in Schools

Schools in the United States are seeing a tremendous increase in the cultural and ethnic diversity among the children they serve. It has been estimated that by 2020 nearly half the US school population will be "people of color" (Nieto, 1997, p. 170), and 18 states will have a majority of students of color (Meier, 2003). This reality, along with the US's expanding relationships with countries around the world, increases the need for children to view themselves as members of a multicultural, global community. Because literature reaches the minds and hearts of its readers, reading and discussing multicultural literature broadens children's perspectives and increases their understanding in a way that affects how people live in a pluralistic society (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2001; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Pierce, 1993).

Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2001) cite five reasons why multicultural literature has value for all children:

- Children of varied cultures who see positively represented characters in multicultural literature derive self-esteem and pride in their heritage.
- Children, parents, teachers, and librarians learn about and become aware of other peoples and their cultures.
- Multicultural literature shows children that other groups are worthy, and that they have something to teach others.
- Emotional involvement and vicarious experience with multi-cultural characters through literature reduce students' prejudices toward the micro-culture.

- Reading about issues and problems peculiar to children of a specific micro-culture from the perspective of story characters who themselves are members of the group can help children of that micro-culture to cope with the same problems themselves. (pp. 190-191)

Theorists in multicultural education suggest that we need to think about diversity in terms of ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender characteristics among others (Banks & McGee, 2003; Kottak & Kozaitis, 2003; Pang, 2001). Nieto (1997) argues that “all students of all backgrounds, languages, and experiences need to be acknowledged, valued, and used as important sources of their education” (p. 8). The state of Florida in particular is already diverse, and this demands that schools use multiple viewpoints to best serve students. Schools can stimulate respect for diversity by providing opportunities for students to read and discuss material from multiple viewpoints in order to develop open-minded attitudes about diversity (Wan, 2006). Integrating ethnic material into the entire curriculum can make it meaningful to students. A model for introducing multicultural literature into the curriculum proposed by Banks (1999) is worthy of further discussion (Bishop, 2003).

### *Banks' Model*

Banks suggests a four-level model using literature at increasingly higher levels of sophistication and depth. Banks' Level One approach, *content integration*, involves introducing cultures through crafts, customs, and holidays to illustrate key concepts. Level Two, *knowledge construction*, involves a value-added approach where ethnic content is added at various points in time, but is not integrated into all curricular areas. It is in this dimension that discussions about the effects of stereotypes can take place. Banks' Level Three, *prejudice reduction*, is more transformative. Ethnic literature is added to various subjects in the school curriculum so that students can learn about cultural variances and issues in the contexts of the various cultures studied. Here the unique perspective of the specific cultural group is integrated by studying supportive fiction or non-fiction as part of the class materials and assignments. Banks' social action approach or *equity pedagogy*, Level Four, is concerned with students learning to identify problems and issues in the various cultures so that they can develop critical thinking skills and take social action steps to resolve social problems and concerns. Banks' model can be readily used as a guide by teachers who work with elementary students.

### *Folktales as Multicultural Windows*

Researchers have shown the power of children's literature to develop children's sensitivity toward diverse cultures. Walker-Dalhousie (1992), an African-American educator in Minnesota, carried out research on literature studies with grade 5 students. Of the children in her study, 88% were of Norwegian heritage, 6% were Hispanic, and 3% were Asian, African, and other. Walker-Dalhousie wished determine if using children's literature

would promote multicultural understanding and understanding of self and others and influence attitudes toward other racial and cultural groups. Her conclusions were that “students were really trying to understand their feelings and those of their classmates from another culture” (p. 422). She stressed the need for “meaningful and necessary dialogue” (p. 422) and suggested that schools needed to provide opportunities for children to read books that connected with their own culture as well as that of others. In this way, literature can contribute to increasing personal understandings and broadening sensitivity, to understanding commonalities and differences in a positive light (Agosto, 2001; Colby & Lyon, 2004).

Wham, Barnhart, and Cook (1996) found similar outcomes in their study of the behaviors of young children who were exposed early to diverse materials. They concluded that elementary children involved in a multicultural literature program had more positive attitudes at the end of the school year toward people of different cultural backgrounds than did those not involved in such curriculum.

Bieger (1996) suggests that when using literature for integrating ethnic content into the curriculum, we cannot merely tell children to be sensitive to others because “attitudes are hard to change; we must break down barriers of prejudice” (p. 309). What cannot be taught through facts may be taught through the heart. Bieger adds that literature is like food for the “head and the heart” (p. 309). She suggests that folktales are an excellent way to develop cultural understanding.

### Background of the Collaborative Project

Egypt Lake Elementary School in Tampa, Florida is a Title I school that receives federal government funding. Over 60% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; 78% of the children live at or below the poverty level. The school serves students from 18 countries, and 61% of students are of Hispanic origin. Approximately 20% are White (European-American), 12% are African-American; smaller percentages are of multiracial (5%) and Asian (2%) descent. The library in Egypt Lake Elementary School is a cooperative public library of the Hillsborough County Library system in Tampa, which partners with the school to provide services to K-5 students during school hours and to the community after school hours.

Each year, schools in Hillsborough County administer the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Egypt Lake school personnel were concerned with the low average reading levels and concomitant language acquisition issues as indicated by the DRA, and 32% of the students were enrolled in limited English proficiency classes (ESOL) to increase their language fluency. Another issue of great concern at Egypt Lake was the need to develop the students’ cultural sensitivity. The administrators and teachers expressed a need to engage students in a program that would integrate multiculturalism into the curriculum. This could lead, they believed, to increased student excitement about and interest in literature that would

result in improved reading achievement while addressing the issue of respect for multiple viewpoints.

### Development of the Cinderella Project

The project was a collaborative effort from the beginning. Two faculty members and a graduate research assistant from the School of Library and Information Science and the College of Education at the University of South Florida met on three occasions with the principal, two media specialists, and two reading teachers from the Egypt Lake School. The intent was to develop a project that would focus on providing learning opportunities using multicultural literature. The faculty members, reading resource teachers, and media specialists together applied for and received an \$8,200 grant that allowed the project team to purchase books for the project and to hire a graduate student from the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) to work as an assistant with the project team.

The goals of this project were threefold: (a) to stimulate interest in reading and multicultural awareness by providing opportunities for students to discuss diversity in cultural practices represented in quality multicultural literature; (b) to provide further engagement with the literature through the arts; and (c) to provide an opportunity for an SLIS graduate student to develop professional collaboration skills with teachers and school library media specialists.

The project organizers believed that integrating multicultural materials into the reading Exploration Program at Egypt Lake would increase the students' literacy skills as well as their open-mindedness toward and understanding of diversity in a pluralistic society. According to Gorski (1997), the curriculum should support students' abilities to tell their own stories and be exposed to those of others. According to Alexander (1983), fantasy is of the utmost value for children. He states, "Fantasy touches our deepest feelings and in so doing, it speaks to the best and most hopeful parts of ourselves. It can help us learn the most fundamental skill of all--how to be human" (p. 83). Huck, Helper, Hickman, and Kiefer (2001) state, "Good fantasy might be critical to children's understanding of themselves and the struggles they will face as human beings" (p. 301).

Therefore, the project team chose to use folktales from many countries. By choosing traditional fantasy, they hoped to incorporate possibilities for personal understanding and respect for diversity. They chose Cinderella stories because many versions are available from many countries and from ancient to modern times. The many versions of the Cinderella story would provide opportunities to expose students to a variety of customs of knowing and living. Savage (2000) listed 10 of the best-known Cinderella versions. The team chose to purchase titles according to guidelines in this and other lists posted on library award and other Web sites. Multiple copies of 33 versions of the Cinderella folktale in picture books were purchased (see Appendix).

Table 1 shows the sequence of events in the project.

Table 1  
Sequence of Events in the Project

<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Events</i>
Summer before the project	Developed syllabus and materials for USF-SLIS course. Ordered books and materials. Notified Egypt Lake teachers of Exploration Classes. Notified graduate assistant of outside coursework. Obtained letter of consent from Hillsborough county school board. Set up independent study course. Completed IRB.
Fall semester	Began independent study course. Began Exploration Classes. Collected preliminary data (DRA, surveys). Trained USF-SLIS graduate student to work with Exploration teachers and students. Performed community theater at Partnership Library.
Spring semester	Submitted mid-year grant report by January. Performed community theater at Partnership Library. Continued Exploration Class collaboration. Collected final data (DRA, surveys, focus groups).

### Cinderella Project Activities

A program of reading enrichment classes called Exploration Classes was developed to support cultural awareness and to increase reading achievement. The Exploration Classes were designed for students who ranked between the 30th and 60th percentiles on standardized tests, who were invited to join the groups. The kindergarten-grade 2 group was composed of 10 students, five girls and five boys. One student was from grade 1, two were from grade 2, and seven were from grade 3. Six students were African-American, two were Hispanic-American, and two were European-American. The intermediate level had 10 participants, all from grade 4, but only five students took both the pre- and post-surveys reported below. Of the older level-six boys and four girls-five were African-American, four were Hispanic-American, and one was European-American. The SLIS graduate assistant worked with the reading resource teachers to plan the classes and helped the two media specialists to organize materials. She also ordered 12 copies each of 33 Cinderella versions for use in the classes.

Exploration Classes met every other Friday and participated in a wide array of activities. During their first meeting, the students talked about their own backgrounds and were assigned the task of talking with their parents to learn more about their own cultures. Learning activities included making passports for themselves: students earned stamps for their passports after reading Cinderella versions from other countries. Another activity required them to draw designs simulating a patchwork quilt and



write on the back of each patch their summaries of the story after reading *Yeh Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*. The teachers facilitated extensive dialogue about each book, talking with the students about the art, the food, and the daily habits depicted for each culture. Each country was shown on a map.

To facilitate and strengthen students' comprehension of story content, the teachers employed Hoyt's (1999) comprehension improvement strategies of revisiting, reflecting, and retelling story elements. The students retold the stories to the teaching team (Callison, 1999). Teachers and students also engaged in a process of reflection to compare the cultures of the various Cinderella versions. Sometimes the students took the books home to continue reading with their parents.

The teachers suggested performing plays of the Cinderella stories. For both plays the teachers facilitated the older student group's writing of its own version. The students dictated, and the teachers recorded. The students also developed props and scenery, chose their roles, and practiced. They presented the first play on a Saturday early in December with approximately 100 people in attendance.

Reading more Cinderella versions continued into the second semester. Two groups formed to write two new Cinderella versions for the second play: one to be performed in a puppet theater and the other to be presented as a drama. In addition, students worked in groups to draw large pictures of a variety of Cinderellas and made the puppets. At the end of the semester, all students according to their preferences performed either in the puppet show or the play. As a culminating activity, the teachers brought food representing various ethnic groups. For example, the group shared bagels and cream cheese for *The Way Meat Loves Salt: A Cinderella Tale From the Jewish Tradition* (Israel) and a Hispanic dessert for *Adelita, A Mexican Cinderella*. The teachers explained how the food related to the cultures represented in the various versions of the story. The students in turn told how the foods compared with what they were used to eating.

The SLIS graduate assistant created a listserv so that all team members could communicate regularly about meetings, students' progress, and other aspects of our work together. In addition to activities developed for the Exploration Classes, the graduate assistant found online resources for developing a Cinderella Web page as supportive content for a Web-based graduate-level multicultural course that was under development in conjunction with the project (Alexander, 2004). She was instrumental in putting together the book order to help diversify the library collection with Cinderella versions; she ordered the puppet theater and created invitations for the plays. She also videotaped the plays and provided copies of them to all the families of participants. The project allowed considerable flexibility and opportunity for the graduate assistant to engage with the community and parents.

### Efforts to Assess the Project

Initial plans to assess the project included collecting data from all participants and a survey of other teachers in the school. The two reading teachers and the graduate assistant had agreed to e-mail their reflections to us following each Exploration Class session. The two reading teachers developed a Likert-type cultural inventory survey with questions about cultural awareness. One form with five questions for kindergarten-grade 2 and a second with 10 questions for the grades 4-5 students were administered before the project began and at the end of the Cinderella project. Because some of the primary students could not yet read, the teachers helped them score their sheets by reading the items aloud and having the students respond by filling in the circles of happy faces for *agree*, faces with a straight line for the mouth for *neutral*, and a sad/mad face for *disagree*. The teachers also developed the teacher survey in order to stimulate thinking about multicultural literature throughout the school. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) test scores from administration by district personnel at the beginning and end of the school year were obtained to determine gains in reading levels. One researcher facilitated a culminating group interview using semistructured techniques with eight children, one reading teacher, and the graduate assistant. Our informal observations added to the understanding of the project's development.

### Findings

The research team asked the following questions. (a) How will involvement in the Exploration program's engagement with Cinderella stories affect students' awareness of cultural diversity? (b) What effect will engagement in the Exploration Classes have on reading achievement?

#### *Student Surveys-Cultural Awareness Inventory*

The student surveys were created to measure change in cultural awareness. Although the number of participants was too small for quantitative analysis, the team believed that results from the surveys were helpful in theorizing about the project and informing future plans. Reported here are the responses from students who took both the pre- and post-survey. Table 2 shows the average ratings of the five questions for pre- and post-project surveys given to 10 primary students. The average change overall was a positive 0.6. Strong positive change was noted for the final statement "I would like to learn about different countries and people," which was one of the goals of the study, to stimulate interest in cultures.

Table 3 indicates that the older group changed positively in the average group scores on items numbered 6, 7, 8, and 10, resulting in a total average of a positive change of 1. The greatest positive change occurred with questions about talking with children who speak a language other than one's own and being more comfortable being around people from other countries

Table 2  
Average Scores of Cultural Awareness Inventory for Primary Group

Item #	Pre-	Post-	Change
1. I have friends who are different from me.	2.6	2.5	-.1
2. I know people who speak a language other than English.	2.7	2.3	-.4
3. People from other countries dress funny.	2.3	1.9	-.4
4. I would like to learn how people in other countries live.	2.5	2.9	+.4
5. I would like to learn about different countries and people.	1.9	3.0	+1.1
Total Average Change for the five items			+.6

*N=10; Agree=3, Neutral=2, Disagree=1.*

when learning about them. The positive change on item 10 indicates that this project may have stimulated family conversations about culture. This is discussed further in data obtained from teachers' reflections.

### *Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) Scores*

Pre- and post- test DRA scores were available for all in the primary group, revealing that nine out of 10 of the primary group students scored at grade level at the year's end. One grade 1 student continued to experience considerable difficulties with reading, moving only from Level 3 to Level 4. With the exception of this student, the average gain for seven out of eight

Table 3  
Average Scores of Cultural Awareness Inventory for Intermediate Group

Item #	Pre-	Post-	Change
1. I have friends who are different from me.	2.4	2.4	0
2. I know people who speak a language other than English.	2.6	2.6	0
3. People from other countries seem weird.	1.6	1.4	-.2
4. I have things in common with people from other countries.	1.6	1.6	0
5. I would like to learn about different countries and people.	3	2.8	-.2
6. I talk to kids that speak a different language than myself.	1.8	2.2	+.4
7. I can learn about other countries from reading stories.	2.4	2.6	+.2
8. When I learn about people from other countries, I feel more comfortable being around them.	2	2.4	+.4
9. I like sharing my cultural differences with others.	2.2	2.2	0
10. My family discusses people's cultural differences.	1.4	1.8	+.4
Total Average Change for the 10 items			+1

*N= 5; Never=1, Sometimes=2, Always=3.*



of the grade 1 students was 15 levels. The intermediate group averaged 39.3 on their DRA pre-test, and the post-test average was 41.7, an average increase of 2.4 levels. A more telling picture can be seen by referring to individual progress. Four students in the intermediate group gained four levels, three increased two levels, and two made no gains.

### *Interview Data*

A focus group of eight students, one teacher, and the graduate assistant was held during the final week of the program. The session was taped and transcribed, and responses were analyzed for emerging topics. The questions below were used to stimulate discussion; the teacher added prompts to encourage students who were reluctant to respond. The questions are followed by summaries of responses.

*What did you learn?* Students responded that they were learning about different cultures and languages. Two children commented on the clothing. One child stated, "The pictures gave you a lot of clues of what their culture was like, that's for sure." Another child commented, "There's all kinds of different cultures and books that you can turn into a play." The children discussed learning about other languages in other countries, and they particularly enjoyed the book with dialect, *Smokey Mountain Rose: An Appalachian Cinderella story*. One child concluded, "interesting to learn different ways they love each other."

*What did you like best about this project?* The students identified a variety of elements. One said, "It was like going to those countries because of using the passports." Several indicated that it was fun because they were able to work in a group with their friends. One student continued to use the passports at home. She said, "I make most of the rooms in my house the actual places from the books and then when I go to each room, I need my passport." "Learning different cultures" and "reading Spanish" [words] as well as "getting to use the microphone" were also mentioned. One child summed it up by affirming, "You learn and have fun at the same time."

*Tell me some other specific things that you learned about other cultures.* Students responded with, "Ireland was like, with lots of trees," "there were different clothes," "like rags and stuff," and one student noticed, "one character wore a wrap around her head."

*How did you feel about performing?* When students did not respond, the teacher prompted them by asking about their concerns with being in front of an audience. One said, "I felt scared on top of the stage," and another explained, "I felt all right because I had people in the group that I knew."

*What would you change and what would you recommend for next time?* Although the students said that they would like to be involved in the project again next year, most said they would change nothing. However, they made two suggestions for change: they would like to have more costumes, and they would like to include more of their friends. They also said that

they would like to study history and learn how to speak another language. All said that they would like to continue the project next year, meet more often, and read versions of stories such as *Three Pigs* or *Snow White*.

### *Teacher's and Graduate Assistant's Observations and Reflections*

The teacher and graduate assistant were surprised to learn that some of the students "had no idea from where their families had originated," whereas several students responded that they had come from other states, not other countries. They noted, "It was great to see every student engaged in the reading process. They were drinking in the words!" After the focus group discussion, the teacher and graduate assistant expressed their delight that one shy child who was a struggling reader chose to be the narrator for the second play having gained confidence from the first.

As the project progressed, the teachers reported increasing popularity of the Cinderella project. The reading resource teacher reported, "Several students have stopped me in the hall to express that they couldn't wait until the next meeting. They are beginning to see how special this time is exploring countries, literature, and becoming culturally aware." The second reading resource teacher said, "I've had a couple of the students say they enjoyed the book *Prince Cinders* and what parts they may want to play." Teachers reported that other students were asking to join the class although it was too late for the current school year.

Overall, the teachers expressed their belief that because of the Cinderella project, the students were more interested in their own cultures as well as learning about diverse cultures.

The graduate assistant and the teachers reported that they believed that the study and the resultant discussions about cultural differences and similarities had resulted in students feeling more appreciated. One teacher commented, "They [students] felt valued ... I think it helped open communication and trust with parents. I think other things came out of it that I don't think we thought were necessarily going to happen."

### Discussion and Conclusions

In reviewing Banks' (1996) framework, it is interesting to try to discern with which level of the Banks' model the current study would align with respect to the lessons provided and activities shared during the project. The project was not limited to Level One of Banks' model as it went beyond the study of general holidays and customs. The dress, food, gender, and behaviors of the characters and the settings in the stories were discussed and then compared to find similarities and differences. This method involved the Level Two approach to the study of specific cultures, but again was not integrated into the general school curriculum. Banks' Level Three requires that the school curriculum undergo a change to integrate ethnic understanding through the use of supportive literature throughout each grade level: this would involve a schoolwide initiative. During the project, students com-

pared a variety of viewpoints, looking at similar ways of life, reflecting elements from Banks' Levels Two and Three.

Although the positive results of the project might provide support for a future schoolwide curriculum change, the current project was limited to volunteers wishing to participate in reading enrichment. However, it did have some influence beyond the project itself as two other teachers used the theme as a part of literature study in their classrooms. One had her students read Cinderella stories on their own, and the other had students draw large pictures of the characters following their reading. Over 150 parents and teachers attended the students' plays, which stimulated dialogue about culture across grade levels.

The Exploration Class students compared their own experiences with the culture about which they were reading in the Cinderella stories. According to Gorski (1997), this is an empowering experience, and the teachers confirmed this in the interviews. As Bieger (1995) suggested, folktales provide a beneficial mediation of cultural understanding. By studying cultures that were different from theirs, the students could *de-center* themselves and reflect on culture on a broader scale. For some, reading stories close to their experiences such as *Adelita*, which was about a Hispanic Cinderella, allowed them to see their first language in print. Some students who originally were unsure of their cultures talked with their parents about their heritage, sometimes for the first time. Thus multicultural literature served to stimulate a home-school connection (Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Carter, 2007).

The teachers were most surprised by the students' interest in learning content; they also noted that there was no resistance to reading Cinderella stories. The students wished to learn more history and used the illustrations from the various texts to learn about the countries. This pointed out for them the importance of discussing the content of pictures; those in the Cinderella books enhanced the experience because without them most students would not have known the environments of the various stories. The use of pictures, photographs, or picture books in introducing other cultures not only enriches the experience, but appears to be necessary for the experience. Because many students are strong visual learners, visual learning techniques could assist many students who lack breadth of exposure to places beyond their own neighborhoods. Furthermore, the students expressed an interest in learning more languages, a topic spurred by reading Spanish in *Adelita* and the dialect in *The Appalachian Cinderella*.

This project was exploratory in nature, but several strategies were planned to assess the effectiveness of the Exploration Classes in enhancing multicultural awareness and improving reading. Unfortunately, not all these strategies were used as planned. For example, after the initial e-mail reflections, only the graduate student continued posting observations throughout the project. Only five of 12 teachers completed the teacher survey. The interview session was limited to 25 minutes, causing the teacher to

press students for answers rather than allowing for free discussion that might have resulted in more individual and unique responses.

However, this project has potential for replication, and results from a follow-up study would be strengthened by more stringent approaches to data collection. We are planning to develop a similar project in another school and following more rigorous research guidelines. Despite these research limitations, the school staff declared the project a success and said that they would continue to use Cinderella stories to stimulate multicultural understanding and respect for diversity.

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## Appendix

### *Cinderella Versions Used in the Project*

- Adelita, A Mexican Cinderella* by Tomie De Paola (México). Putnam, 2002.
- Baba Yaga* by Margaret Y. Phinney (Russia). Mondo, 1995.
- Baba Yaga and Vasilisa The Brave* by Marianna Mayer (Russia). Morrow, 1994.
- Bigfoot Cenderrrrrella*, by Tony Johnston (California Grizzly). Puffin, 1998.
- Brocaded Slipper and other Vietnamese Tales* by Lynette Vuong. HarperCollins, 1992.
- Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella* by Robert San Souci (Caribbean). Aladdin, 1998.
- Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah. (Chinese) Random House, 1999.
- Cinder Edna* by Ellen Jackson (Other). Mulberry, 1994.
- Cinder-Elly* by Francis Minters (Jewish rap). Viking, 1994.
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