

Acquiring Knowledge about a Culture through Children's Literature: The Challenges of Using Asian Cinderella Picturebooks

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Abstract

This article examines picturebooks based on a popular folktale, *Cinderella*, but told from the cultural lenses of several Asian countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, and Vietnam. These variants of the well-known children's literature have the potential to influence thinking and promote an awareness of culture among young learners. The article addresses the question about the acquisition of new knowledge of a specific culture through children literature with the use of picturebooks. Using content analysis on five picturebooks selected for the study, the researcher found that images of human and non-human characters as well as cultural artifacts promote perceptions of a specific culture. Also, culture-specific texts serve as an invitation to the reader to explore significant moments in the story, given the culture or group of people. Finally, the researcher recommends that before selecting children's books for the classroom, teachers should engage in the process of reviewing the curriculum, collaborating with other teachers, consulting with a cultural expert, and planning for multicultural experiences.

Keywords: Asian Cinderella, children's literature, picturebooks

I remember knowing about the *Cinderella* story from my uncle, who was enthusiastic about comic books and movies. He took me to watch the movie version produced by Disney as well as similar film versions like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi*. At a young age, I believed then that the images from these sources and narratives from stories my uncle told me shaped how I see the world.

In many cultures, children learned about others and their environment through a variety of sources such as parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and media. Through this article, I revisit and further explore my childhood memories with folktales. Also, this study examines the potential influences of children's literature through picturebooks that promote a child's understanding (Kummerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2013; Roser, Martinez, & Fowler-Amato, 2011) of cultural contexts. Finally, this article addresses the question: How can we acquire new knowledge about a specific culture through children literature, specifically, picturebooks?

As classrooms become more diverse, teachers must select and use children's literature that their students can identify and relate through the presentation of texts, narratives, and images about a culture, people, and values (Brown, 1999; Elleman, 1998; Harris, 1997; Martinez & Nash, 1998; Hurley & Chadwick, 1998; Levy, 2000a; Norton, 2001). It is because children's books can fill in the gaps, create bridges, and infer possibilities for children to make sense of the world (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994; Strehle, 2001) with all its political and social issues. Also, children's books can become powerful tools to teach students how to appreciate different beliefs and value systems that exist in their environments (Bishop, 1997; Brown, 1999; Lewis, 2001).

There is an expectation for teachers to be highly selective of multicultural children's books that students can access in their classroom. The research literature identifies critical elements as a criterion for selecting multicultural children's books (Bigelow et al., 1994; Brown, 1999; Kruse, 1999; Slapin & Seale, 1998). The elements can be clustered into several categories: images, texts, themes, plots, characterizations, settings, and styles.

Kruse (1999) argues that "images convey meaning, and illustrations are crucial components in the construction of these images" (p. 22). The Council of Interracial Books for Children (1994), as pointed out by the editors of *Rethinking our Classrooms*, states that illustrations need to be checked for stereotypes, tokenism, and how behaviors or acts are attributed. There

should be no “oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications” (p. 14). Faces of minority characters should be depicted as “genuine individuals with distinctive features” (p. 14). Finally, it is essential to identify if certain actors portray roles that are not consistent with their positions in real-life situations (Brown, 1999; Slapin, Seale, Gonzales Ten Fingers, 1998).

Kruse (1999) also argues that “texts should not perpetuate negative stereotypes or factual inaccuracies that may permanently distort the reader’s image” (p. 22) of the characters being portrayed in the children’s books. The Council for Interracial Books for Children (1994) identified guidelines pertaining to the use of text in children’s books: 1) insulting or bias passages relating to standard of success, resolution of problems, and role of women; and 2) use of loaded words or sexist language (Brown, 1999; Slapin & Seale, Gonzales Ten Fingers, 1998).

Beyond images and texts, the research literature argues that there is a need to evaluate multicultural children’s books similar to the way that regular literature books are being valued, i.e., both holistically and rigorously given the theme, plot, characterization, setting, and style (Brown, 1999; Norton, 2001). A subject comes in different shapes or forms, such as, relationships like love, family life, everyday experiences that includes a depiction of courage and demonstration of friendship and sacrifice. These themes are also found and common in multi-ethnic literature (Martinez & Nash, 1998; Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994).

A plot is a configuration of actions, conflicts, and resolutions of disputes in a story. The author uses these elements to draw the reader into the story. Also, these elements are “critical in creating a vicarious multi-ethnic experience” (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994, p. 17). Children become a participant in a story when they get involved in figuring out what is going to happen next. Brown (1999) added that a plot should contain enough details that are natural and interwoven into the flow of the story. In doing so, the sequence of events in the story aroused the readers’ interests as it unfolds before their eyes.

Almost every story has at least two characters. It is the characters that breathe life into the plot (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994). The development of characters is significant because if it is not done right, the characters become bland and boring. Figures should be believable and have depth (Brown, 1999). Furthermore, interactions between characters should be portrayed as naturally

and credibly as in reality. Character development is vital in the course of the story because children need to be able to relate to them. In reading multi-ethnic literature, characterization is important because the reader needs to discover similarities and differences between cultures. The creations of well-developed ethnic characters provide readers with cultural representatives.

The setting of the story provides the reader or listener with a context for the story regarding the time frame and place (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994). The setting of a multicultural story is essential because it provides children with geographic and cultural information that broaden their understanding of how different events are connected, and the characters are related. Brown (1999) states that a setting needs to be transparent, believable, and authentic for the readers to see and to be engaged in the story.

The words the author uses to tell a multicultural story are essential. The selection of specific words by the author enhances the readers' understanding of the development of an ethnic character or relevance of a culturally different setting (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994). The author may also be able to provide a new perspective on a familiar environment or situation by presenting it through the eyes of an ethnic character. The style of the book must be understandable and readable and succeed in arousing the reader's emotions.

Brown (1999) argues that multicultural literature for children is best when it "provides the readers an in-depth view of culture, one that goes beyond stereotypes" (p. 62). So, teachers are warned that as selectors of these educational resources, they need to look for stereotypes and biases portrayed in the materials. Several indicators that teachers need to watch out include publication dates, the physical makeup of the book, cultural accuracy, and use of inside/outside perspective. Brown provided selection guidelines for multicultural children's books that include quality, readability, child appeal, the authority of the author, accuracy, reviews received from professional journals, diversity of representations within and across cultures, consideration of all sides of an issue, and stereotypes. Other groups, The Council on Interracial Books for Children (1994), raised similar points about what teachers need to pay attention to selecting books for the classroom such as illustrations promoting stereotypes, tokenism, and authority; storyline communicating standard for success, resolution of problems, and the role of women and minorities; lifestyles and relationships between people; hero and heroic images; the potential impact on a child's self-image; author or illustrator's background; author's perspective; use of loaded words; and copyright dates.

Brown (1999) argues, “children of all cultures need to see accurate portrayals of multicultural characters in reading materials” (p. 67). Positive depictions of individuals from other cultures in reading materials assure ethnic minority children that they have a place in the world. Furthermore, white children or those who are racially different from the characters in the books they read “can see accurate representations of other cultures” (p. 67).

The article assumes that images and narratives found in picturebooks can influence children’s belief systems about a specific culture. As children read or listen to a story, they assimilate or accommodate the data to construct their images of reality (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) of a culture or group of people. Thus, the use of picturebooks depicting a specific culture facilitates the development of such perceptions among children that may or may not be appropriate for that culture.

Materials and Methods

Since the article focuses on acquiring knowledge about cultures through the depiction of images and, to an extent, texts, five picturebooks were selected that represented a variant of the famous folktale, *Cinderella*, from a particular Asian country (i.e., Cambodia, Indonesia, Hmong/Laos, Philippines, and Vietnam). The *Cinderella* folktale is chosen not only because of its popularity as children literature, but scholars and academicians have investigated its origins and derivations (Levy, 2000b; Ting, 1974). The Asian countries were selected given the familiarity of the researcher with these cultures.

Picturebooks used were Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella (Coburn & Lee, 1996), Angkat: The Cambodian Cinderella (Coburn, 1998), Abadeha: The Philippine Cinderella (de la Paz, 2001), The gift of the crocodile: A Cinderella story (2000), The gift of the crocodile: A Cinderella story (Sierra, 2000) and The golden slipper: A Vietnamese legend (Lum, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The researcher used content analysis on the illustrations and texts appearing in each picturebook using a coding schema developed to answer the questions. Kohlbacher (2006) cited Berelson (1971) in defining content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of [the] communication.” The researcher generated the coding schema based on the research literature (Bang, 2000; Moebius, 1986), and in consultation with colleagues engaged in teaching children’s literature as well as those familiar with the cultural contexts of each picturebook.

Images were given a closer look using principles introduced by Bang (2000) involving shapes, colors, and composition (See Appendix C). In investigating adherence to these principles of illustrating picturebooks, the author did a closer review of the images used and depicted in each page (See Appendix D-1 to 3). Also, the author looked further into picture codes demonstrated in the illustrated pages including position, perspective, frame, lines, colors (and media), and shapes (and patterns) present or use in creating the illustrations (See Appendix E-1 to 3). Also, the researcher categorized images into human and non-human characters as well as artifacts.

Texts were studied regarding how the unfolding of events describes or uses native names or labels to identify an object in the story. These categories facilitated understanding of cultural components represented in picturebooks as well as elements found prevailing across the selection.

There are several ways to convey images in making these picturebooks “come to life”: illustrations and texts (Ellefsen, 2015; Koss, 2015; Paynter, 2011). Figures can be in the form of human and non-human characters. Words or paragraphs can also convey images. The use of descriptive texts or narratives can provide the reader with a picture of how things look like primarily when the story refers to artifacts or unfolding events. Finally, culture-specific versions can also be used to identify objects with local flavor to enhance the delivery of the story.

Images of Human Characters

Illustrations of characters in this selection include a father, mother, daughter, stepmother, stepsister(s), husband-to-be, and supernatural beings. Images of fathers depict poor farmers or fishers in several variants. The father from Indonesian variant was not identified, but it can be assumed that he is an older man. However, given the rural setting of the story, one can also expect that the father is a farmer.

Images of mothers came in two forms, i.e., the one that grew up with the child and died and those that were dead at the onset of the story. Several variants depicted the dead mothers at the beginning of the story, while some mentioned them as alive during the early years of the child. The Hmong/Laotian variant was the only one that created a different image of a mother in the story -- she turned into a cow to help the family till the land.

Again, several variants depicted a cruel stepmother who was jealous of her stepdaughter's beauty and grace. The Philippine variant was the only picturebook that presented two stepsisters. The Vietnamese variant has a stepsister born after the marriage of the father and the stepmother. In variants where there was only one stepsister, the stepsister is identified as younger compared to the character of *Cinderella*.

The image of the husband-to-be always included royalty or a young man who is affiliated with the position of wealth and power. Several variants have a prince or king as the image of a husband-to-be character while others portrayed images of men of influence.

Images of Non-Human Characters

Images of non-human characters were present in all variants. These non-human characters either take the form of a human such an "old man" or a "beautiful woman," or animals. Non-human characters that took human forms were identified as spirits. In the Cambodian variant, it is called the spirit of virtue while in the Philippine variant, it is recognized as the spirit of the forest. Several variants use fish as an image of a non-human character helping the girl. Others include birds such as sparrows and blackbirds. Domestic animals such as a cow, ox, pig, horse, rooster, or chicken also provided the images of non-human characters. Other pictures of non-human characters included a crocodile.

Images of Culture-Specific Artifacts

Artifacts are objects produced by human work. Images of artifacts in the different variants used adjectives to enhance the visualization process. The following are phrases used to improve the visual images of the objects mentioned in the stories: dainty, golden slippers (Cambodia); *Sarong* and pure blouse of gold (Indonesia); the shining carriage pulled by a white horse (Indonesia); apron embroidered with delicate needlework (Hmong/Laos); exquisite purses (Hmong/Laos); silver necklace (Hmong/Laos); dainty shoes (Hmong/Laos); black and white handkerchiefs (Philippines); silk blouse (Vietnam); and brocade slippers (Vietnam).

Texts Describing Unfolding Events

In all *Cinderella* variants from these Asian countries, the story unfolds in the death of a loved one such as a father (e.g., Vietnam). The second event is the marriage between the father and the stepmother. The third event involved the maltreatment of the girl by her stepmother and stepsister. The fourth event identifies a celebration like the Autumn festival (Vietnam) or New Year celebration (Hmong/Laos), dance at the palace (Indonesia) where the girl meets her husband-to-be. The Philippine variant did not have a celebration event instead, the young man found the enchanted tree and the ring that he took from the tree made his finger swell and required a healing power of the main character.

Culture-Specific Texts Identifying Objects

In reviewing the picturebooks of a *Cinderella* story variant from a specific Asian country or culture, the author found the use of culture-specific texts beyond nouns or names of characters. *Sampot* (Cambodia) and *Sarong* (Indonesia) are culture-specific words for cloth that a woman can use to wrap-around her body like a dress. *Bathala* (creator), *Anitos* (ancestor spirits), *Datu* (chief) and *Babaylan* (priest-healer) from the Philippine variant are culture-specific designations of positions or roles in a community or society. *Sarimanok* (chicken with a colorful tail, Philippines), and *Qeng* (bamboo music instrument, Hmong/Laos) are culture-specific texts used to identify objects or names of elements found in the story.

Closer Look Using Bang's Principles

Almost all principles introduced by Bang (2000) were observed in the picturebooks selected for this inquiry (See Appendix D-1 to 3). Some picturebooks of Cinderella variants (from Hmong/Laos, Philippines, and Vietnam) did not have strong depictions of the second principle about the use of vertical shapes. One might argue that these picturebooks are for the entertainment of children, so the presence of scary images is not welcomed.

Another principle that was not powerfully demonstrated across the selected picturebooks pertained to the use of upper half of a picture as “a place of freedom, happiness, and triumph” (Bang, 2000, p. 54). Only the Philippine variant demonstrated this principle given having several spirits as characters in the story.

The results of this section of inquiry inform the reader that almost all these principles are quite universal in their application to illustrating picturebooks. However, there are cultural preferences that might not be aligned with these principles and require further study and elaboration when introducing picturebooks to young readers.

Closer Look Using Picturebook Codes

Moebius (1986) describes different codes in looking at picturebooks, including position, perspective, frame, line, and color. Position refers to “whether the main character is depicted high or low on the page, in the center or on the fringe, on the lefthand side or the right” (p. 148). Each position communicates to the reader a certain understanding of the story and how the characters are part of it. Perspective as a code includes the “presence or absence of horizon or horizontals, vanishing points, and contrast between facades and depths” (p. 149). Frame as a code “enables the reader to identify with a world inside and outside the story” (p. 150). Line’s thickness or thinness as the code could communicate the “intensity of the character’s experience” (p. 150).

Finally, color as a code is traditionally associated with the presence in a picture about certain moods or feelings. However, linkages of color to different objects, especially culture-specific ones, might produce a different meaning to the reader than what is commonly understood by the reader’s community.

An observation emerges after reviewing these *Cinderella* variants – the presence of a flower or flowers in each picturebook except for the Hmong/Laotian variant. Lotus flower is evident in Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Indonesian variants. The image might be a symbolic icon to communicate the religious or philosophical underpinnings present in these cultures. The Philippine variant had a periwinkle as a floral image but could not find any religious significance yet. Though the Hmong/Laotian variant did not have an image similar to the Philippines, the background used in almost all page illustrations was a depiction of green mountains. The picture of the lush, green mountainsides actively communicates the life of Hmong as a people and culture.

Acquiring Knowledge about Cultures Using Picturebooks

Given the results of this initial review and exploration of picturebooks of the *Cinderella* folktale variant from Asian countries, it is apparent that their use in the classrooms of young children promotes perceptions of culture. Images of characters communicate individual roles and family life that may not be accurate, given contemporary realities. Images of non-human characters lend themselves to children’s perceptions of spiritual existence that might conflict with their upbringing, i.e., religious, social, and economic, etc. Images of cultural artifacts and culture-specific texts that described unfolding events provide glimpses of what is significant to a culture or group of people. Finally, culture-specific texts of objects offer an invitation for children to explore other resources to understand better the cultural context of the story that they are reading.

Understanding Bang’s (2000) principles in illustrating picturebooks and Moebius’s picture codes might be helpful to young readers to decode the picturebooks. Teaching the different principles to children could help them relate abstract concepts like calm and stability to real ones. Also, by starting to talk about the position, perspective, frame, line, and color of images first, children might be able to make stronger associations and connections of what they see to enhance understanding of the texts they read.

Beyond the *Cinderella* Variants and Teaching Culture-Specific Picturebooks

In what ways teachers can respond to these challenges of teaching culture through picturebooks? Teachers can respond to the challenge of selecting multicultural children’s book in several ways (Alexander & Morton, 2007; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014): curriculum review; collaboration

with other teachers; consultation with the cultural expert; and creation of multicultural experiences.

Curriculum review is a critical piece in selecting children's book for the classroom to teach about culture because it allows the teacher to identify opportunities to bring in such resources into the curriculum. Teachers can use the table below to make notes as they review children's books for their classroom, given their curricular needs for teaching diversity or cross-cultural elements. First, they can fill in the blanks on the first row: theme, plot, characterization, setting, and style. Then, they can identify images, texts or narratives that support the elements. Also, they can indicate the authority of the authors and artists in telling the story as well as the perspective that they present. Another strategy is to use plus (+) or minus (-) signs to indicate if a particular image, text or narrative is supportive or not to what they know about the culture or the cultural group. Also, teachers can note pages where these reside.

Table 1.

Children's Book Selection Matrix

Curricular concepts address	Theme(s)	Plot	Characterization	Setting(s)	Style(s)
1.	1.		1.		
2.	2.		2.		
Images					
Texts					
Narratives					
Authority					
Perspective					

Teachers' time is always limited, so collaboration with other teachers is an essential response to the challenge for all teachers to consider when thinking of using children's books in their classrooms to teach about a culture or diverse perspectives. Teachers can share children's books that they used in their class that met curricular needs as well as teaching ideas on how to use them. Other forms of collaboration include co-teaching using children's book by presenting the different point of views, and developing or sharing of cultural "nuggets" that provide the overview of critical elements in a particular culture or cultural group.

Bringing in people from the culture helps students understand that different perspectives are real and is embodied in a real person. For example, in discussing migration and immigration concepts, teachers can invite somebody from other cultures to talk about the experience of moving from one country to another. To prepare for such an encounter, students can prepare by reading a book about immigrants or other children's book espousing similar themes. If students from different cultures are present in the classroom, teachers can use them as cultural consultants as well when reading a particular children's book that incorporates their background or cultural context.

Experience is always considered a good teacher. It is essential for teachers to create multicultural experiences for students to make sense of what they are reading. After reading a story, teachers may engage their students on a field trip to a place where they will experience a cross-cultural experience.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Cinderella is one of the stories that brought me back to children's literature, and then to picturebooks. As a student, teacher, and someone who enjoys multicultural children's literature, I firmly believe that the creation and use of culture-specific children stories will become a vital literacy issue in K-12 education. Given this, teachers must create opportunities in their classrooms to get students engaged not only in their learning but more so in identifying themselves as productive members of a diverse society.

Children's books, like the *Cinderella* folktale variants, can act as a conduit for these children to learn and grow amidst complex and multiple cultural identities, academic expectations, and choices. It is also essential for teachers and their students to work with materials free of bias and stereotypes. To meet this challenge, teachers need to continuously perform curriculum review to identify areas where multicultural children's literature can be integrated, engage in collaboration with other teachers and consultation with those who have cross-cultural experiences, and provide classroom activities that allow students to take a closer look at accessible cultural artifacts like picturebooks with multicultural contexts. Finally, teachers need to create opportunities for all their students to experience cultures based on their readings by bringing in resources from the school and the community at large.

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