Diversity Books for Young Children

Sarah Childers, Indiana

Young children may be my best teachers when it comes to issues of equity. With their open, inquisitive minds and often brutal honesty, young children are unmatched when it comes to asking hard questions, pointing out differences, and keeping parents and teachers accountable. When someone looks, speaks or acts differently from their accustomed norm, young children are not shy to ask why, often loudly and in public.

The conversation between adult and child (and the unwilling subject of conversation) can be profound, funny or startlingly tragic. How many times have we overheard a child in the grocery store ask their parent something along the lines of "why is that man walking funny?" only for the parent to shush the child and tell them not to stare. How many times might we have responded this way ourselves, out of fear of embarrassing the person of interest? While thinking we are being "polite," this response sends the message to the child that differences are not okay to talk about, see, or point out, and are therefore shameful and bad. The child's voice gets silenced, and an opportunity is lost.

Young children also love to point out differences among themselves, excluding others because of any of a million reasons. Questions arise among preschoolers about why one child doesn't eat meat, or another child has two moms. Young children notice differences in skin color too, differences we are often reluctant to address. In hindsight I'm wondering who is really protected by the silencing around difference; is it the person who is different or the adult who does the silencing?

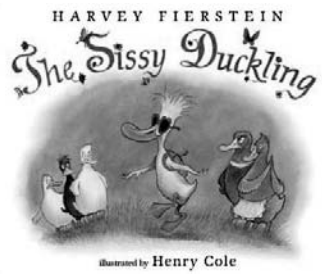
We must answer questions when they arise, honestly and openly, so that differences are not kept in the shadows, unspoken and unvalued. We must recognize differences *with* young children in order to build within them the capacity to feel secure about their own individuality and differences as well as value the differences in others.

A visit to my local library's web site proved very helpful in finding resources for addressing diversity issues with young children. Their diversity booklist provided a wealth of children's books, of which I picked only a handful to review. I found the following books helpful and often simply profound.

Who is the Beast?
by Keith Baker

Suitable for the youngest listeners, *Who is the Beast?* is a gorgeously illustrated picture book that introduces us to a tiger who wonders why all of the animals in the jungle are scared of him. The snake is scared of his big green eyes, the monkey of his swishing tail. But the tiger is wise, and points out that they all have eyes, and that the monkey too has a swishing tail. By finding common ground, they come to understand one another and see that, in fact, they are all beasts.

The Sissy Duckling
by Harvey Fierstein



Elmer is a duck who has many talents. He loves to bake, put on puppet shows, and build sand castles. But none of the other boy ducks like to do the same things as Elmer. When Elmer's dad tries to teach him baseball, Elmer is relieved when he strikes out and can go back to the things he enjoys. His father is ashamed, especially when the other boys call him a sissy. His father disowns him, and Elmer leaves home to make his way alone. But when a hunter shoots his father, Elmer's unique talents and caring save his life, and open the door to renewing their relationship. A great story about being different, strained family relationships, and accepting your own gifts and uniqueness.

Bigmama's
by Donald Crews

In this nostalgic story, a black man recalls a summer from his childhood when he and his family took a long journey to Bigmama's ("Not that she was big, but she was Mama's mama") and tells of their delight in discovering that everything is just as they remember it. The children explored around the house, the pond, the chicken coop, and found an adventure at each turn. Better yet, they found strength in family and created

(continued on page 21)

group was to provide the cool and hard feedback requested to improve his written communication.

I wondered to what extent time was being taken up with compliments because Israel shared a passionate and powerful piece of work or because within this piece of work, Israel already surpassed the limited expectations we hold, socially and institutionally, for our English language learn- *(continued on page 23)*

In The Times of Gold
(excerpt from Israel's epic poem)

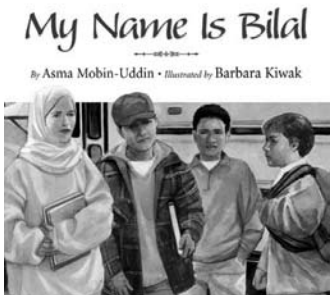
The end of the month is hear and we
get the money, which appears not to
be ours
The white men has collected his dinero
just as usual and once again the
Tortilla, salt, and lemon will fill the
stomach of my family
The earth would be sad now that she
knows that I would be leving her
For a different land
She cries because the hands that will
touch her
Leave scratches
I cry too, because I don't know how the
earth
Would treat me now that she knows I
have substituted her for the white,
red, and blue
But before I leave I live my patria I lave
you this message that "I would never
change
You for anything"
I love you but the leaders of
This time don't really want me here
because
I don't know How to read, write, and
even talk
They say it's my fault, but
They don't see that they have kept me
oppressed for centuries
Now I know how to see the truth
beyond the lines
I have crossed two worlds to come into
this one...

cherished memories to last a lifetime.

More More More Said the Baby
by Vera B. Williams

A tickling, hugging, laughing good time for "babies" (early childhood through kindergarten)! This story tells of three different families and how they adore their little ones. The books' three love stories are Little Guy, about a white boy and his father, Little Pumpkin about a black girl with her white grandmother, and Little Bird, about an Asian girl and her mother. *More More More* is a great introduction to variety in family compositions and similarities in love.

My Name is Bilal
by Asma Mobin-Uddin



Bilal and his sister Ayesha are the new kids at school, and on top of that, they are the only Muslims. When some boys tease Ayesha and pull off her hijab (headscarf), Bilal is too scared to help her. He tells the children in his class that his name is Bill, and Al is his middle name. He doesn't want anyone to know he's Muslim, for fear that he will be teased and tormented too. Fortunately, Bilal's teacher offers him some help in the form of a book about his namesake, and by reading that powerful story, Bilal is able to stand up for himself, his sister, and his beliefs. ■

For a more complete list of children's books that address diversity, see our web site at www.nsrfharmony.org/connections.html

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