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Teachers and Librarians Collaborate: Teaching about Family and Community through Children’s Literature

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Collaboration between a library media specialist and a teacher can range from mere co-existence to a true educational partnership.  

(M. J. Johnson, 2005, 22)

Children’s librarians and educators have a long history of informal collaboration. Research supports collaborative instructional planning between educators and librarians, and experts offer recommendations for facilitating effective collaboration (Johnson, 2005; Tuzzo, 2004; Haycock, 2004). Effective teacher-librarian collaborative projects “honor the library media specialist as a technologist, information intermediary, and instructional leader, and the teacher as a content and classroom management expert” (Johnson, 2005, pp. 22-26). Librarians and teachers each should demonstrate an attitude of having something important to contribute, as well as an understanding of, and appreciation for, the input and expertise of others. Finally, effective collaborations begin with identification of mutual goals and objectives (Small, 2002).

Margit is an academic librarian and a children’s literature scholar. Gail, a former elementary classroom teacher, currently teaches social studies methods courses in a graduate teacher education program. Both authors advocate teachers’ use of quality children’s books in the classroom. We also believe that, through the use of children’s books about family and community, students have opportunities to learn about people, culture, traditions, values, and everyday lives similar to and different from their own. Our mutual interests led us to collaborate on a children’s literature project focusing on Family and Community. Together, in this article, we focus on books by the well-known children’s author and professional illustrator Patricia Polacco, to provide realistic and memorable examples of the cultures of diverse peoples within one’s own community. Related National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards include I. Culture, II. Time, Continuity and Change, and IV. Individual Development and Identity (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).

Both authors had the opportunity to hear Polacco speak at author talks where she shared her background and details regarding how she came to write children’s books. During her author
presentations, Polacco emphasizes the influence of her family, especially her grandparents, on her writing. Polacco's family, she says, inspired her to write, gave her valuable insight into the importance of family ties, and taught her lessons about the positive effects everyone gains when young people interact with and learn from older family members. Many of Polacco's books include examples of such interactions.

When Polacco speaks with educators and parents, she also talks about how she values opportunities to know people of diverse cultural backgrounds. On her website, Polacco tells about the California neighborhood where she spent much of her childhood: "What I loved the most about this neighborhood is that all of my neighbors came in as many colors, ideas and religions as there are people on the planet. How lucky I was to know so many people that were so different and yet so much alike." (http://www.patriciapolacco.com/author/bio/bio.html, retrieved July 22, 2011).

Clearly, Polacco's multicultural experiences and perspectives influence a number of her books. Both authors were favorably impressed with Polacco's work and recognized how well the themes from many of her books fit with National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) curriculum themes. As a result, we decided to collaborate on a set of related resources to help teachers incorporate Polacco's work in the elementary classroom.

To begin work on our collaborative project, Margit provided Gail with a collection of Polacco's books, and Gail provided Margit with a brief description of the NCSS Curriculum Themes. We decided the project should be structured as an annotated bibliography of Polacco's books related specifically to NCSS curriculum themes, and should include instructional objectives and related teaching strategies. Each book in our bibliography relates to the social studies standards strands I. Culture, II. Time, Continuity and Change, and IV. Individual Development and Identity.

We share the results of our collaboration (below), and encourage teachers and librarians to adapt the collection to fit specific instructional needs.


A family gathers at a farmhouse to celebrate Christmas in the Russian Orthodox tradition. The celebration takes place on Epiphany in January at Uncle Vladimir's (Vova's) house with traditional decorations and foods from the family's Russian heritage. A special treat for the children is the nighttime sleigh ride and decorating an outdoor evergreen tree with berries, popcorn, bags of suet and grain for the wild birds.

**Objectives**
Think independently and critically in order to understand one's place in a diverse world.

Describe how other cultures and/or countries celebrate holidays.

Identify traditions and customs that families practice.

Suggested Activities

Prepare a planning web about and discuss holiday traditions celebrated by the students in your class and/or their families. Individual students may write about a holiday tradition based on their own experiences.

Have students work in small groups to create a Venn diagram, comparing their own holiday traditions with that of children from other countries/cultures. Students will present their diagram to the class and summarize comparisons made.


Three children come up with a moneymaking scheme to buy a beautiful Easter hat for "Grandma Eula", who cooks tasty Sunday chicken dinners. Mr. Kodinski, owner of the store, and the children have a misunderstanding. Mr. Kodinski eventually agrees to sell the children's decorated eggs in his shop to help them pay for Grandma Eula's hat.

Objectives

Consider how friendship and caring for others require reciprocity.

Understand importance of cooperating with others to work toward common goals.

Suggested Activities

Think/pair/share: Have you ever had a friend who is a grownup? How is being a friend with a grownup different from being friends with someone your own age?

Write (or draw) about a time when you worked with others to achieve a common goal. Did everyone agree at first on what to do or how to do it? How did your group resolve its differences?


When Mrs. Katz's husband dies, a young African-American boy named Larnel befriends the older Jewish woman. Larnel gives Mrs. Katz a kitten named Tush. As he helps her care for the kitten, Larnel learns about Mrs. Katz's heritage, and the common struggles and triumphs of the Jewish and African-American peoples.
Objectives

Describe some elements of Jewish culture.

Recognize and appreciate multiple perspectives.

Suggested Activities

As students listen to or read the book, have them identify aspects of Jewish culture that relate to celebrations (foods, traditions, relevant holidays). Ask students to write a non-fiction paragraph incorporating what they have learned about Jewish culture from Mrs. Katz and Tush.

How are the two characters (Larnel and Mrs. Katz) different? What do they have in common? Discuss the reason why the two characters admire and like each other (differences make them unique).

Discuss with the class why/how each individual in the class is unique or special. Use the board or chart paper to describe unique characteristics and/or contributions of individual students. Discuss how this list makes the class as a group unique and special, too.


As a Jewish couple shares the harvest traditions of Sukkoth with neighboring children, a devastating firestorm rips through the hills of Oakland, California and destroys their neighborhood. The couple’s cat Tikvah hides in the Sukkah (a hut of sticks prepared for the Sukkoth celebration), which miraculously remained unburned. The cat’s survival represents hope to the neighbors.

Objectives

Identify traditions and customs that families practice.

Consider how cultural customs bring a community together.

Suggested Activities

Sukkoth commemorates the time the Israelites made temporary shelters when they wandered in the wilderness. It also celebrates the time of harvest. Discuss Sukkoth with the class, and invite discussion about how families and communities celebrate harvest time.

Connect Tikvah’s story with current or recent news events (9-11-2001; devastation from hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods; etc.). How do people pull together to overcome disastrous events? What
brings them hope?


Marcel's (Polacco's great-aunt) and her daughter Monique help Jews escape to freedom from Nazis during the French Resistance. Monique awakens one night to find Sevrine, a young Jewish girl, sitting on her bed admiring Pinouff, Monique's cat. Sevrine lives with her parents and others in Marcel's basement, returning only at night until Nazi occupation threatens to expose their hiding place and they must flee to save their lives.

Objectives

Recognize, respect, and appreciate diversity present in many neighborhoods. Demonstrate acceptance of personal worth and the worth of others.

Suggested Activities

Younger students: Why did Marcel and Monique want to help Sevrine and her family and friends? Are there people in our community who fear for their safety because of their beliefs or religion?

Older students: Explore the role of the Righteous Gentiles in the holocaust. Map or chart countries where Jewish people were hidden, and where they could escape if necessary. What happened to the others?


Trisha and her family are preparing for Hanukkah in Michigan when, suddenly, scarlet fever strikes the neighborhood. Trisha's family rushes to their neighbors' aide by preparing a holiday dinner for them and delivering Christmas trees.

Objectives

Identify traditions and customs that families practice.

Describe how members of a community work together to help one another.

Respect diverse cultures and belief systems.

Suggested Activities

Talk about times students or their families or churches have helped members of a community. List examples from students' experiences, and brainstorm other ways students or their families can help those in need.
Discuss similarities and differences between Trisha’s family and their neighbors. How did similarities and differences influence Trisha’s family’s decision to provide neighbors with holiday dinners and Christmas trees?


Polacco tells the story of a quilt her great-great-grandmother created from old clothes, and passed down from generation to generation-in one form or another. In this tenth anniversary edition, the author has expanded the story to include more text, family photos, and paintings of her own two children.

Objectives

Identify traditions and customs that families practice.

Consider how customs and traditions change over time.

Learn about and appreciate diverse cultures present in the classroom and local community.

Suggested Activities

List traditions portrayed throughout the book. Compare traditions of early generations with traditions of the modern generation. Which customs or traditions continued through the generations? Which changed? Have small groups of students create a chart to depict their findings.

Conduct an investigation of your classroom’s ethnic heritage. Make charts, maps and graphs to show where the different families originated, or different ethnic/religious groups represented. List relevant immigration dates (if possible) on charts or graphs.

Additional Patricia Polacco Books about Family, Community, and/or Culture


The villagers are convinced that the dreamer Appelemondo will never amount to much but his dreams change the village and all the people in it.


A collection of traditional rhymes is rewritten to feature Russian characters and scenes.


A mysterious Indian woman takes William and Mabel on a strange boat ride and answers their questions about the wind, the rain, and the changing nature of the sky.

An Amish girl, whose elders have impressed upon her the importance of simplicity, is horrified when one of her hen's eggs hatches into an extremely fancy bird.


In this story a young Ukrainian girl must repeatedly return to the wren she has rescued to relay her parents' increasingly greedy demands.


A quiet rural community is dramatically changed when a meteor crashes down in the front yard of the Gaw family.


The author remembers the summer when she was ten years old and staying with her father in Michigan where she took riding lessons and became friends with a perfect horse.


A girl recalls the special summer spent in Michigan with her yarn spinning father and a magic rock.


After losing running, climbing, throwing and burping competitions to his obnoxious older brother, a young boy makes a wish on a falling star.


Having failed to win the pumpkin carving, pie eating, and seed spitting contests, William hopes to impress Hester by winning the dress up competition.


Say Curtis describes his meeting with Pinkus Aylee, a black soldier, during the Civil War, and their capture by Southern troops.


An injured goose, having broken the painted eggs intended for the Easter Festival, lays thirteen marvelously colored eggs to replace them, then leaves behind one final miracle in egg form before returning to her own kind.

On her birthday Dad takes a young girl and her brother to see the Monster at Clay Pot Bottom.


At first, Trisha loves school, but her difficulty learning to read makes her feel dumb, until a new teacher helps her understand and overcome her problem.


Young Patricia is afraid of the thunderstorms at her grandma’s farm in Michigan. Then Grandma teaches her to make Thunder Cake. Shared experiences and family traditions are used to calm a child’s fears.

Patricia Polacco Audiovisual Materials about Family, Community, and/or Culture


References


