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Traditional folktales enter the classroom

Thursday, August 11, 2005

By Stephanie Samuel
Special to the AFRO

Folktales are rich oral histories grounded in cultural tradition and life experiences. Yet few of these precious stories have bridged the diversity divide to mainstream recognition in U.S. culture. However, things are changing.



Folktales that existed exclusively within separate cultures for many centuries are entering the U.S. educational system as highly beneficial "teaching stories." Psychologists and educators are busily working to understand and receive the positive cognitive effects these fictive stories offer.

"Stories have been part of all cultures from time immemorial, but only recently has their psychological significance been discovered," said Professor Robert Ornstein, a heavily published psychologist who has written 20 books related to his profession. As a professor and a proponent of "teaching stories" and their educational wealth, he shared his findings on their psychological benefit at a presentation at the Library of Congress in 2002.

"These stories, with improbable events that lead the reader's mind into new and unexplored venues, allow [the reader] to develop more flexibility and to understand this complex world better" said Ornstein

In May, the Rosemount Center, a nonprofit education provider in Adams-Morgan in Northwest

Washington, began using traditional Afghan folktales translated and rewritten by writer Idries Shah to teach preschool children to read in different languages.

"It was a really great way to extend the program we have here," said Amy Donahue, Rosemount's curriculum education manager.



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The center, established in 1972, provides Early Head Start programs for toddlers and preschoolers in addition to its day care services. Both the toddler and preschool programs are taught through a bilingual curriculum.

A large number of the families served by the Rosemount Center are Spanish-speaking immigrant families living at or below poverty level. Sixty-eight percent of the center's 157 preschool children are Latino.

The bilingual curriculum, taught jointly by English- and Spanish-speaking teachers, encourages Latino children to be literate in both languages. For the other Rosemount preschoolers the bilingual education offers the rare opportunity to learn a new second language, and sometimes a third language, at a young age as part of the center's 50/50 language immersion program.

The Afghan tales are appealing to Rosemount because they are translated in both English and Spanish on CD. "Many of our children have very few books at home, much less books in Spanish," said Donahue.

Now, the center's 157 preschool children all have a paperback version of the book *The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water*, along with the bilingual CD, to take home and enjoy in either English or Spanish.

Rosemount's child psychologist, Fabiola Azcarate, monitors the children's mental and educational progress. Her assessment of the "teaching stories" approach is similar to Ornstein's. "This book is very good for language and very good for life," said Azcarate.

The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water teaches the children higher-level vocabulary. The center uses the book to teach the children to read and recognize words in both English and Spanish.

"The book is good," said Donahue. "It has advanced vocabulary."

Each of Shah's books has a few higher-level words for the children to figure out, one of which is "reflection."

"Everyone knows what 'reflection' means now," said Donahue.

Azcarate said the children also follow the emotions of the characters and try to figure out why they feel that way. "They don't know what is the reason why the lion has a fear," she said.

Shah's story tells of Share, a misunderstood lion that later learns how frightening his appearance is when he becomes afraid of his own likeness.

The book allows the children to use their mental skills to figure out the lion's dilemma and relate to his emotions.

Rosemount receives its storybooks and related course training from the Share Literacy Program, for which Ornstein serves as a board member. Share Literacy is a curriculum-building organization that partners with Hoopoe Books, the publisher of *The Lion*, and the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge.

Dan Sperling, a spokesman for the mid-Atlantic region of Share Literacy, values folktale teaching stories for their culture.

"These stories have been in Africa, Afghanistan, Asia and many other cultures," said Sperling. "Most of these stories are more than a thousand years old."

Share Literacy creates curricula based on Hoopoe Afghan tales and accepts the Afghan tales as original stories that have not been tampered with by American culture. "The only source of pure educational stories in the U.S. is Hoopoe stories," Sperling said.

Hoopoe Books has published all nine of Shah's teaching stories, four of which are in both Spanish and English, for schools and other educational programs. *The Lion* has been the most popular of the books since it was first published in 1998.

At Rosemount, the book is also read daily in the center's preschool classes. All five of the preschool classes, named after animals, have regular story times when the book is read.

The children in the bear class, "ositos" in Spanish, participate in a ritual to get ready for reading time. They gather in a circle around their English-speaking teacher, Christy Caulker, and sing, "If You Want to Hear a Story" to the familiar tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It".

"They're excited about [the book]," said Donahue "They ask for it." The children in the lion class get to choose whether to hear the story in English or Spanish. In the end, the children prefer for their Spanish-speaking teacher, Hilton Cermeno, to read the book in Spanish. They respond to *El León Que se Vio en el Agua* in both English and Spanish. "I like when the lion goes 'grrrr!'" said 4-year-old Beatriz Huerta. Beatriz and other members of the lion class performed the story as a play at the preschool graduation ceremony in June. The Rosemount Center plans to continue using Afghan teaching stories as part of their curriculum. The new book for the upcoming school year is Shah's *The Farmer's Wife*.

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