

85 - The Importance and Impact of Sharing Diverse Books with Young Readers

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. And as always, we will be uploading a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we'll come to you with a 10-minute professional development with new ideas for you to try. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for notifications about future episodes.

We are so, so excited to have with us today, Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood. And let me just tell you, her bio is packed.

So here we go. JaNay Brown-Wood is an award-winning and New York Times bestselling author, children's book author, poet, educator, scholar. She holds her BA in psychology, and applied developmental psychology from UCLA.

Her MA in child development from CSU Sacramento, and her PhD in education from UC Davis. JaNay's first children's book is titled Imani's Moon, and it won the NAESP Children's Book of the Year award. She's been featured on Stephen Colbert's The Late Show, and Storytime with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Her second book, Grandma's Tiny House, A Counting Story, has received several starred reviews from Publishers Weekly, and it won the CELI Read Aloud Book Award. Her third book, Shhh, The Baby's Asleep, received a starred review from School Library Journal. JaNay lives in California with her husband, Catrell, her daughter, Vivian, and two turtles.

She loves writing for kids. She loves spending time with her family, teaching about child development and literacy, and spreading the word about the importance of diversity in children's literature. We are thrilled to have her as our guest today, and we're also going to give you a little glimmer of her forthcoming books in our session.

So, JaNay, welcome, and thank you for taking the time with us today.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Thank you so much for having me. Wow, hearing that bio, I'm like, is she talking about me? So, thank you for having me.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: You have done some amazing things, and when you turned your title of your session in today, which is The Importance and Impact of Sharing Diverse Books with Young Readers, I was like, yes, because I love children's literature. I did so many things in my classroom when I was teaching, with children's literature and just teaching and using themes, and I love this. So, I want to know why you chose this as your topic and why it's important and relevant.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Absolutely, yeah, I'm a lover of children's books as well, for so many reasons, right? But the reason why I picked this topic is because literacy is so important. Getting children the skills to be able to read, write, and spell are imperative. But one of the ways to really hook them in, is the books that we provide for them.

And so, when we're able to give children diverse books, this gives you a higher likelihood of pulling them in, because if they can find characters that look like them, overcoming obstacles, this tells them, look, you can too. You can do this as well. And so, I picked this topic because I just wanted to engage in the conversation about not only the importance of

literacy, but the importance of diverse books and authentic books so children can find themselves in beautiful ways on the pages of books.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, it's so relevant for our teachers, our administrators, our families today. Do you have any suggestions for our listeners to begin picking up books and adding to their libraries?

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Yes, so one of the first things I want to talk about is this idea that Dr. Rudeen Sims Bishop coined, this idea of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. So, we want books to be mirrors for children, meaning they can open a book and see their experiences, reflected back to them in these validating ways.

But books can also be windows and sliding glass doors that gives other readers an opportunity to learn about someone else's experience, that is different than them, but then to build compassion because of this. So, you know, some suggestions I would offer is go out there and look for books that mirror your children but also give them an opportunity to learn about other experiences. So, librarians are fantastic resources.

You can walk into a library and say, I'm looking for diverse books and describe, you know, the children who are in your classrooms or in your communities, and librarians will be able to help you get some authentic books that, again, provide those mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. There are also things like there's an organization called We Need Diverse Books. It's hashtag WNDB, and they have lists and lists of different types of books you can find, based on like ethnicities or religions or regions of the world.

So, my suggestion is get out there, look for diverse books, but not just that. Look at your current libraries and ask yourself, are my books within my libraries, does it afford, you know, representation across the board? And if not, do a really deep dive and start to determine what areas can you improve, so that all the kids can find themselves on your shelves.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love this.

So, I just have a question for you real quick. What's your favorite children's book?

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Oh, that's hard. So, are we talking picture books? Are we talking like novels?

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Just what is your favorite, you know, book about diversity or with diverse children in it that you could say, go pick this up? This is amazing.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: OK, Grace Lin's *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*. It's just this is a novel. OK, it's a novel.

It's a middle grade novel. But it's great to read aloud to young children. Matter of fact, it's our bedtime choice of book right now for my six-year-olds.

Right. So, I'm reading it to her. Older kids can pick it up and it's just beautifully written.

So, I would say that's at the top of my list. *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* by Grace Lin.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: OK, perfect.

Another just quick question. We know that parents and teachers need to start reading to children at a very, very young age. Right.

But what is your reasoning for this? And how do you see this changing? Like what needs to happen?

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: We want to bathe the young brain in as much language as possible, as early on as possible. So, if we're thinking about like the science of the brain and how the brain develops, those neurons need to be stimulated. And that is what allows for these very strong networks to be established, and to build and to be strengthened.

So, when we're reading to children, we're bathing their brains in language, but not just that. We're starting to build these warm associations around books. Think about when you read books with maybe a loved one when you were younger.

You're like cuddled up. You've got, you know, it's nighttime. Maybe it's a bedtime story.

There are these warm feelings and experiences, tied to sharing a good book. So, if you're able to do that early on, then kids are getting excited about books and building these warm memories with them. And then on top of that, again, you're bathing the brain with language, and strong language skills are needed to help you build literacy skills, right, to help you build the ability to read, write and spell.

Because while language comes naturally, if your brain is typically developing and you hear language, right, and this comes naturally, but the ability to read, write and spell, has to be taught until it's built on those language skills.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And I see it, I see it, I see the organic approach and I see the more purposeful, very intentional, more planned approach. So, I love that.

Take us through, take our audience through, you know, we close our eyes. What does this look like, you know, in a setting that you've been in? I'm assuming there's probably conversations. There's probably elaboration of vocabulary.

There might be some phonemic awareness and phonics. Take us through what the actual lesson would look like.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: I love this.

Yes. So, I'm going to I'm going to use my book, Shhh, The Baby's Asleep, just for fun, OK? And what I'll already tell you about this book, it features a black family, and mama just got the baby down for a nap. And so, she's sort of creeping through the house.

And one of the young siblings is creeping through the house and everybody's making a ruckus, right? Daddy's loud belly wants PB and jelly. Grumble, grumble, grumble. And so, the the the brother's like, shh, the baby's asleep.

Well, I bring this one up because it has onomatopoeia. Right. So, like creak, creak.

These are, again, children being able to have these experiences with language. Right. So, you have onomatopoeia and the text is written in rhyme.

So, rhyme is a aspect of phonological awareness, understanding. Right. The last sound of this word sounds like the last sound of that word.

Again, getting children just familiarized with these different aspects of language. So, if I were to take you through a lesson, I would open up the book, or I'd actually start on the title page. Who wrote this book? What's an author? Who illustrated this book? What is an illustrator and have the children engage? Oh, the author wrote the story, the illustrator drew the pictures.

I might ask questions like, well, what do you think is going to happen in this book? Make a prediction. And so, again, giving them opportunities to engage. And then I start to read the story, and I might point to the words as I'm reading it, like creak, creak.

Right. And ask the children, can you say creak, creak? Or I might say, can you use your body and tiptoe like mama's doing? And so, we're moving through reading this story. And then here's a spoiler.

The baby wakes up. OK, so this tends to be one of the favorite pages of children. And so, I'm going and I'm asking them to join in.

And I would go all the way through the story, again, engaging them in the story, asking questions, giving them opportunities to use their bodies. And then at the end, you know, close the book and say the end. And we might then

have a discussion about so what happened in this story? Does anyone else have a baby brother at your house? Do you have to be quiet when your baby brother is asleep? And so, again, asking these pointed questions, to get children hearing language, comprehending the questions and then using language as they are talking to me about what we read.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that. And so, all of the books that she introduced that you've written, what got you interested in writing books?

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: You know, I so much about what I've been talking about is the importance of diversity. And I can think back to when I was a young child, and I actually hated reading.

I did not like to read. I like to be read to like by my dad or a teacher. But I hated reading.

And I think a part of the reason for that, was because I couldn't find books that looked like me. I couldn't find characters that were like me that didn't have, you know, oppression or struggles as being their story. And so, I just instead of reading books, I started writing.

So, I think I actually have a unpublished book that I wrote and illustrated, called Taylor, the Tyrannosaurus Rex. And so, I wrote this story because my little sister's name was Taylor. And so, I have all of my cousin's names in there.

They're dinosaurs. But it's like this is what my family does. And then when I got older, I started writing Detective JaNay books.

So, this is what got me started in writing. I loved story, but I just didn't like the sorts of books that were provided for me. So, I started writing my own.

And then I realized how much of a love I have for story. And then that blossomed into years of writing and practicing. And now this career where I get to do it, you know, and share my words with children all over the world.

So that's what got me started.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that. I love it.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: I have goosebumps. I mean, you really talk about the power that the component of literacy has from you at a young age. I mean, for lack of a better term, that's a game breaker for you.

It made you who you are today. And I just think that's so great. You couldn't find it.

You created it. I love that. Absolutely.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Thank you. And, you know, what I try to do then is I want to kind of take that barrier away from kids, because I want the stories that I write to pull them in in that same way. Right.

To pull them in because they see themselves in that character and they see that character overcoming. And then they internalize that message. Well, I can do it, too.

I can do that thing, too. I can do the impossible, like touch the moon, like my character Imani does in Imani's Moon. So, you know, I just want kids to get pulled into these books and really internalize their power.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Sure. Gosh, I believe. All right, Janae, we are going to wind down with three takeaways that you have for us.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Yes. So, this just goes back to what I've been talking about overall. Number one is I just believe all children should be able to find themselves represented on the pages of books, in authentic and validating ways.

So, then it becomes our job as adults and teachers to go out and find those books so children can be exposed to them. I also think number two, here's my number two takeaway, is that children should be able to have the chance to learn about others, through books as well, because maybe someone doesn't have an experience that they have, but that they

can start to build compassion and connection and empathy, by learning about someone else's experience. So, giving them those opportunities through books are so important.

And my number three takeaway is, really consider the books that you're sharing with children, and ask yourself if they are balanced, right? Do they offer different types of stories, that children from all backgrounds can relate to and can learn from? So, in other words, if you have stories about black characters, is the story only about oppression or slavery or something like that? Because you want to make sure you have a balance of, yes, some historical texts, but also just black children living their lives as Americans, with the story not being about their race, but about something else and them just being black children experiencing that. So that's just an example. So that third takeaway is just really asking yourself, are the books that you share with children balanced and do they represent the children who are all around you?

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that, and I love those examples.

I like giving our listeners examples. So, I want to leave them with one challenge. What is your challenge today?

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Here's the challenge.

Go to your bookshelf and analyze it with a critical eye. Look at the books that you have. If they're your in-home libraries, if it's your classroom libraries, really look at them and ask yourself, do you have a range of diverse stories? Do you have some mirrors that look like maybe yourself, or some of the children in your class? But do you also have sliding glass doors? So, in other words, do you have stories that have children with disabilities? Do you have stories of children who practice other types of religious practices, or from regions of the world that maybe you're not from or you've never visited? Right.

Do your stories have families with different types of compositions, like a single parent or two dads, two moms or grandparents as the guardians? Right. So, pull out those books in your bookshelves and look at them critically. And then from there, you can kind of determine, hmm, here are some areas of improvement for my bookshelves, so that I can really make sure I'm representing my kids.

And not just that. Do this for the types of books you read for fun, too. Are you reading a range of diverse stories? Because, again, it helps really build compassion and empathy, for others who are different than each of us.

So that's my challenge for the listeners.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that, and JaNay, you have really given us some things to think about.

And I think our listeners are going to take this to heart, and really start looking at their classroom libraries, because I know I sure would. I always wanted my classroom library to be diverse, to be full. I even had a parent side of the library where parents could come in, and they had resources and books available to them.

So, I think a library in your classroom is very important. So, thank you so much for being here today. We appreciate you so much.

Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood: Thank you for having me and for helping me, you know, get that word out about the importance of diversity. So, thank you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Definitely.

Thank you.