

The Joe Joe Series: A Culturally Responsive Resource

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IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM, we often introduce new units through the use of trade books. Children's literature, the best of which brings social studies content to life, is usually more engaging than textbook prose. Children's literature that shares the experiences, contributions, and perspectives of various cultural groups achieves several goals at once. It can help elementary students develop a sense of civic efficacy ("Yes, my participation does make a difference!") and acquire the attitudes and skills (such as tolerance and assertiveness, active listening and clear speaking) that are essential to the functioning of a multicultural society.¹ A series of books that we have found to be especially successful in introducing students to social studies concepts and African American historical figures are the *Joe Joe* books by Jean Alicia Elster. Through these fictional stories, all students are introduced to the real accomplishments of a variety of influential African Americans. The students also witness Joe Joe taking the knowledge and inspiration he has gained from learning about historical figures and applying them to challenges in his own life. Let's take a look at three of these books, and then see how a social studies teacher can use the lessons they contain.

Swinging True

The typical book in the series begins with a similar opening scene: Joe Joe talking with Mrs. Morgan, the librarian. Mrs. Morgan listens carefully to what Joe Joe has to say, then suggests a book or two that Joe Joe might be interested in checking out. At the beginning of *Just Call Me Joe Joe*, the first book, it is early spring, and Joe Joe makes it clear that he likes baseball. Mrs. Morgan finds a book about the early Negro Base-

ball Leagues for Joe Joe. He excitedly runs to tell his peers, Tyrone and Kalia, about the book.

Each story in this series also includes a personal dilemma that Joe Joe must work through. These dilemmas typically arise from peer pressure: Joe Joe must decide whether to adhere to his own deeper convictions or to follow the short-sighted directives of some of his peers. In this first book, Joe Joe is upset because Mr. Booth, who owns the neighborhood corner store, assumes that Joe Joe was with a gang of boys who stole from his store and vandalized it, but Joe Joe was not. While trying to decide what to do about Mr. Booth's misunderstanding, Joe Joe is also reading the book

that Mrs. Morgan gave him, learning about "Fleet" Walker (the first African American to play for a major league baseball team in the 1880s), Satchel Paige (who was a great pitcher in the Negro and Major Leagues), Josh Gibson (who was a great hitter in the Negro Leagues) and "Cool Papa" Bell (who always returned to the Negro Leagues to play even after playing in other leagues). Known for never quitting, Bell was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame after retiring from the game. After reading about these great players and the difficult life choices that each faced, Joe Joe decides that he must talk directly to Mr. Booth, and explain that he was not a part of the vandalizing gang.

Applying National, State, and Local Standards to the *Joe Joe* Series

NCSS Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- ❶ CULTURE
- ❷ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE
- ❸ PEOPLES, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS
- ❹ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES

State of Tennessee Process Standards

1. Acquiring Information
2. Analysis of Data and Problem Solving
3. Communication
4. Historical Awareness

Memphis City School's Content Standards

- Standard 1. Students should be able to analyze and discuss different forms of government and the influences of government on the lives of people.
- Standard 2. Students should be able to interpret social systems of different cultures, based on a knowledge of their arts, religions, and philosophies.
- Standard 3. Students should be able to analyze the impact of location and the interactions between the environment and people across continents.
- Standard 4. Students should be able to predict world conditions, based on knowledge of past and present social, political, and economic conditions.

Joe Joe returns to the store and talks to Mr. Booth, who admits that he realized that Joe Joe wasn't a member of the gang and apologizes for yelling at him. He also praises Joe Joe for speaking up for himself. A new understanding of trust is established between Joe Joe and Mr. Booth, like that between the boy and the librarian.

Dreaming Big

In *I Have a Dream, Too!*, Joe Joe is excited about his report card which contains all 'A's and one 'B'. His family is impressed. Mrs. Morgan gives him a book about Mary McLeod Bethune and her dream of learning to read. Two of Joe Joe's peers, Kalia and Tyrone, aren't impressed. They laugh at Joe Joe for his good grades and for having a dream of going to college. They tell him that no one from their neighborhood goes to college, so he might as well squelch that dream.

Again Joe Joe has a decision to make: will he listen to his peers' taunts and lower his expectations of himself, or will he find a way to make his dream come true? At first, Joe Joe does give up on his dream and even stops writing an essay for school about

going to college. Then he reads about Mary McLeod Bethune and how she reached and then exceeded her dream of learning to read, and eventually opening her own school and then her own college, Bethune-Cookman College, in Daytona Beach, Florida. After reading this biography, Joe Joe finishes his essay with a new spirit.

In order to begin saving money for college expenses, Joe Joe returns to Mr. Booth's store and asks him for a job. Mr. Booth hires him to work in the store. Again, Tyrone pokes fun at him, saying that he could make more money if he would work for Cecil, a young man whose business appears to be "off the books." Joe Joe talks with his mother about his friends making fun of him and tells her about his dream of going to college. She gives him encouragement. When he reads his paper aloud in class, the teacher—and his classmates—are impressed.

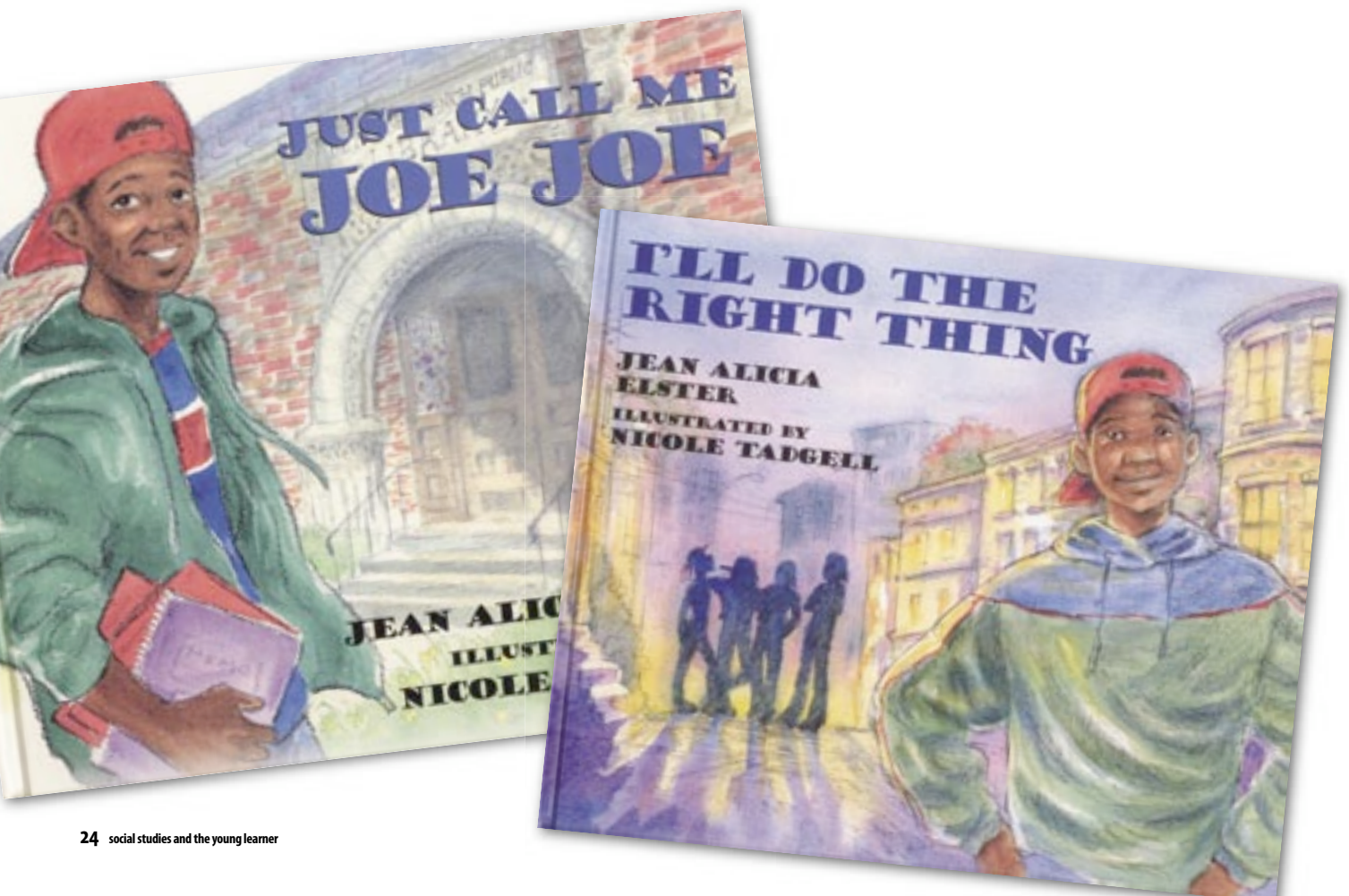
Aiming High

In *I'll Fly My Own Plane*, Joe Joe wants a remote-controlled model airplane just like Tyrone's, but he can't afford to buy one. Tyrone again tries to convince Joe Joe to work for Cecil (as does Tyrone) so

that Joe Joe can buy the plane. Joe Joe visits the library and is soon reading about notable black aviators: the Tuskegee Airmen (the first all-black unit of pilots in the Air Force during World War II), Bessie Coleman (the first African American female to fly a plane), Captain Benjamin O. Davis (the first African American general in the Air Force), Lloyd Newton (the first African American to fly with the Air Force Thunderbirds), Guion S. Bluford, Jr. (the first African American in space), Mae C. Jemison (the first African American woman in space), and Bernard A. Harris Jr. (the first African American to walk in space). After reading about how hard these people worked throughout their lives to achieve their goals, Joe Joe knows that he does not want to take the easy way out. At the end of the story, Joe Joe is happy flying the plane that his dad built for him.

Relating to Social Studies

The core strength of this series of books is the interesting counterpoint between the lives of the historical figures and the challenges that young Joe Joe faces in the here and now. Elster introduces students using authentic photos



of the historical figures, and she accurately summarizes their biographies. At the same time, as storyteller, she employs youthful, fictional—but credible—characters, Joe Joe, Kalia, and Tyrone, who will ring true to many, if not all, of the elementary crowd. Whatever his or her race or ethnic background, each student is faced with peer pressure at some point, each is confronted with moments of decision, each is faced with the apparent “limits” of his or her background and social standing.

Elster weaves character education lessons into these stories through the dilemmas Joe Joe faces and the decisions he must make within each story. In addition, Elster addresses character education through the African American heroes and heroines who are presented. Hero has been defined as “a person (female or male) whose voluntary actions reflect the moral or ethical standards—the values—of a culture at a particular point in time ...Dramatic stories about female and male heroes in the literature of history and fiction are likely to attract the attention of learners, to arouse their interest, and to raise questions among

them that lead to discussion and reflection about values.”² Elster’s stories definitely evoke these responses among students who read her books. Students are curious not only about the historical figures presented, but also about Joe Joe’s “heroic” actions on his own behalf.

Elster also explores family makeup and relationships in these stories, ethnic stereotyping, and the value of work. She explores several other components of social studies, such as geography (places that the historical figures lived or visited), economics (Joe Joe’s parents’ occupations, his mother wanting to attend college and needing money to do so, his working at the store or for Cecil), social relationships and personal identity (the personality and self-concept of Joe Joe, how Joe Joe received reinforcement from his grandmother, parents, Mrs. Morgan, and eventually Mr. Booth), and anthropology (describing African American culture, tradition, customs, rituals and kinship patterns)

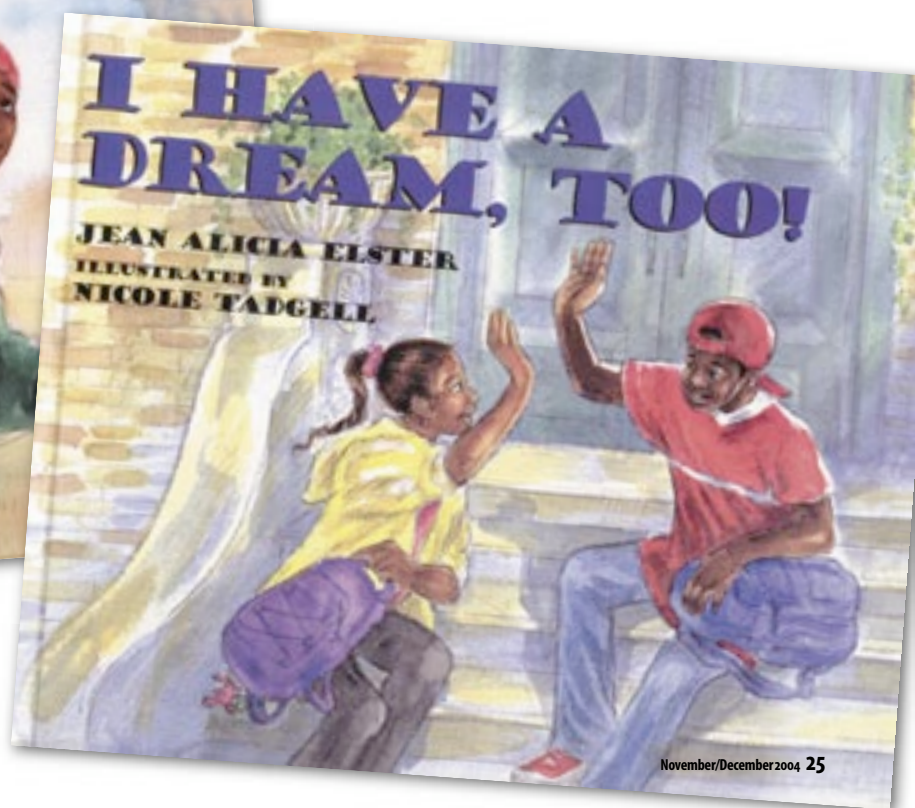
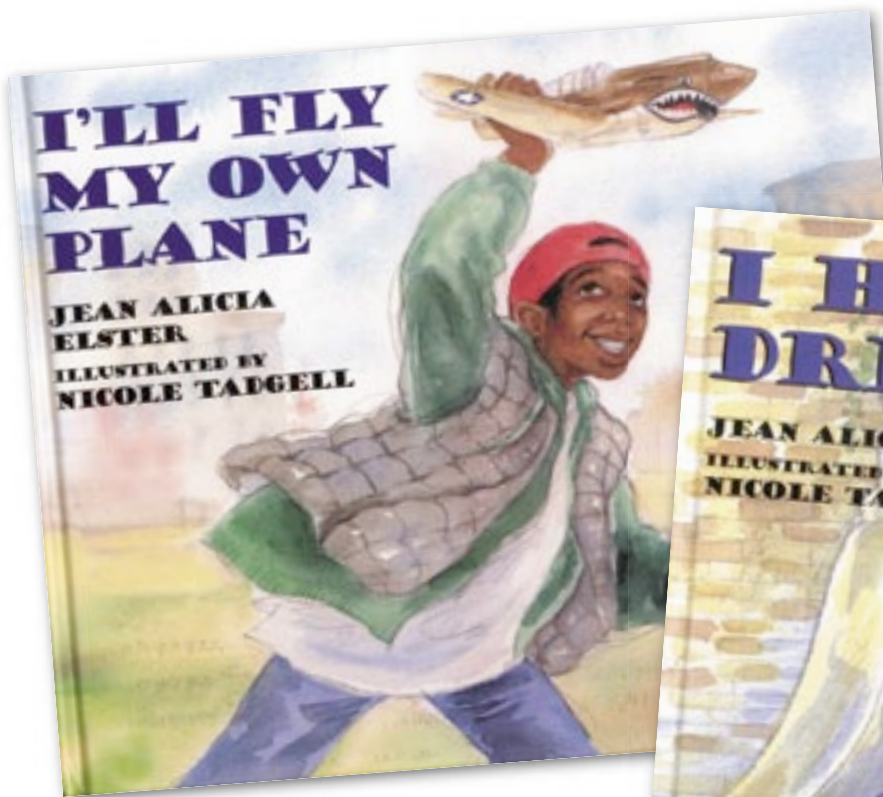
Elster also does a great job of weaving Mrs. Morgan and the library into these stories. In doing this, Elster points

out the importance of reading and how it can change lives. She also helps students understand that it is okay to achieve and do well in school; and that you do not have to give in to peer pressure. In the end your friends may look up to you for being a strong individual.

Other Social Studies Activities

Below we suggest some integrated learning, hands-on activities that will engage students and assist them in making connections between the Joe Joe stories and their real-world experiences.

1. Have students complete cooperative biographies on each of the African American historical figures that they are introduced through these books;
2. Have students compare and contrast, using a Venn Diagram, how their families are similar to and different from Joe Joe’s family. Facilitate a discussion about their families. Have students brainstorm and discuss their own family customs, traditions, culture, rituals, and kinship patterns and compare them to Joe Joe and with themselves. The teacher



A Conversation with the Author of the Joe Joe Series

In January of 2004, I interviewed Jean A. Elster, author of the Joe Joe Series. By the end of my conversation with Mrs. Elster, I felt as if I had made a friend. —N.C.B.

Boyd: Who or what inspired you to write the Joe Joe series?

Elster: Initially, Judson Press asked me to write a children's book with emphasis on urban children. They were aware that I had written children's literature passages for standardized testing services. Also, at that time, my son was ten years old, and I wanted to address the concerns of parents raising children in an urban environment. There were certain challenges and issues that I felt were unique to six to ten year olds. And, since there is a large Middle Eastern and Hispanic population in Detroit, I also wanted to write something that people of all cultures could appreciate. I wanted to create a book that parents of children of color could read—either with them or to them—and then address the issues and concerns confronting Joe Joe with their children. I also wanted the books to be educational and entertaining. One particular situation stood out in my mind as I developed these issues. My son and I were in a local department store. He was standing away from me with his hands in his pockets. I got out of the checkout line, walked over to him, and told him to take his hands out of his pockets, so that they would not think that he was stealing. I knew right then that he had reached the point in his development where he was no longer viewed by society as just a cute little boy, but rather, as a potential thief or criminal. I wanted the series to address situations such as these in a helpful and sensitive way for both parents and their children.

Boyd: In writing the books, did you realize that you were developing such a great teaching tool for classroom teachers, or did you think you were just writing a good book that African American children could share with their parents?

Elster: My main focus was parents being the teachers. I was not thinking about the classroom. I wanted parents to teach their kids and hoped that both parents and children could learn and be edified. I didn't realize that they were being used in classrooms until my book signings when classroom teachers would come to me to sign their books. They would tell me that they had been looking for books such as these to use in the classroom. I also wanted to include African-American historical figures that were not as well-known as Martin Luther King Jr. and Jackie Robinson. I wanted lesser-known historical figures who could be introduced to the parents and children. I researched the historical figures' backgrounds and felt that this was creating an excellent opportunity for parents to teach their children.

Boyd: The use of authentic pictures of the historical figures as well as including authentic statements about the figures is a wonderful touch to the books. What led you to include these items within the story?

Elster: In conducting my research for *Just Call Me Joe Joe*, I found vintage photos of the historical figures. I sent copies of the photos and sources to Judson's art director, and the art director found photos from the National Baseball Hall of Fame. We asked for permission

to use the photos and, from that point on, it evolved that vintage photos and sources would be included within the stories.

Boyd: I love all of the characters in the Joe Joe series. Why did you choose the family, peers, and other characters (i.e. Mrs. Morgan, Mr. Booth, Cecil) to include in the stories versus a more Huxtable-type family and environment? I especially loved the idea of Mrs. Morgan at the beginning of each story, what influenced you to include her in each book?

Elster: As I said earlier, Judson Press wanted me to write a book that focused on urban issues. Mrs. Morgan is based on an actual librarian in Detroit who had a relationship with my son. She would have books ready for my son each time he went to the library on whatever topic he had expressed interest in reading; he especially liked books about the solar system and space. In the series, I wanted Mrs. Morgan to be omniscient. Whenever she chose a book for Joe Joe, I wanted it to be the book that he needed. Additionally, I felt that it was important for children to see an African American male child who enjoyed reading and learned from reading. I want the children reading the series to become more intelligent, in-depth readers at an early age.

Regarding the family, I wanted an intact family, but at the same time, I wanted an intact family that they could relate to if their own family was not intact. I know that a lot of my children's friends lived with extended family. That is why the grandmother was included as part of Joe Joe's family. So, if there are children who live with a grandparent, they can still be affirmed about whatever their family situation is and can see themselves in Joe Joe's situation.

I included Cecil to be an antagonist character. I wanted the children to understand that he is a negative influence and a character that they do not want to be like. This is why I make sure that Cecil ultimately fails to influence Joe Joe in each book. In addition, that is why Cecil's character is not pictured in the books, although he is mentioned. My editor has already asked me to "redeem" Tyrone [in the plot of a new book], if there are any future volumes in the series.

Boyd: Peer pressure is an issue with all children today. How do you think the Joe Joe series illustrates to children that they do not have to give in to peer pressure from friends?

Elster: I address peer pressure through the [the other boys] teasing [Joe Joe] about the old baseball bat that Joe Joe's father gave him to play baseball with and through teasing about Joe Joe wanting to go to college. I show, through Mary McLeod Bethune overcoming what people said she couldn't do, that you can achieve your dreams. In the Joe Joe stories, children see that they have to believe in themselves, keep goals, and stay motivated. By doing this, they too will overcome.

Boyd: Thanks so much for these wonderful stories.

- should participate in this activity;
- Have students create a timeline of the historical figures in the stories and where they fit in history using words and pictures for descriptors. (They could do this individually, in small groups, or as the whole class.);
 - Have students create a map showing all of the places that were mentioned in relation to the historical figures and have students go on a scavenger hunt to gather as much information as they can about these various places;
 - Facilitate discussion among the students about the various decisions that Joe Joe had to make and determine how they would have reacted or changed these decisions This addresses character education issues;
 - Have students investigate other people who were the first from their ethnic group to integrate a particular field or sport;
 - Have students research other people or interview a family member who had a dream and how these people made their dreams come true. Also have students write about their own dreams;
 - Have students collaborate with family members to create a family crest, quilt, or book of thoughts;
 - Have students research, then report back to the class, on why African American baseball players were able to play baseball in other leagues, such as the Cuban leagues, but not in the major leagues in the United States, or why Bessie Coleman moved to Paris, France, in order to be a pilot. (i.e., What were the differences in the governments, laws, people, in these societies at the time?)

Language Arts Activities

There are many interdisciplinary activities that could be centered on a Joe Joe book. In the language arts, one could ask students to do one of the these activities:

- Discuss the issues that Joe Joe faced in each story by role playing in a talk show format.
- Create a character web to analyze Joe Joe's traits and cite specific examples from the book to support each trait

identified.

- Reenact a scene from the story, but instead of role-playing the scene the way it happened in the book, have students change the way the scene ends and explain why they chose that ending.
- Create a comic strip with illustrations and dialogue of their favorite scene from the story. Have students explain why this was their group's favorite scene.
- Write a letter to someone in their family, stating in what ways Joe Joe was a hero to his friends and family.
- Design an advertising campaign that would convince other students to read the Joe Joe books. They can use a TV commercial, billboard, ad in the newspaper, or Internet pop-up ad, etc. They should write a creative rap, song, jingle, poem, etc., then explain why this is a good story for other students to read.
- Write a letter to the author sharing their thoughts about the book.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teachers should be aware that each book on the Joe Joe series is prefaced with a quote from the Christian Bible or the Hebrew Scriptures, and prayer is a tradition in Joe Joe's family. Reflecting on a problem, self-reflection about one's motives and behavior, and quiet prayer are part of Joe Joe's repertoire for navigating his social environment. The series is published by Judson Press, which is a division of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, but the books do not mention that denomination or include any proselytizing statements.

In our view, these allusions to spirituality in the Joe Joe series of books are not overbearing, and do not disqualify the series from use in the public school classroom, but check with your principal before purchasing them in quantity. The series is outstanding because it does several things simultaneously, and does them all well. It teaches history, character education, interpersonal communication, and the value a good book can bring to everyday life. It is a resource that supports culturally responsive teaching at the same time that it meets curriculum standards. One could define culturally responsive teaching as "using the

cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them."⁵ In other words, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers and students to get beyond a simple awareness of differences—to reach for an "understanding of the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups."⁶ The goal is for students to discover the contributions of all the ethnic groups to the advancement of our society, to perceive the importance and uniqueness of each member's effort, and to begin to visualize what their own personal contribution can be. 🌍

Notes

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