



Learning to read and to think

Education

By James Cullum

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Once upon a time there was a lion who was confused because he didn't know why the other animals in the jungle were so terrified of him. Then one day he walked over to drink from a lake and saw another lion staring back at him. He became afraid.

“Was it another lion?” asked Deitrich Burney.

“No!” the children screamed.

“What did he see?”

“His 'refrection'!” a 5-year-old student said.

After reading “The Lion Who Saw Himself in the Water,” Burney, a teacher for Higher Horizons Head Start, said the story is a lesson in humility and empathy.

“This story talks about how some things can be misinterpreted. What it does is support social and emotional development,” Burney said.

It also helps for the 290 low-income children in the school to have good teachers and storytellers. And Burney is truly a great storyteller.

“Roar!” he said, imitating the lion, then pulling out a mirror for all the children to try out and see themselves growl and roar.

This is no ordinary story. It is a folk tale from Afghanistan and is thousands of years old.

Programs across the country are using it and 10 other stories from the Middle East to help children with the building blocks of literacy and to build up their brains with complex stories that force them to think outside the box.

Higher Horizons serves low-income families and students in the Baileys Crossroads and Falls Church communities.

Another story, “The Farmer's Wife,” features a woman who can't reach an apple that's fallen down a hole. She tries to enlist animals, a beekeeper and inanimate objects to help her, but each decline the invitation.

In the last moments of the story, a new character, the wind, scoops the apple from its place. The ending is unusual because of its unpredictability, introducing another option for the extraction of the apple, which moves the children beyond rational thought.

“It's critical for kids to use higher-level thinking skills by generating analogies, which is an intellectual skill with an emotional component,” said Susan Josephs, an educational consultant who wrote the teaching curriculum for the stories for Hoopoe Books, which has distributed more than 150,000 books to schools and programs across the country.

Early childhood education is vital to the continuing development of young minds, a reason why the stories are sent home for the low-income children who usually see a separation between home life and school life, a dividing line that inhibits learning, Josephs said.

Using constant repetition with games and cut-out puppets, students build their vocabulary, while the undercurrents of theme and meaning enter their subconscious, especially at nap time, when a CD of the book lulls the children to sleep.

For more on Hoopoe books, go to www.hoopoekids.com.

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