

2016

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of:

Adam, H., & Harper, L. (2016). Assessing and selecting culturally diverse literature for the classroom. *Practical Literacy: The Early & Primary Years*, 21(2), 10-14.

<https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/aeipt.212531>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/1892>

Assessing and selecting culturally diverse literature for the classroom

The importance of authenticity

Articulated within the Australian Curriculum (AC) and the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) are strong principles of diversity and intercultural awareness. These principles place a responsibility on educators to make curriculum decisions that reflect inclusive goals and practices. It is important that all children have access to authentic and accurate representations and role models related to their cultural backgrounds and everyday lives, in order to gain benefits associated with developing a positive sense of identity and belonging, (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Jones Diaz & Harvey, 2002; Morgan, 2009) with additional benefits to their academic and intellectual progress (DETYA, 2000; Fleer & Raban, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2009). This is where culturally diverse literature can be a particularly valuable resource to address principles of diversity while addressing curriculum requirements. By selecting children's books that are representative of diversity, pathways are open for children to discuss and consider important issues such as diverse perspectives, intercultural awareness, and breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions. In turn, these types of conversations with children develop general capabilities such as critical and creative thinking, personal and social capabilities, and ethical and intercultural understandings.

The selection of culturally diverse literature however, can be problematic. Research shows that many authors of children's books are from dominant cultures, writing about non-dominant cultures. These books can contain characters or information lacking authenticity and often reflect stereotyping and misunderstandings in the portrayal of non-dominant cultures (Bishop, 1997; David, 2001; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005). Other challenges emerge when educators fail to understand what authentic, culturally diverse literature is, resulting in educators inadvertently selecting texts that hinder rather than promote intercultural awareness and understandings (Johnston, Bainbridge, & Shariff, 2007; Willis & Parker, 2009).

Recent studies in Western Australia

Since 2011, Helen's masters and doctoral research has focused on study of ten early learning settings investigating the selection and use of children's literature to address principles of diversity. Using

Bishop’s (1997) three categories for assessing the quality and validity of multicultural portrayal in children’s books, a significant gap in the selection and availability of authentic, culturally diverse literature was identified in both studies. Table 1 shows Bishop’s categories adapted to include the Australian context.

Table 1: Bishop’s Categories for Multicultural Literature

Categories	Indicators
1. Culturally specific/conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “illuminate the experience of growing up a member of a particular, non-white cultural group” (Bishop, 1992) • have potential to increase appreciation and understandings of those not from this culture • books are written by people of the culture reflected in the book
2. Generically Australian(or American/British)/socially conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “featuring characters who are members of so-called minority groups, but contain few, if any specific details that might serve to define those characters culturally.” (Bishop, 1992) • assumed audience is white • themes present white European American/ Australian values and activities • characters may be portrayed in stereotypical ways in illustrations
3. Culturally neutral/melting pot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “feature people of colour but are fundamentally about something else” (Bishop, 1992) • “cultural authenticity is not likely to be a major consideration” (Bishop, 1992)

Adapted from “Multicultural literature for children: Making informed choices” by R. Bishop, 1992, in V. Harris (Ed.), *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8* (pp. 37-53). Norwood, MA: Christopher- Gordon.

The fiction books portraying cultural diversity, that were audited in these studies, show a majority to have a caucasian central character, with characters in secondary roles falling primarily into category 3 (culturally neutral/melting pot), and the remainder into category 2 (generically Australian or American/British, socially conscious).

Another concern emerging from the data relates to non-fiction books. This research found that since the implementation of the AC and EYLF, there has been an increase in the number of non-fiction books selected by educators to promote intercultural understandings. The selected books however, are almost all written by authors from dominant cultures and overwhelmingly fall to categories 2 or 3. Book themes are focused on the more exotic aspects of culture such as celebrations, traditions and traditional stories with little or no portrayal or mention of contemporary life of these same people and cultures. Research shows that this focus on the exotic and traditional alone can promote stereotypical or outdated understandings of diverse cultures, thus being counterproductive to promoting intercultural appreciation and understanding (David, 2001; Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005; Bishop, 1997).

The studies also found that in some centres, books falling into category 1 (culturally specific or conscious), made up no more than 0 - 2% of all books available. If classroom collections reflect this lack of authentic, culturally diverse literature, this creates further challenges for educators hoping to promote intercultural understandings in their classrooms.

Such findings highlight the need for educators to recognise the value of culturally diverse literature, and the importance of using carefully considered selection criteria to ensure that the use of those texts assist in achieving overall goals and outcomes for cultural consciousness. Without careful selection, use of the texts could potentially and unwittingly result in presenting attitudes and values that are counter to the goals and ethos of the curriculum. This is where the outcomes of the work Laurie has done in the USA can be immensely useful to educators.

Building a book collection

It can be challenging and time-consuming for educators to assess the authenticity of multicultural books, but the benefits make this worthwhile. Applying Bishop's categories is one useful way in which to do this. Alternatively, research undertaken in the USA by Laurie Harper and her colleague, Susan Trostle Brand, has led to the development of a *Checklist for selecting and evaluating multicultural picture storybooks* (Harper and Brand, 2010) (see Table 2). This checklist provides

educators with an evidence-based guide to evaluate the potential of books for use in the classroom. It can also assist in providing pointers for discussion around such textual characteristics as texts, illustrations, themes, viewpoints and perspectives.

Table 2: Checklist for Selecting and Evaluating Multicultural Picture Storybooks (Harper & Brand, 2010).

1. Author
 - ___ Are the author / illustrator qualified to write or illustrate material relating to the culture(s) portrayed? How?
 - ___ Have the author/illustrator conducted related research? If not, have they lived among (either as a member of or as a visitor to) the groups of people represented in the book?
2. Story
 - Is the story interesting to children?
 - Does the story contain authentic language?
 - Are factual and historical details accurate?
 - Overall, is this a high-quality story, independent of its multicultural aspects?
3. Characters
 - Are characters believable?
 - Are universal human emotions, attitudes, needs, and experiences reflected?
 - Do characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups?
 - Are life styles realistic?
 - Are females as well as males depicted in leadership roles?
4. Setting
 - Does the story reflect a variety of places and times?
 - Are urban, suburban, and rural settings represented realistically?
 - Are cultural settings and geographical features represented accurately?
5. Plot
 - Are real situations depicted?
 - Are rigid boundaries of class, culture, religion and ethnicity dismissed?
 - Are various conflicts presented for children to explore and discuss?
 - How are conflicts resolved?

6. Theme

- Does the story offer children a variety of situations, concepts, and new ideas on which to reflect, question, and consider?
- Are values explored, rather than preached?
- Are there lessons to be learned?
- Are children exposed to multiple perspectives and values?
- How does the story promote understanding of our diverse society?

7. Illustrations

- Are diverse populations represented?
- Is there diversity represented within cultural groups?
- Are characters realistically and genuinely represented?
- Do the illustrations avoid reinforcing societal stereotypes?
- Do the illustrations and text use authenticity to demonstrate respect for other cultures?
- Do the illustrations and text convey characteristics common to all people and cultures?

8. Developmental Appropriateness

- Is the story age appropriate; can children understand what is presented?
- Is the story individually appropriate in terms of children's family backgrounds?
- Does the story reflect the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which children live or to which they can relate?
- Will the story encourage meaningful and relevant discussions?

Selecting and evaluating multicultural literature for young children

Selection of quality culturally diverse literature begins with the same criteria that apply to selecting quality children's literature in general: the literary elements of plot, characterisation, setting, theme and point of view must be interwoven to create a convincing story in an age-appropriate manner (Harper & Brand, 2010). Illustrations and pictures should be examined for authenticity, accuracy and stereotypical representation. It is especially important when selecting books for young children that real people, real situations and authentic illustrations be depicted, since they are perceived as meaning making symbols. Other important considerations include the presence of authentic language, historical accuracy, and believable characters and realistic life styles with which children can identify. Selected books should represent a variety of settings and themes, providing opportunities for children

to consider multiple perspectives, values and cultures. These criteria are the hallmark of high quality multicultural literature.

Educators can use the checklist in Table 2, to both evaluate the books in their existing collection and guide the acquisition of additional books. By placing a checkmark for each of the criteria met when evaluating a book, the educator will then be able to see the strengths of each book as well as any areas that may be lacking. By then looking across the collection to be used, educators can use this deeper knowledge of each book to ensure that the books selected as culturally diverse are culturally authentic and representative of a variety of cultures, with realistic plots, settings and themes.

Infusing culturally diverse literature into the curriculum

Bishop (1997) perceives a dual role for infusing culturally diverse literature into the curriculum; It can serve as a mirror or a window. A child may see his or her own characteristics, idiosyncrasies, interactions and feelings reflected and affirmed in a character. He or she may also have the opportunity to see another's life. These types of literary experiences broaden a child's perspective, while nurturing an appreciation of new ideas and experiences. When children appreciate commonalities among people rather than exaggerating differences, both unity and diversity are reaffirmed.

When teachers read high quality culturally diverse books, children learn to identify various cultural heritages and respect the values of many minority groups. Teachers assist children to discover the implicit and explicit messages conveyed in a text through meaningful discussions. They assist children to recognise unfairness, to consider multiple perspectives and values, to challenge stereotypes and biases, and they provide children with models for challenging inequity. In-depth discussions of culturally diverse books help children to develop empathy for others and learn to appreciate the perspectives and experiences of other populations, across the globe. Activities such as these provide a window into the lives of culturally diverse groups of people and illuminate the concept that we all belong to the human race.

Teachers are urged to select books with a variety of genres and cultures and to avoid using a single book to represent a particular culture. As classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, the messages that teachers promote through reading literature should convey respect and acknowledgment of diversity. The Anti-defamation League (2003) suggests that culturally diverse literature should not speak to a limited group of children, but rather it should speak to all children. Rochman (1993) eloquently sums up high quality culturally diverse literature with: “The best books break down borders, they surprise us and change our views of ourselves; they extend that phase ‘like me’ to include what we thought was foreign and strange” (p. 9). This changing view of self is especially important for families and educators to consider if true multiculturalism is to be embraced by our youngest children.

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