

# Learning Through Literature That Offers Diverse Perspectives: Multicultural and International Literature

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**A**s a country, the United States is becoming increasingly diverse and will be continuing on this path in the foreseeable future. In addition, we live in a world that is increasingly global, as technology advances have closed the gaps when it comes to our relationship with world neighbors. Thus, in the 21st century, we can no longer afford to merely look inward, reading and learning only from literature that reflects who we are and our own corner of the world. Instead, as our students grow up in a world that allows them more direct contact with diversity than ever before, we—and they—are challenged to consider a wide range of perspectives and to take a global perspective on a variety of social, economic, scientific, political, and intellectual issues. In this chapter, we will consider the roles that multicultural literature (literature reflecting the diversity in the United States) and international literature (literature originating outside the United States) can play in helping students gain diverse perspectives of the world.

## The Role of Books in Students' Lives

Books can hold an important place in the lives of young people. They can provide important information and offer insights into everything from interpersonal relations to social conditions, and how to live one's life. Books impact readers on many levels. They facilitate thinking processes well beyond a literal level of understanding the book. Books that are engaging and well written offer readers depth so they can return to the book again and again, finding insights and connections as they better understand themselves and their world. Multicultural literature has a particularly important role to play in such impacts (Harris, 1997). Reading about the diversity within the United States and the diversity of the world provides readers with settings and perspectives that allow them to imagine and consider a wider world beyond their own.

In this first decade of the 21st century, when computerized multiple-choice quizzes

determine the levels by which students choose their reading material and provide points for remembering a constellation of literal level facts about a book, it is especially important to engage readers at a deeper level of thinking and understanding, and to choose books that can be meaningful to them as readers. It is also important to ensure that students have access to a wide range of reading materials, across many genres and spanning different reading levels. This ensures that readers have the opportunity to engage with text that is most appropriate for them, but also acknowledges that an individual child's interests and background experiences often enable that child to engage with and comprehend quite well a particular book that would ordinarily (and by the computer placement test) be considered beyond the child's reading level. Thus, a number of factors should enter into a thoughtful process of evaluating and selecting books for students.

## Evaluating and Selecting the Best Multicultural and International Literature

When evaluating and selecting culturally diverse literature, a focal guiding point to keep in mind is to be diligent in the search for high quality literature that reflects authentic portrayals of diverse populations (Yokota, 1993). Culturally authentic books portray a culture in a way that seems plausible: The people seem real, the setting is believable, and both the big picture of the theme as well as the details described all ring true (Cai, 2002; Fox & Short, 2003). These portrayals can range from ones that are culturally neutral and incidentally depict people of diversity, to those that are culturally specific where the story takes place *because* of the cultural context (Sims

Bishop, 1992). To be avoided, however, are books that perpetuate erroneous information or have hurtful images.

In addition to generally accepted criteria for evaluating and selecting literature, the following are points to keep in mind specific to ensuring high quality multicultural and international literature is available to students:

- Do the author and illustrator present authentic perspectives?
- Is the culture portrayed multi-dimensionally?
- Are cultural details naturally integrated?
- Are details accurate and is the interpretation current?
- Is language used authentically?
- Is the collection balanced?

Details on each of these selection criteria and examples of specific multicultural and international titles that fit them can be found in Temple, Martinez, and Yokota (2010).

## Getting Beyond Inclusiveness: What Are the Issues Today?

We are now well beyond the days of calling for multicultural literature to be included in the curriculum and in the school and classroom libraries for children to read independently. Curricula, commercially published reading materials such as basal series, classrooms, and libraries now routinely include multicultural and international literature in their work. Although the overall quality and range of multicultural literature that is available has been greatly enhanced in the past two decades especially, a number of issues are currently at the cutting edge of the inclusion of multicultural and international literature for today's students:

- Dealing with books, activities, and discussions that lead to problematic understandings
- Scaffolding student thinking about diverse perspectives
- Cultural “blindness” that is silently endorsed in an effort not to emphasize differences
- Understanding and incorporating international literature
- Growing in our adult understanding about diverse perspectives

### *Dealing With Books, Activities, and Discussions That Lead to Problematic Understandings*

While the need for including culturally diverse literature in classrooms continues, that is clearly only a first step. In fact, we are now seeing that when teachers consider only inclusiveness, unintended problems can result. In some stances, for example, a well-intentioned book that centers on issues of cultural diversity may present a “slice of life story” with representations of a culture that lack multidimensionality to the point of being stereotyping. There are other instances of books, that in trying to sensitively address differences, end up being condescending or patronizing to the point where readers ultimately respond, “I’m glad not to be like those others.” Whereas such attitudes were more overtly stated in books of generations ago, they continue to be published today, but with much more subtlety—yet still present—attitudes that call for people who are different to “blend in.”

We need to go beyond merely being inclusive. A key to doing so is adopting a specific “intentionality” in what we do when we consciously seek to expand our awareness and understanding of a diverse world and its many

different perspectives. This intentionality calls for educators to be diligent in not merely being inclusive, but in considering the “why, what, and how” of including literature that reflects diverse perspectives. Educators can model this thinking process by scaffolding their students’ thinking about what matters.

### *Scaffolding Student Thinking About Diverse Perspectives*

Our own personal background experiences in interacting with people of diverse backgrounds affects how comfortable we feel in discussing issues related to diverse perspectives. When students have had limited experiences, they may need scaffolding to consider perspectives they had not thought of before. Sometimes, students bring a set of understandings and attitudes that are biased or limited. In most cases, students benefit from teachers and librarians who are able to expand their understanding by asking questions, offering interpretations, and giving additional information as needed.

One specific example can be found in Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (2003) study of middle school students discussing Spinelli’s (1990) *Maniac Magee*. Ladson-Billings (2003) found that students adopted one mindset, and then used details from the book itself to support their case. What her research also revealed was that when teachers asked questions at the end of reading a multicultural book, some teachers never asked questions that dealt with race relations at all, even if it was an overtly important aspect of the book.

Another example of offering additional information to scaffold student understanding is with An Na’s book, *The Fold*. In the story, young teens are contemplating a surgery that would change the shape of their eyelids to include a crease. While this is the most fre-

quently done cosmetic procedure in the world, it is almost exclusive to Asian women; it is likely that non-Asian readers would benefit from additional information that can readily be found on websites or in books to help readers understand the scope of this surgery's popularity, thus taking the situation in the story and putting it in a context that makes more sense to all readers, regardless of their prior knowledge.

### *Cultural "Blindness" That Is Silently Endorsed in an Effort Not to Emphasize Differences*

Again, in an effort to embrace the notion of not singling out anyone and pointing out differences, some teachers take a "color blind" position, maintaining that they do not "see" color—implying that they do not notice a person's race. Such a position, however, ignores some of the most culturally distinct ethnically distinct physical features and pretends that "we are all similar." This denies the distinctions, silences the stories of diversity, and empowers the idea of "cultural homogeneity", or the melting pot theory of eras past.

### *Understanding and Incorporating International Literature*

The realization of the need for international understandings has become much more prevalent in recent years than in the past. What international literature offers that is not present in multicultural literature from the United States is perspectives that arise from societies and cultures from various places around the world. How, exactly, do international books differ from multicultural books? The technical answer is this: international books originate from outside the United States, are translated into English if the original is in a different lan-

guage, are sometimes modified for the "American market," and are made available by a publisher in the United States. What can be confusing is that many international books do not appear overtly international in theme, whereas a number of multicultural books written and published in the United States are clearly set in countries outside the United States and tell about a life that seems "foreign" to the readers here. However, the key distinction is the country of original publication. What international books allow us to enjoy and celebrate are the best of children's literature that is being enjoyed by children around the world, made available to children in the United States, as well. It also allows U.S. readers to see how other countries view themselves and see the world through their lens (rather than seeing those countries and cultures through American eyes). In addition, it allows us to share the stories and illustrations of the best authors and illustrators from around the world (Yokota, 2008).

In the past, the number of such books available in the United States was limited, and access to the books were even more limited. These days, there has been an increase in the publication of books that originate outside the United States and being made available here, and access through interlibrary loans has expanded the possibility of having materials even more widely available. Awards such as the American Library Association/Association of Library Services for Children's Mildred Batchelder Award for the best translated book from the previous year are now augmented with newer awards such as the annual list of the United States Board on Books for Young People's Outstanding International Books for Children. There are many stories that have become so familiar to U.S. audiences that they are considered classics in the United States as well as in their country of origin, such as

Pinocchio, Winnie-the-Pooh, The Little Mermaid, and in more recent times, the Harry Potter series.

### *Growing in Our Adult Understanding About Diverse Perspectives*

The first step in making multicultural and international literature a vibrant and appropriate part of our students' lives is recognizing and monitoring our attitudes toward diversity. Consider what dispositions are necessary to think about the "other" in a way that gives consideration of other perspectives. *Tolerance* is a favored term frequently heard among those whose work looks at how to deal with diversity. In fact, "tolerance" is a term that is often paired when addressing issues such as "social justice and tolerance." Yet "tolerance" actually means that we will not fight against diversity and that we will put up with differences; in other words, "tolerate" has a negative connotation to it. It can be useful to think of tolerance as a first step in overcoming negative attitudes, if they exist. But such an attitude is only as first step toward "acceptance."

It should also be recognized that for some people, a negative attitude is not the root of problems. Rather, it can be a lack of understanding—or even harder to overcome, not even being aware of that lack of understanding. Not being aware of what one doesn't know can lead to a patronizing or condescending attitude, even when the intent is to be supportive and inclusive on matters of diversity. Therefore, an important basis for having a positive disposition toward diversity is to begin by recognizing and acknowledging what one doesn't know and developing an attitude of desire to learn about "others," and then continuously monitoring how our attitudes come across. In the name of "diversity," books are

still being published that exhibit these kinds of patronizing or condescending attitudes, all with a desire to be inclusive. As educators, we can develop sensitivity to this issue in a way that we would not select such books for inclusion in our schools. Yet, owing to lack of awareness on the part of teachers, some books that reinforce racist attitudes toward a desire for "melting pots" of culture not only continue to be published, they get starred reviews and featured attention for recognizing an under-represented culture.

How can we go about increasing our adult understanding? This can happen in many ways, with personal experience being at the top of the most influential ways of learning about diversity. True, it would be nice to travel and live among people different from ourselves and to learn from those experiences. But limited time and resources may not allow much of that. However, through books and other media, we, too, can continuously grow in our own understandings. Joining book clubs can give us opportunities to engage in adult-level discussions on these issues that challenge us. Technology has made it possible for us to engage in book discussion in virtual space as well as in real time. These virtual space discussions can take place any time if you have a computer with Internet access. Engaging with other educators can be particularly beneficial as you discuss new and innovative ways to engage students in learning about their world. Examples of virtual book discussions can be found by joining Goodreads.com or through public libraries, bookstores, or professional organizations and other social networking sites.

### Next Steps

We have come a long way in providing our students with access to diverse perspectives, as represented in literature. The growth in the

sheer number of books currently available is largely due to the educators and students who have found that such literature matters to them as important reading material. But the field is changing, and one change that will greatly benefit our search for quality books reflecting cultural diversity is through technology. Although still available from years past, we no longer rely much on such print resources as *Kaleidoscope* (e.g., Sims Bishop & The Multicultural Booklist Committee, 1995) and related book-search tools (Schon, 2004, Seale & Slapin, 2004, Smith, 2004). New Web-based tools such as NoveList enhance the quickness by which new materials are added, making timely updates, new connections, and so on. This technology also means access to things like on-line databases, International Children's Digital Library, digital formats of literature and other related technology-enhanced resources. In terms of multicultural literature, it means that we can access larger databases like the Children's Literature Database that are more comprehensive and allow small presses that represent culturally diverse literature to have more visibility and marketing. It also means access to publisher sites for small presses and bloggers who are focused on multicultural literature, or professional organizations related to international children's literature who are hosting interesting options beyond traditional membership materials.

In international literature, it means that we can be introduced to the virtual exhibition such as the "Books from Africa, Books for Africa," from the International Board on Books for Young People. At this site, users can find books that are written in Africa, or written for Africa, available with information about the title, author, illustrator, language, and a synopsis. There are a few sample pages and the cover image shown as well. We can

read entire books from countries around the world, cover to cover, on the International Children's Digital Library at [en.childrenslibrary.org](http://en.childrenslibrary.org). Although this site depends on the generosity of copyright holders donating their books to be scanned and included in the library, more than a million users from 166 countries participate in reading 3,887 books in 53 languages. Also, an Internet search will reveal other countries' websites related to children's literature, some offering complete books online to be freely available.

When shaping and supporting curriculum, it is critical to keep multicultural and international literature central to the book selection and also to the discussions and learning that follow. In Chapter 14, Gail Bush describes the process we used in the "Literacy, Literature and Libraries" grant, working with teachers and librarians for them to "partner" as they worked together to support a mutually created curriculum where multicultural books were core materials for student learning. Partnering with public libraries, community organizations, parent groups, and others also created a situation of many people collaborating to support student learning. Some recommendations for partnering and planning for curriculum include the following:

- Recognize that books reflecting diversity are central and not to be set aside for featured recognition times only (i.e., African American Heritage Month).
- Consciously include books reflecting diversity in all areas of learning.
- Scaffold student thinking about diversity by framing discussion with important questions.

It is clear that culturally diverse literature can be and should be central to student learning, and well-selected, high-quality literature can have an impact on students' sense of self,

and sense of others (Harris, 1997; Sims Bishop, 1992, 2007). We hope that multicultural literature will become increasingly inclusive so that more diversity will be seen in future

works (Yokota & Frost, 2003). We can hope that as this generation of readers of multicultural literature grows up, they will have gained a sense of their world through their books.

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