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**Books as Bridges: Utilizing Multicultural Literature to Foster Connection, Representation,  
and Inclusivity in Student Education**

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April 29th, 2024

# **Books as Bridges: Utilizing Multicultural Literature to Foster Connection, Representation, and Inclusivity in Student Education**

## **Rationale**

In my community I have served various roles that aim to close cultural gaps and nurture connections in education settings such as serving as an intern at a refugee resettlement agency. Through this role I learned it was critical for refugee children to see their stories, their culture, and their language embedded into the American world. These books became a bridge for cultural orientation and allowed children to see that people like them could survive and succeed. A beautiful future was exposed to these children when they learned they could be doctors, soccer players, artists, and astronauts. For me, multicultural books were a bridge into their culture, and allowed me to get to know their traditions and customs even when we could not communicate due to a language barrier. Books constantly served as conversation starters and were a bridge between their new and native culture. Being on the frontline and directly working with students of marginalized communities has opened my eyes and pulled my heart towards advocating for their stories to be heard. Moreso, I want to encourage and empower those within the classroom to step into a new world and learn of new cultures. I see a severe need for educators, peers, and community members to embrace a multicultural perspective. In light of recent book bans which limit access to literature we need educators to cross the bridge and invite their students to follow.

## **Introduction**

Multicultural texts are vital to creating connections with all students but also see and value the experiences of children from diverse cultural identities. Our classrooms are filled with children of diverse cultural identities however, 82% of educators in the United States are White monolingual individuals (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020). This creates a need for a bridge where

students and educators can meet. Books can serve as a bridge between cultural identities and provide authentic and representative knowledge. Multicultural literature constructs a bridge, guiding children from merely observing the unfamiliar on one side to embracing the discomfort of the unknown on the other. For children of diverse backgrounds multicultural books serve as a bridge where they can embrace their biculturalism and navigate between their two worlds. Children of color are intrigued by their own cultures and need a place to harbor away from complete assimilation. In addition, students from dominant backgrounds learn to empathize with others in a diverse global society. Interests in literature increase when children feel represented by the stories they read (Gunn et al., 2022). Through a literature analysis, I plan to observe the influences of multicultural literature in student education.

### **Read Alouds and Social Emotional Learning**

Read alouds are a common practice that is well known to be beneficial to students (Gunn et al., 2022). They enhance reading abilities and allow many opportunities for teachers to help students make connections and understand the text at a deeper level. Furthermore, children learn from reading and being read to, “Through reading, young children broaden cognition and gain social understandings necessary to navigate and succeed in society, while viewing and entering varied social worlds” (Gunn et al., 2022, p. 362). As we step across the bridge to difficult conversations regarding feeling confident in one’s cultural identity the intentional use of multicultural children’s books can ease the connection, “During read-alouds, teachers create space that empowers children through authentic conversations and fosters cognitive and social understandings children may reflect and act upon in their lives” (Gunn et al., 2022, p. 370). The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides children with the tools to have an understanding of the world and people around them. CASEL is a framework consisting of five

competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Together these concepts allow for individuals to have knowledge of their emotions and the influence they have within relationships. In addition, building upon CASEL skills promotes personal development and empowerment while taking into account other perspectives (CASEL, 2020). The use of multicultural books is essential in SEL as it “facilitates empowerment for children while navigating their diverse identities” (Gunn et al., 2022, p. 363). There is a necessity for educators to be intentional with the books their students are exposed to and there are benefits to reap from these books for everyone in the classroom. “These analyses should focus on the quantity, accuracy, complexity, placement, purpose, variety, significance, and authenticity of the narrative texts, visual illustrations, learning activities, role models, and authorial sources used” (Gay, 2002, p. 108). For students of diverse backgrounds, multicultural books provide role models to navigate everyday situations in which being different can be emotionally complex. Children should see the value in their cultural identity as well as in the identities of others. Through books they are able to bridge understanding of the pride characters have in the things that may make them different. In addition, representation is needed to teach students soft skills “for example, lessons of leadership, power, and authority taught through images should include males and females and expressive indicators of these accomplishments from many different ethnic groups” (Gay, 2002, p. 109). An example by Laura M. Jimenez in *Mirrors and Windows with Texts and Readers: Intersectional Social Justice at work in the Classroom* (2021) described a read aloud conducted to 2nd graders, the book featured a poem in Cree and how Cree children were treated in their Native boarding school. Throughout the read aloud students jump in with little to no prompts from the teacher and connect the reading to their own lives, “The children saw and called out the parallels between how the Cree children were

treated and their own lives” (Jimenez, 2021, p. 159) Furthermore, this read aloud fostered powerful connections through their learning experience, “In the end, we learned about each other in ways that mattered. We built a place where students... teach each other, and learn from their peers, as well as the adults in the room...” (Jimenez, 2021, p. 159) In this scenario, the multicultural literature guided the second graders and their teachers across the bridge to a place where they could empathize with the Cree people and form comparisons between their own experiences regardless of prior knowledge or direct personal connection to Cree culture.

Multicultural books continue to teach valuable lessons such as the importance of kindness and gratitude but allow for children to see these lessons play out through diverse illustrations (Gunn et al., 2022). For students from dominant backgrounds, the ability to recognize emotions is equally as important. By using multicultural books with an emphasis on SEL, students learn to recognize emotions in a much more diverse variety of people, cultures, and contexts. This equips all students with strong self and social awareness skills necessary in the global world, “children make connections and develop social-emotional understandings foundational to success in their personal endeavors as well as citizens in a diverse, global society” (Gunn et al., 2022, p. 371). Lastly, multicultural books engage various groups of students and help them identify with the experiences of characters within the books as well as “lead to motivation and interest in reading” (Gunn et al., 2022, p. 371).

### **Anthropomorphism and Avoiding Oppression**

Books can serve as a bridge to socially just education in which the literature is used to combat systems of discrimination and bias. One literature method to address systemic issues is through anthropomorphism, animals displaying human-like characteristics and interactions. Sotirovska and Kelley (2020) determined that children need to understand societal issue topics,

like immigration, to empathize and learn about the resilience of people but also remain far away enough that they can approach these topics without biases. Especially considering that children are racially aware at a very young age, “Children ages 4-11 start forming racial stereotypes and racial awareness only increases with age” (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020, p. 338).

Anthropomorphism allows for children to learn lessons and gain understanding of marginalization, discrimination, and racism in a setting that is make believe. Children’s literature which embeds this method makes it easier for teachers to integrate the topics to create a multicultural aware classroom. Thus, helping deconstruct racial stereotypes and stop them from forming all together. In addition, they help highlight the experiences of marginalized communities which allows for students and their experiences to be seen, “Picture books can be windows into worlds both real and imaginary” (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020, p. 339). Almost half of the student population are children of color, yet much of the available literature predominantly showcases white individuals as the main characters, limiting diverse representation (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020).

On the other hand, for years the depiction of people of color even through animals has furthered harmful stereotypes. “For centuries, children’s literature books have treated and viewed racialized Americans as subhuman” (Sotirovska, & Kelley, 2020, p. 341). Book choices with anthropomorphic characters must be intentional and fully reviewed “because anthropomorphism opens the possibility of either disrupting or perpetuating this master narrative” (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020, p. 339). For example, with the case immigration books regarding this topic should “demarginalize immigrant experiences in picture books by acknowledging them as acts of individual power, such as perseverance and self-preservation” (Sotirovska, & Kelley, 2020). Anthropomorphism guides children to cross the bridge to understand the other side and aids their

comprehension of complex concepts such as immigration and racism. Classrooms are much more diverse than the educators who teach them, this results in “lesson plans about immigrant Americans often assume a White audience” (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020, p. 342). When incorporating multicultural literature, it is important to avoid strictly displaying stories focused on the oppression of marginalized groups. Instead, when choosing quality multicultural children’s literature educators must “think about the content of depictions: doing our best to ensure that representations are accurate, authentic, nuanced, and wide-ranging” (Crisp et al., 2016). There is a reluctance from educators to use culturally responsive materials due to lack of knowledge and understanding, community opinions, and fear of scrutiny. However, the inclusion of multicultural literature into classroom instruction must be strategic and authentic to foster connection.

### **Dual Language Texts and Translanguaging**

The incorporation of culture and language engages emerging bilinguals and enhances their learning in a unique and effective way, “explicit knowledge about cultural diversity is imperative to meeting the educational needs of ethnically diverse students” (Gay, 2002, p. 107). Incorporation of native languages, or heart languages, is closely linked to cultural inclusivity, both of which are becoming more prevalent as linguistic diversity across the United States is steadily growing (Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020). Language is deeply rooted in culture and identity, “when children are encouraged to use these heart languages in early literacy contexts, they can feel safe to be who they are” (Si’ilata et al., 2023, p. 25). Incorporating dual language texts within classroom instruction empowers children to maintain their heart language and develop a duality embracing their learning. Furthermore, the mastery of both a native language and languages cannot be assumed for bilingual students. The use of dual language texts can help



students bridge across both languages, which is critical in all classrooms with multilingual learners (Domke, 2024, p. 586). This is necessary to build community and must go beyond “mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values” (Gay 2002, p. 107). By using dual language books that encompass culture, families are much more involved in their child's education. “Families saw their languages as valued in education and aligned with aspiration for their children to succeed in a system that has traditionally privileged English” (Si’ilata et al., 2023, p. 25). In addition, the incorporation of dual language texts helps teachers be best equipped to serve their bilingual and bicultural students, “these books act as catalysts to support teachers in enacting key ideas in their teaching practice” (Si’ilata et al., 2023, p. 26). Dual language texts help students confidently project their identity and engage them in beneficial literacy practices.

The incorporation of translanguaging, a multilingual individual’s seamless use of all language repertoire, creates an authentically inclusive learning community for all. “Translanguaging refers to how multilingual people communicate by seamlessly drawing on all the languages they know without regard for how society considers these separate languages to use at separate times for separate purposes” (Kelly, 2022, p.763). In the context of a classroom “translanguaging involves supporting students to bring all their linguistic resources to understanding and creating texts” (Kelly, 2022, p.763). Multicultural literature that is dual language or includes translanguaging allows all students to connect with a story and celebrates the linguistic diversity of the classroom community. Furthermore, they allow students to embrace their bilingualism and “creates space for students to become experts in their own languages even when their teachers are still learning. The important thing is not for teachers’ perfect proficiency, but rather their disposition to learn about and welcome children’s language” (Kelly, 2022,

p.765). The inclusion of native languages into classroom instruction empowers students to co-construct knowledge and feel represented. In this way, students who are bilingual can foster connections with their peers and lead their classmates and teacher across the bridge into a learning community where all languages and knowledge are valued.

### **Being Intentional in Representing Students**

In the process of building a classroom library and creating a repertoire of texts to use in classroom instruction educators hold the high responsibility of being intentional in the literature that is accessible to students. Ensuring that the classroom library includes diverse literature is a challenging and labor-intensive task. Being critical about the presence of multicultural texts in the classroom libraries is crucial because teachers often overestimate the diversity represented in books available to students. (Souto-Manning et al., 2019). Nurturing the construction of a bridge to create connections across cultures and backgrounds between everyone in the classroom community. Multicultural children’s literature should center around everyday joy, problem solving, and success of a historically marginalized group as opposed to oppression (Vlach & Muhammad, 2023). “When children cannot see themselves reflected in the books they read or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (Bishop, 1990, pg. 1). It is crucial for the inclusion of multicultural literature into classroom instruction to be an authentic representation of another culture and “center children, families, and communities who have historically been marginalized in society and rendered invisible in curricula” (Souto-Manning et al., 2019, p, 67). Authentic representations are necessary to welcome and build self-efficacy for children in learning spaces. If children fail to see themselves in materials within the classroom they may lack a sense of belonging. At the same time, students who are consistently represented

through materials in the classroom will gain a false sense of the importance of their perspective (Souto-Manning et al., 2019). Additionally, a message is sent regarding the representation, or the absence, in children's literature. By showcasing student experiences in stories, we affirm the value of their cultures, whereas failing to intentionally include their narrative continues to uphold a dominant lens. In other words, "nothing is 'neutral'; and that any decision pertaining to curriculum and teaching is political (being motivated by a person's beliefs and/or furthering the interest of specific groups)" (Souto-Manning et al., 2019, p. 68). As educators and advocates for the success of students there is great importance in exposing students to the global world through literacy and instruction, "all parties involved in the creation of those spaces have a responsibility to include an array of books that represent the diversity of identities and experiences of the students in our classrooms, as well as people and cultures across the country and around the globe" (Crisp et al., 2016, p. 31). Every student in the classroom deserves to feel represented and every student in the classroom must learn to empathize and value the experiences of others.

### **Recommendations**

Using criteria presented in the peer reviewed literature I compiled a list of children's books as a recommendation for use in classroom instruction. These books were intentionally chosen because they authentically represented various cultures and experiences. In addition, the characters within the books model social emotional awareness by displaying various CASEL components. The recommended children's literature can be embedded into everyday classroom instruction such as read alouds and is key in bridging connections with students. The following criteria was used to develop the multicultural literature selection:

- "Whose voices are centered? Why? What does this tell us? What are the consequences of this for inclusion and exclusion?" (Souto-Manning et al., 2019, p. 67)

- Is this “an authentic representation that shows marginalized individuals as whole people living complex lives that do not adhere to the dominant White narrative”? (Jimenez, 2021, p. 158)
- Do the characters represent an ability to problem solve and have social emotional awareness? (Gunn et al., 2022)

See Table 1 below for a list of recommended multicultural children’s literature. One of the featured books is *The Little Doctor El Doctorcito*, the dynamic complexity of these multicultural children’s book creates the opportunity for use in classroom instruction by discussing Salvador’s display of CASEL components, integrating vocabulary, and analyzing characters (see Appendix A). Another book featured in this selection is *My Name is Sangoel* where the characters exemplify social-emotional development and can be incorporated into art, social studies, and reading comprehension activities. (see Appendix B).

Table 1. Bridging Cultures: Recommendations for Exploring Multicultural Children's Books

Title	Author
A Movie in My Pillow	Jorge Argueta
A River of Mariposas	Mirelle Ortega
Areli Is a Dreamer	Areli Morales
Crown: An Ode to The Fresh Cut	Derrick Barnes
Drawn Together	Minh Le
Dreamers (see Appendix A)	Yuyi Morales
Do You Speak Fish?	D. J. Corchin
Front Desk	Kelly Yang
Fry Bread	Kevin Noble Maillard
Gibberish	Young Vo
Hair Love	Matthew A. Cherry

I am Rene the Boy	Rene Colato Lainez
I Love Saturdays y Domingos	Alma Flor Ada
I'm From	Gary R. Gray Jr
Islandborn	Junot Díaz
Lailah's Lunch Box	Reem Faruqi
Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match	Monica Brown
My Name is Jorge, On Both Sides of the River	Jane Medina
My Name is Sangoel (see Appendix B)	Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed
My Papi Has a Motorcycle	Isabel Quintero
My Two Border Towns	David Bowles
New Kid	Jerry Craft
Octopus Stew	Eric Velasquez
Paletero Man	Lucky Diaz
Planting Stories	Anika Aldamuy Denise
Platanos Are Love	Alyssa Reynoso-Morris
Saturday	Oge Mora
Saturday at the Food Pantry	Diane O'Neil
Thank You Omu	Oge Mora
The Boy Who Touched the Stars	Jose M. Hernandez
The Day You Begin	Jacqueline Woodson
The Little Doctor El Doctorcito (see Appendix C)	Dr. Juan J. Guerra
The Proudest Blue	Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali
The Year We Learned to Fly	Jacqueline Woodson
We Are Water Protectors	Carole Lindstrom
Where Are You From?	Yamile Saied Mendez
Yefferson, Actually	Katherine Trejo
Your Name is A Song	Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow

## Conclusion

Educators do not need to be experts in every culture in existence but instead they must be willing to cross the bridge into the discomfort of unfamiliar territory and learn about their

students' cultural identities. It is our responsibility to make sure our students have a true sense of the complex diversity in the global world. Furthermore, it is our due diligence to ensure our students are authentically represented in classroom materials. On the other side of the bridge is culture and language that belongs in the learning community. Additional research is needed to identify educators' hesitancy to incorporate multicultural literature in the classroom. However, there is value in including multicultural literature regardless of the demographic make-up of the classroom; it may not change the world but it will change how students connect with each other. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) says:

We are realistic enough to know that literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. It won't take the homeless off our streets; it won't feed the starving of the world; it won't stop people from attacking each other because of our racial differences; it won't stamp out the scourge of drugs. It could, however, help us to understand each other better... (p. 2)

Literature may not cure the problems of the world but including multicultural children's literature allow us to develop a learning community that empowers and validates the experiences of others. When students cross the bridge guided by multicultural literature, they gain a sense of empathy towards the experiences of their peers. Multicultural literature belongs in classroom instruction because it empowers students to embrace and navigate their diverse world by fostering connections. Multicultural literature is a powerful bridge that allows all students to develop new perspectives, build empathy, and engage in social emotional learning.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Dreamers Analysis**

Yuyi Morales tells the story of an immigrant mother conquering a new world. The mother's life forever changes when she goes into a library for the first time. New worlds come to life and she realizes her and her baby have become dreamers. This book incorporates the CASEL competencies social awareness and self-awareness. The mother in the story demonstrates social awareness as she feels the cultural clash of moving to a new place. She realizes that she may be different but is also willing to connect with the experiences of others through literature.

(Morales, 2018) The mother must also reflect upon herself, her strength and the empowering emotions she feels as she reads books. Yuyi Morales immigrated to the United States with her son in 1994, she drew upon her own experience, emotions, and materials to write and illustrate this book. (Morales, 2018) In addition, to centering immigrant voices, many pages of this book include translanguaging by combining English and Spanish.

## **Appendix B**

### **My Name is Sangoel CASEL Analysis and Classroom Integration**

Sangoel is a refugee traveling to America with his mother and sister. Before he leaves Sudan, his is advised by the elders at the camp that he is Sangoel in Africa and in America. Once Sangoel starts school he realizes no one can pronounce his name correctly, he has a hard time fitting in and getting used to his new country. (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) He comes up with a creative way to help communicate how to say his name. Sangoel models social awareness, relationship skills, and self-management throughout this book. His classmates demonstrate empathy and compassion when Sangoel arrives and they work together, using Sangoel's strengths to learn each other's names. He is also very aware of his emotions and when he begins to get upset about the mispronunciation of his name he remembers the advice given to him by an elder. (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) Sangoel and his classmates demonstrate relationship skills by learning to communicate. The use of pictures to convey meaning helps the students create positive relationships and work as a team. (CASEL, 2020) This book is written by two women who have closely worked with refugees in placements in and out of the United States. (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) Examples of integration in classroom instruction include social studies (see figure B1) and art (See Figure B2). Furthermore, students can engage in a discussion about the significance of names and demonstrate their understanding of the story by expressing empathy towards Sangoel and writing him a welcoming letter to introduce him to the class (see Figure B3).

# ART Integration

What does Sangoel do when people can't pronounce his name correctly? He shows them with pictures!

Using magazine cut outs or drawings create an image representation of your name!

The illustration shows a child in a blue shirt and yellow shorts standing on a pile of colorful magazine cutouts. The child is holding a large green cutout that forms the letter 'S'. Above the child, there is a soccer ball on a green field with a goal, and a sun. The background is a yellow and white pattern.

Figure B1.

# Social Studies

Sangoel begins to make friends through soccer, also known as football in many other places around the world. Did you know soccer is the most popular sport in the world?

Every four years everyone comes together to watch the World Cup. A tournament in which countries from all over the world send their men's soccer to team compete for the title of World Champion .

Students can use technology to research about the World Cup and the many places it has been held. In 2026 the World Cup will be held here in North America!

The illustration shows a child in a red hoodie reading a book. Two other children are standing next to him, one holding a book. In the background, there are soccer balls and a locker room. A large soccer ball with various national flags is positioned above the text.

Figure B2.

**LESSON PROCEDURES**

**Schema activation**

- Have every student in the class say their name one by one. After each student says their name have the rest of the class repeat the name back with the correct pronunciation. Ask students:
  - Why do you think it is important to say each other's names correctly?
- Read *My Name is Sangoel* aloud to the whole class
- Pair students together and have them discuss comprehension questions
  - How does Sangoel feel about coming to America?
  - Why does he begin to feel lonely?
  - How does his idea help his classroom community?
- Allow for students to share to the whole class about insights they learned from the book
- Students will independently write a letter to Sangoel welcoming him into our classroom community.
  - Write a letter in which you welcome Sangoel into our class. What would you say to make sure he knows we are excited he is here? How would you communicate that you are his friend?

Figure B3.

## Appendix C

### The Little Doctor El Doctorcito CASEL Analysis and Classroom Integration

The book centers Salvador and his family who are from El Salvador. He loves to learn and in the story he is helping his grandmother by being her translator at the doctor. The Little Doctor El Doctorcito incorporates aspects of Salvadoran culture from flags, food, and healers. At the same time the author is strategic in drawing clear distinctions from an assumed Mexican cultural experience that often occurs to Spanish speaking individuals. (Guerra, 2017) The author of this book Dr. Juan J. Guerra writes from his own experience of immigrating to the United States at a young age and being the translator for his family. His passion for helping culturally diverse individuals via the healthcare system drew him to become a doctor, very similarly to how it occurs to Salvador in the book. (Guerra, 2017) This book is a dual language book providing the text in both English and Spanish. In this book Salvador demonstrates social awareness, self-awareness, and responsible decision making. He displays social awareness by expressing concern about other people's feelings especially while in the waiting room of the clinic. Salvador recognizes that knowing English and Spanish is an asset and hopes to continue helping others in his future career as a doctor. He plans to become a doctor and sets goals so that he can achieve his dream. He anticipates the hard work it will take but hopes to ensure others have positive experiences in helping his community. Students can complete a character description chart (see Figure A1) to demonstrate comprehension of the overall story.

# CHARACTERS

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

List four words that describe the character

What does the character do?

Draw a picture of the character

What does the character say?

Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events





Figure C1.