

Culturally Relevant Classroom Library

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Megan Byrne

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Loyola University

Amy J. Heineke, Ph.D.

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## Culturally Relevant Classroom Library

### Introduction

As a fairly new classroom teacher, the majority of my classroom library consists of books that were given to me by other teachers or purchased by the district. Over the past few years, I've slowly started to build up my library by buying books that my students will be able to relate to. However, this is an ongoing process as I work with a very diverse population and have new students every year. My goal is to create a classroom library that reflects all of the unique backgrounds and cultures in my classroom. I am striving to find picture books that include male and female characters from diverse cultural backgrounds, family structures and social classes. At the same time, I want my students to be able to connect with the texts on many levels, so I am looking for books that explore general themes and issues that all of my students will be able to relate to. Some examples include: adjusting to a new home, family bonds and connections, and financial hardships. As a first grade teacher, another goal is to teach my students to appreciate their uniqueness and culture and accept the culture of others. Therefore, I am including picture books that discuss the theme of acceptance and valuing the culture of others.

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### List of Texts

**Title:** My Diary from Here to There - Mi diario de aqui hasta alla

**Author:** Amada Irma Perez

**Illustrator:** Maya Christina Gonzalez

**Copyright date:** 2002

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

#### **Key Words/Text Details:**

Female, Latina protagonist, Identity, separation, adjusting to a new life, family connections

#### **Summary:**

Amada is a young girl living in Mexico who finds out that her father has lost his job and their family is going to move to the United States. Amada expresses her fears, nervousness and loneliness by writing in her diary. Throughout the story, Amada's family is separated when her father goes to look for work in the US, leaving his wife and daughters behind. The family is reunited at the end and Amada realizes she is stronger than she thinks. Although Mexico is far

away, its memory lives on in her heart. This story discusses themes of identity, immigration, separation and crossing the border.

**Title:** Pedrito's Day

**Author:** Luis Garay

**Copyright date:** 1997

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Separation, honesty, strong male protagonist, Central American setting, social class

**Summary:**

In *Pedrito's Day*, a young Latino boy has dreams of getting a new bike. He spends his days helping his mother at the market and earning coins through shoe shining. Pedrito's father is up north working to raise money for his family. When Pedrito is asked to run an errand, he loses the money he is supposed to deliver. Pedrito decides to be honest and tell the truth, showing his true character. Although Pedrito is embarrassed, his mother praises him for telling the truth and replacing the money with his hard earned coins. This story of honesty and hard work is one that children can relate to.

**Title:** My Very Own Room: Mi propio cuartito

**Author:** Amada Irma Perez

**Illustrator:** Maya Christina Gonzalez

**Copyright date:** 2000

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Bilingual, Mexican American family, adjusting to a new life, family bonds, social class, female protagonist

**Summary:**

In *My Very Own Room*, a young girl Mexican American girl wants desperately to have her own room. Although she loves her family, Amada needs a space to call her own. With the help and generosity of her family, Amada creates her own room and uses the limited resources her family has to get a lamp and library books to complete her new room. This story is a bilingual text written in both Spanish and English and tells the loving story of a young girl adjusting to her new life in the United States and her quest for a place to call her own.

**Title:** Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match/Marisol McDonald no combina

**Author:** Monica Brown

**Illustrator:** Sara Palacios

**Copyright date:** 2011

**Genre:** Multicultural, Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Bilingual, biracial, individuality, celebrating differences, acceptance, female protagonist

**Summary:**

This bilingual text by Monica Brown tells the story of a young girl who “doesn’t match.” She is biracial and has bright red hair and brown skin. Throughout the story, Marisol is told by others that she doesn’t match but she continues to be proud of her individuality. In the middle of the story, Marisol’s friends challenge her to try to be the same as everyone else. Marisol is up for the challenge but discovers that life is boring when she’s not being her truly unique self. This book embraces individuality and teaches children to be proud of their uniqueness and accepting of others.

**Title:** A Day with Dad

**Author:** Bo R. Holmberg

**Illustrator:** Eva Eriksson

**Copyright date:** 2008

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Divorce, family structure, male protagonist, separation, transition, family connections

**Summary:**

This book deals with the sensitive topic of divorce, as it tells the story of Tim who is spending the whole day with his dad. Tim’s dad lives in another town and Tim is excited to see him. As they explore the city together, Tim expresses his excitement by telling everyone he encounters “This is my dad!” As it starts to get dark, Tim begins to feel sadness as he knows it is almost time for his father’s train to leave. When his dad gets on the train, he announces to everyone that he has the best son anyone could ever have. Holmberg’s story portrays the happiness of both father and son to spend time together and the sadness they both feel when it is time to say goodbye.

**Title:** Those Shoes

**Author:** Maribeth Boelts

**Illustrator:** Noah Z. Jones

**Copyright date:** 2007

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Family structure, economic struggles, social class, friendship, male protagonist

**Summary:**

In *Those Shoes*, Jeremy wants to buy the cool black and white striped shoes that everyone at school has. When Jeremy asks his grandma to buy him the shoes she says they can only afford to buy the boots he *needs* and not the shoes he *wants*. During school one day, Jeremy's shoe breaks and the guidance counselor gives him shoes from the bin for kids that need things. Jeremy is teased by his classmates and is embarrassed of the shoes he is forced to wear. Jeremy's grandma feels for her grandson and takes him to the shoe store but cannot afford to buy the fancy black and white shoes that Jeremy desperately wants. Jeremy has the idea to go to the thrift store to see if any "rich" kids have outgrown the shoes and he ends up buying a pair that are too small for him and hurt his feet. Later in the story, Jeremy notices his friend Antonio's taped up and small shoes. Jeremy generously decides to give his black and white shoes to Antonio and the two boys become friends.

**Title:** Two Homes

**Author:** Claire Masurel

**Illustrator:** Kady MacDonald Denton

**Copyright date:** 2001

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Family structure, divorce, separation, male protagonist, family bonds

**Summary:**

This short story tells a child's perspective of having divorced parents and living in two homes. The main character, Alex spends time at both houses and describes the similarities and differences between his mother and father's homes. Despite spending time away from his parents, Alex knows that he is loved unconditionally by both of his parents.

**Title:** It's Okay to Be Different

**Author:** Todd Parr

**Illustrator:** Todd Parr

**Copyright date:** 2001

**Genre:** fiction

**Key Words:**

self-love, acceptance, respecting others, celebrating differences

**Summary:**

Todd Parr's, *It's Okay to Be Different*, is a simple story that gives the message that differences should be celebrated. This story includes differences of family structure, physical attributes, interests and feelings. It teaches children about self-acceptance and respecting others.

**Title:** The Family Book

**Author:** Todd Parr  
**Illustrator:** Todd Parr  
**Copyright date:** 2003  
**Genre:** Fiction

**Key Words:**

celebrating differences, self-acceptance, family structure

**Summary:**

This colorful and short story by Todd Parr teaches children that all families are different. The illustrations and words depict different family structures and give the message that families are special no matter what kind of family it is.

**Title:** My Name is Yoon  
**Author:** Helen Recorvits  
**Illustrator:** Gabi Swiatkowska  
**Copyright date:** 2003  
**Genre:** Realist Fiction

**Key Words:**

Korean Immigrant family, identity, female protagonist

**Summary:**

Yoon is a young girl that feels alone when her family moves to the United States from Korea. She is not sure that she wants to be “Yoon” and misses her home and writing her name is Korean. Throughout the story Yoon tries out different names and eventually finds her place in a new country.

**Title:** Yoko  
**Author:** Rosemary Wells  
**Copyright date:** 1998  
**Genre:** Fiction

**Key Words:**

Acceptance, celebrating differences

**Summary:**

When Yoko brings sushi to school her friends tease her and make fun of her lunch. Her teacher, Mr. Jenkins decides to host an International Food Day to teach the class about acceptance and the students’ cultures. By the end of the book, Yoko’s classmates try the sushi and discover that it’s okay to try different things and to accept each other’s differences.

**Title:** Suki's Kimono  
**Author:** Chieri Uegaki  
**Illustrator:** Stephane Jorisch  
**Copyright date:** 2003  
**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:**

Japanese American protagonist, celebrating differences, expressing your culture  
\*Japanese Glossary

**Summary:**

In *Suki's Kimono*, Suki wants to wear her kimono from her grandmother on the first day of school. Suki loves her kimono and doesn't care when everyone at school teases her. During class, Suki goes a Japanese dance for her class and everyone cheers. This story teaches students about self-acceptance and the importance of celebrating each other's cultures.

**Title:** The Other Side  
**Author:** Jacqueline Woodson  
**Illustrator:** E.B. White  
**Copyright date:** 2001  
**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:** Female protagonists, friendship, acceptance, racism

**Summary:**

*The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson tells the story of Clover and Annie and the fence that separates them. Both Clover (a young black girl) and Annie (a young white girl)'s mothers tell them that they cannot climb over the fence and the girls spend time watching each other from afar and longing to play together. After a while the girls strike up a friendship and spend their days sitting together on the fence. By the end of the story, Annie's other white friends accept Clover and the young girls play together and break down their racial barriers.

**Title:** I Love Saturdays y domingos  
**Author:** Alma Flor Ada  
**Illustrator:** Elivia Savadier  
**Copyright date:** 2002  
**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:** Female protagonist, biracial Latino and Caucasian, family bonds, bilingual text

**Summary:**

In *I Love Saturdays y domingos*, a young girl spends Saturdays with her Caucasian grandparents and Sundays with her Latino grandparents. The story shows the similarities and differences

between the sets of grandparents and portrays the love that she receives from all of her grandparents. Alma Flor Ada uses English and Spanish words throughout this bilingual text.

**Title:** Whoever You Are

**Author:** Mem Fox

**Illustrator:** Leslie Straub

**Copyright date:** 1997

**Genre:** Fiction

**Key Words:** celebrating differences, acceptance

**Summary:**

This short story by Mem Fox teaches children that although everyone does not look, sound and speak the same, there is still a bond connecting us all. Despite our differences, we are all united. *Whoever You Are* includes illustrations that take the reader around the world and across cultures.

**Title:** The Sandwich Swap

**Author:** Queen Rania Al Abdullah (with Kelly DiPucchio)

**Illustrator:** Tricia Tusa

**Copyright date:** 2010

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:** Female protagonists, cross cultural friendship

**Summary:**

Salma and Lily are best friends and do everything together. One day the girls get into a fight when they make fun of each other's sandwiches at school. After the girls make up, they suggest an International Food Day at school. This story teaches children not to jump to conclusions when they come across something new or different. It gives the message about the wonderful things that can come from learning about yourself and others.

**Title:** A Chair For My Mother

**Author/Illustrator:** Vera B. Williams

**Copyright date:** 1982

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:** Female protagonists, social class, financial hardship, single parent home

**Summary:** A young girl tells the story of how a fire destroyed her family's apartment and how her mother works long hours as a waitress to earn enough money to buy a chair. They save any change and tips in a jar and finally have enough to purchase the chair they've been dreaming of.



This book tells the story of a family dealing with financial hardships but how the love between them keeps the family strong.

**Title:** Throw Your Tooth on the Roof

**Author:** Selby B. Beeler

**Illustrator:** G. Brian Karas

**Copyright date:** 1998

**Genre:** non-fiction

**Key Words:** Cultural traditions

**Summary:** *Throw Your Tooth on the Roof* is a book that all students can connect with as it shows the traditions of different cultures when a child loses a tooth. Each page is dedicated to a part of the world and shows what children do when they lose a tooth in different countries. Children can compare and contrast their tooth losing traditions to those in other parts of the world.

**Title:** Goyangi Means Cat

**Author:** Christine McDonnell

**Illustrator:** Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher

**Copyright date:** 2011

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**Key Words:** Korean, female protagonists, adoption, adjusting to a new life

**Summary:** Soo Min moves from Korea to be with her adopted American family and has a difficult time adjusting to her new life and home. Everything feels strange to Soo Min except for her friendship with the family cat, Goyangi. Goyangi runs away and Soo Min eventually finds and is reunited with the cat. Throughout the story, Korean words are included in the text and illustrations.

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### Reflection

While compiling my list of culturally relevant texts, I recognized my need to diversify my classroom library. Because many of my students are non-readers or emerging readers, it is not enough to have these books in the classroom library. I need to expose them to the texts and stories through read-aloud times and literacy lessons. Through web searches, conversations with colleagues and visiting the Skokie Public Library, I have compiled a list of texts that reflect the diverse cultures represented in my classroom.

## Culturally Relevant Classroom Library

I was able to find texts depicting different family structures (including issues of divorce), protagonists of female and male gender and themes of finding one's identity and adjusting to a new home. Although many of the books selected reflect a specific ethnic background, I chose books that discuss themes that all students can relate to despite their ethnic heritage. At the same time, I came across multiple texts that teach the importance of accepting and celebrating one's own and other's cultural differences.

While researching, I purchased six titles that I felt strongly reflected the cultural diversity in my classroom. I was also able to find many texts at the Skokie Public Library that are available for classroom use at any time. While exploring these titles, I compiled a list of ways that they can be used in my classroom during my literacy instruction. By incorporating many of the 19 texts including in this list through read-aloud, I will expose my class to diverse literature that is relatable to their own lives. I also plan to use the books for my shared reading curriculum, specifically during the reading strategy of connecting. By providing my students with rich literature that acts as a mirror into their own lives, I believe my students will produce a strong understanding of making self-to-text connections.