

FEATURE

# STUDENT DIVERSITY INSPIRES SPECIAL

## “OUR LANGUAGES” COLLECTION

Anchorage

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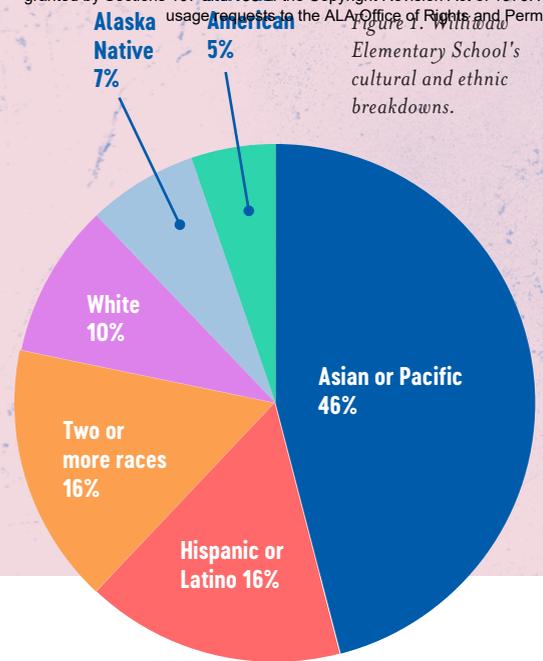


Figure 1. Williwaw Elementary School's cultural and ethnic breakdowns.

**M**y transition from classroom teacher to school librarian brought many new and exciting opportunities. I feel grateful and fortunate to be able to build connections with every child in my school. My goal is for all my students to feel safe and welcome, whether they have grown up in the neighborhood, have just arrived from the Dominican Republic speaking only Spanish, have experienced the trauma of being a refugee fleeing home countries due to dangerous, unsafe conditions, or have recently moved from one of the small, remote Alaska Native villages.

In order to provide a safe and welcome environment in our library, I created an “Our Languages” collection of books in the first languages of all my students, from Espanol to Hmong to Yup'ik Eskimo. I also partnered with a local furniture store, Scan Home, to create a large, cozy seating area in the library and a safe place for students to visit when they feel sad, angry, or other feelings that often accompany transitions to new settings or trauma.

Williwaw Elementary School, where I'm the school librarian in Anchorage, Alaska, currently has a

very ethnically and culturally diverse student population (see figure 1). As of October 2018, the ethnic breakdown for Williwaw Elementary School students was 46 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 16 percent Hispanic or Latino, 16 percent two or more races, 10 percent white, 7 percent Alaska Native, and 5 percent African American (“Anchorage School District Ethnicity Report” 2018).

Over the years, Anchorage, Alaska, has grown to become one of the most diverse cities in America. In the Anchorage School District, there are more than 110 languages spoken (Anchorage School District n.d.). In 2012–2013 Williwaw Elementary was the twelfth most diverse public school in the United States (Tunseth 2015).

The Anchorage School District has an English language learners (ELL) program that supports students learning the English language. As I work with students, I know that while learning English is important, linguistic support for students' native languages is also vital, because students may stay connected or may want to reconnect to their native language and culture.

During my first year as the school librarian at Williwaw Elementary, our school collection didn't contain books in the various languages that students spoke or heard at home. The collection contained a few Spanish books in the Dewey section at the bottom of a shelf, but they were rarely checked out.

I wanted to celebrate and showcase our student's diversity in our school library. My goal was to enhance our collection with books that:

- Appeal to ALL my students
- Contain familiar illustrations that remind students of their homelands
- Contain illustrations and descriptions of where their parents or grandparents lived before moving to the United States
- Have illustrations of people who look like them
- Are written in first languages
- Are bilingual that contain words in both a first language and in English



- Are culturally based and are in English with illustrations

## Grant Launches “Our Languages” Collection

In my first few months of librarianship, I wrote my first DonorsChoose request for books in Yup’ik, Somali, Vietnamese, Tagalog/Filipino, Spanish, and Hmong. The day the books arrived, I invited some students into the library to help me open the boxes of books.

One fifth-grade student, PajTshiab, found the bilingual book *Good Night, Little Sea Otter* by Janet Halfmann and Wish Williams. It’s written in Hmong and English. She sat down and started to read the story. PajTshiab was reading the Hmong text in the book. I asked her if she would read to me. I listened to her read the language she learned to read and speak at home. She said that she would like to check out the book to share with her family that had immigrated from Thailand.

Not all Hmong children know how to read in their language, but many know the stories told in the hand-embroidered traditional Hmong

story cloths featured in the book *Dia’s Story Cloth: The Hmong People’s Journey of Freedom* by Dia Cha. Many families want to teach their children to read in Hmong. Hmong students enjoy sharing the Hmong language books with their families because these books are not always commonly available.

Another student, Asoese, pulled the bilingual book *At School in Tonga and English (Tonga Nuyasa Edition)* by Ahurewa Kahukura from one of the boxes. She was thrilled to see words in print that she heard at home. She was not able to fluently read the words but was eager to share the book at home with family members. She shared that her family is originally from Samoa.

I created an “Our Languages” section in our library with bins of books in the many different languages that our students speak or are part of their ethnic background. My students are able to learn about our world and about themselves, and they are able to stay connected to their culture, language, and traditions through this special collection. I placed the collection near the circula-

tion desk in a central area that is highly visible and is easily accessible.

## Literature for ‘Real People’

One part of the “Our Languages” collection is Yup’ik, one of the largest Alaska Native languages. Yup’ik is a language and a description for its people. *Yuk pik* translated to English is “real person” (Alaska Native Language Center n.d.). Many Yup’ik families have moved from villages to larger communities such as Anchorage for economic opportunities. The transition from a village to Anchorage is often difficult, both socially and emotionally, for families. As an educator, I strive to help my Alaska Native students stay connected to their rich culture. By adding books written in Yup’ik or Yup’ik and English to our school library collection as well as adding traditional Yup’ik stories in English, our entire school population benefits.

When I read and share bilingual Yup’ik stories with my students during library class, I encourage my students to share information about who they are. They share where they’re from and their stories. Through this process, we welcome

them into the school family, which helps them feel safe. My students flourish and gain confidence as we celebrate their individuality and culture. Reconnecting my students with Alaska Native culture, language, stories, and traditions helps them feel welcome at our school.

### **My Experiences in a Yup'ik Village**

"Quyana," I said smiling, as one of my students, Lucy, handed me her library books that she was returning. She smiled and seemed surprised to hear me say "thank you" in the Yup'ik language. She told me how she shared the books with her grandmother who read them to her and how she enjoyed hearing "Gram" share stories about their Yup'ik culture when she was little. I was excited to get her feedback on the new books written in the Yup'ik language I had just received from my DonorsChoose grant.

I shared with my student, Lucy, that I began my teaching career in a Yup'ik village on the Kuskokwim River. We shared stories about traditional Alaska Native foods that we enjoy such as dry fish and akutaq (Eskimo ice cream made from white fish or salmon, moose fat or vegetable shortening, sugar, and berries), eeling (catching eels through thick river ice), berry picking, and other experiences. We had a connection. Before she left the library, she asked when I'd be getting more Yup'ik books.

When I was teaching in the Yup'ik village of about 125 people, the elders (who are grandparents of my former students) spoke fluent Yup'ik. My students' parents were semi-fluent and spoke mostly English, while my students knew and spoke only words and phrases in Yup'ik. My small classroom library didn't have any books in Yup'ik, and all my students spoke English at school. I witnessed how the Yup'ik people passed down

stories, traditions, and beliefs mostly orally by listening and learning from the elders, who were respected leaders in the small communities. I invited the elders into our classroom to share their stories with my multi-age class. I enjoyed hearing the stories as much as my students did. I wondered if anyone had written these stories down.

One spring day, a parent shouted "The ice is going out!" as she ran into our classroom toward the end of the school day. I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but I soon realized that I, along with my students and the entire school population, would soon be running down to the mighty Kuskokwim River. I could hear it before I could see it. We watched large chunks and plates of ice flowing down the river and stacking up with fierce power along the massive and powerful river.

Soon, one of the elders explained in Yup'ik, her first language, how we needed to carefully go to the river's edge and wash our faces in the flowing water. In turn, the river would wash any sickness we may carry down the river. All the children and community members participated in this tradition. It was an honor to be a part of the rich Yup'ik culture and to witness the respect the children and community had for their elders.

Many families pass on their rich cultural traditions; however, my former students in the Yup'ik village grew up learning English as their first language. The desire of many Yup'ik people is for the language to be revitalized by teaching young people to speak and read in Yup'ik. A new Yup'ik immersion program opened last year at an elementary school in Anchorage. It is the first school in the Anchorage School District to offer immersion program in an Alaska Native language.

### **Connections to the AASL Standards**

The different ways my students utilize and value the books within the "Our Languages" collection reflect the Include Shared Foundation from the AASL Standards across many Domains. My students value balanced perspectives that are enhanced by the school library's variety of resources. Our library represents all students and their place in the global learning community, and facilitates opportunities to experience diverse ideas (AASL 2018, 76–77).

Within the Create Domain, the "Our Languages" collection supports the diverse developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of the range of learners and their communities (AASL 2018, 76–77). My students identify and value the stories of their peers and value books in other students' first languages.

I coordinated our first Barnes and Noble Book Fair in October 2019. I planned activities surrounding a multi-cultural theme to showcase our school's diversity. We had students perform multicultural songs, and volunteers led multicultural games such as a Thailand jumping the rubber band game and board games such as Tapatan, a game from the Philippines. The fair also included multi-cultural crafts such as creating a Hmong star ornament, and storytimes in Spanish and Mandarin Chinese. It was a true celebration of our students and a great way to raise funds to purchase more books for the "Our Languages" special collection.

### **How Diversity Weaves Us Together**

As a first-year school librarian, my top priority was to build connections with my students. In order to accomplish this, I knew that I needed all my students to feel welcome and safe. To help students feel welcome,

## Recommended Books for an Elementary Level “Our Languages” Collection

This is a list of “first language,” bilingual, and cultural books. Many are part of our collection and some are on my list to add to our collection this year.

### Hmong

- *Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella* by Jewell Reinhard Coburn and Tzexa Cherta Lee
- *Good Night, Little Sea Otter* (Hmong/English) by Janet Halfmann
- *The Whispering Cloth: A Refugee’s Story* by Pegi Deitz Shea
- *Nine-in-One, Grr! Grr!* by Cathy Spagnoli
- *Dia’s Story Cloth: The Hmong People’s Journey of Freedom* by Dia Cha

### Filipino/Tagalog

- *Filipino Friends* by Liana Romulo
- *Am I Small? Ako Ba Ay Maliit?* (English and Tagalog Edition) by Philipp Winterberg and Nadja Wichmann
- *My Filipino Word Book* (English, Tagalog, Ilokano Edition) by Robin Lyn Fancy and Vala Jeanne Welch
- *Abadeha: The Philippine Cinderella* by Myrna J. De LA Paz and Youshang Tang
- *My First Book of Tagalog Words: Filipino Rhymes and Verses* by Liana Romulo and Jaime Laurel

### Spanish

- *Si Llevas un Raton a la Escuela* (Spanish Edition) by Laura Numeroff
- *You Be You/Sé Siempre Tú* (English and Spanish Edition) by Linda Kranz
- *La Araña Muy Ocupada* (Spanish Edition) by Eric Carle

- *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story* by Tomie DePaola
- *Oso Pardo, Oso Pardo, ¿Qué Ves Ahí?* (*Brown Bear and Friends*) (Spanish Edition) by Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle
- *The Cazuela That the Farm Maiden Stirred* by Samantha R. Vamos
- *Un Pez, Dos Peces, Pez Rojo, Pez Azul* (Spanish Edition) by Dr. Seuss, translated by Yanitzia Canetti
- *Viva Frida* by Yuyi Morales
- *Marisol McDonald Doesn’t Match: Marisol McDonald No Combina* (English and Spanish Edition) by Monica Brown
- *Rooster/Gallo* by Jorge Lujan and Manual Monroy
- *Tortillas Para Mamma and Other Nursery Rhymes* (various authors)
- *Gracias/Thanks* by Pat Mora and John Parra
- *Maria Had a Little Llama/Maria Tenia una Llamita* by Angela Dominguez

### Vietnamese

- *Milet Mini Picture Dictionary: English-Vietnamese* by Sedat Turhan and Sally Hagin
- *The Three Little Javelinas/Los Tres Pequeños Jabalies: Bilingual* (English, Multilingual and Spanish Edition) by Susan Lowell
- *Vietnamese Children’s Favorite Stories* by Phuoc Thi Minh Tran, Dong Nguyen, et al.
- *My First Vietnamese Alphabets Picture Book with English Translations: Bilingual Early Learning & Easy Teaching Vietnamese Books for Kids* by Huong S.
- *The Dragon Prince: Stories and Legends from Vietnam* by Nhat Hanh, Thich

### Tongan

- *At School in Tongan and English* (Tonga Nuyasa Edition) by Ahurewa Kahukura
- *Creatures in Tongan and English* (Tui Language Books) (Tonga Nyasa Edition) by Ahurewa Kahukura
- *Living in the Garden in Tongan and English* (Tui Language Books) (Tonga Nyasa Edition) by Ahurewa Kahukura
- *My First Tongan 200 Picture Word Book* by Gerard Aflague and Mary Aflague

### Somali

- *Milet Bilingual Visual Dictionary* (English-Somali) by Milet Publishing
- *Milet Picture Dictionary* (English-Somali) by Milet Publishing
- *Buugga Soomaali Alifbeetada – Somali Alphabet: Somali Children’s Alphabet Book* (Somali Edition) by Kiazpora
- *English Somali Jobs/Shaqooyinka Children’s Bilingual Picture Dictionary* by Richard Carlson Jr.
- *My Bilingual Book Sight* (English Somali) by Milet Publishing

### Samoan

- *Colors in Samoan with English Translations* by Mary Aflague and Gerard Aflague
- *Let’s Learn the Samoan Alphabet* by Gerard Aflague and Mary Aflague
- *Teach Me Samoan: Using 31 Daily Words* by Gerard Aflague
- *My First Samoan Alphabets Picture Book with English Translations* (Bilingual Early Learning & Easy Teaching Samoan Books for Kids) by Natia S.
- *Teach Me My Feelings in Samoan with English Translations* by Mary Aflague and Gerard Aflague



**THE NEST SYMBOLIZES HOW OUR DIVERSITY BRINGS US TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY WHEN CELEBRATED AND WOVEN TOGETHER LIKE AN OWL'S NEST.**

I partnered with a local business and furniture store, Scan Home, to create a central, comfortable reading area I affectionately named the Owl's Nest.

This cozy reading space, inspired by our school mascot, includes a large papier mâché tree that was created in collaboration with our art teacher and fifth-grade students. Its burly trunk is decoupaged with discarded book pages, and an owl's nest sits atop the tree. Students contributed ribbons of different textures, colors, and sizes and wove them together to create the owl's nest. Owls usually use a nest built by another species in nature, so the plan to build a nest that represented the various students in the school worked out well. The nest symbolizes how our diversity brings us together as a community when celebrated and woven together like an owl's nest.

Students typically sit together as a class in the Owl's Nest seating area after they check out books. A pair of decorative owls "roost" in the nest, and remind everyone of how we are all unified and a part of our school family. I value how my students sit together as a class in this common space and share books with each other. It may sound like a simple

addition of a piece of furniture and art, but both have significantly helped to build community and safe relationships in our library.

Something else that is being built in our library is the confidence of English language learner (ELL) students and students who are refugees who have fled their countries due to unsafe conditions. If you walk through the Owl's Nest space in our library, you may hear students reading to each other in their native, first languages. You may see Hmong or Yup'ik students who do not read in their first language but can see themselves in the illustrations and recognize some words and phrases on the pages of the books they've checked out. You may also see white students, who make up 10 percent of our school population, reading bilingual books in Spanish and English or Samoan and English. You will see all students, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or background, feeling safe and welcomed.

A new student, Juan Ignacio, arrived at our school directly from the Dominican Republic, speaking very little—if any—English. He was very fluent in reading Spanish and immediately

started checking out books from the Spanish book collection. As a result, he felt safe, valued, and welcome as he was able to check out books and read along with his peers in the Owl's Nest.

The bilingual books are not only popular with ELL students, they are also a hit with other students who learned only English at home, but have a desire to reconnect with their ancestral/native language. Bilingual books are also enjoyed by white, English-speaking students. They enjoy learning about different cultures through the English print and illustrations.

Many times, when I read the English words in bilingual books, I'll invite students to read a portion in their native language, such as Spanish or Hmong, for the class. The students beam with pride as they share something unique about themselves. Our library is a safe place where everyone is welcome and it is safe to explore and express their ethnic and racial backgrounds.

In Anchorage, there are more Hmong than any other refugee group. Some of my Hmong students have shared stories with me about relatives living in refugee camps, but most of the Hmong people migrated from Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin (Lee 2009; Tsong 2004).

My students from Somalia, who are also refugees and immigrated to Alaska with assistance from the Catholic Social Services' Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services, regularly check out books in the Somali language week after week and share them with their parents and siblings at home. One second-grade boy, Ayaanle, often shared the Somali books with his classmates of other ethnicities and cultures, and they soon started checking out the books as well. Although I hadn't expected this, I was pleased to see how accepting and interested his classmates were in his language and culture.



**STUDENTS LEARN TO GO TO THE SAFE PLACE AND PRACTICE SELF-REGULATION INDEPENDENTLY.**

## Meeting Needs with Safe Places

I've worked to create a socially and emotionally safe environment in our school library. In addition, our library also has a designated physical "safe place" where students learn self-regulation techniques when they are feeling sad, mad, or another feeling that may make it challenging to participate in library lessons and activities. I teach different relaxation techniques so students learn to independently calm themselves.

Students learn to go to the safe place and practice self-regulation independently. There are four breathing exercises that I teach, including the S.T.A.R, Drain, Pretzel, and Balloon. These techniques are based on the Conscious Discipline method (Conscious Discipline n.d.). There is no judgment and students are allowed and encouraged to go to the safe place at any time. When they are feeling calm and safe, they quietly rejoin the group.

The benefits of having a designated safe place as well as literature that supports students' needs are many. My students feel safe and welcomed. In my experience, when this occurs, connections are easily formed. Many former students who graduated and transitioned to middle school have accepted my invitation to return to visit and volunteer in our library.

Almost every day after school, a handful of students enter the library to greet me as they start shelving books while we chat about our day.



**Kay Waitman** is the teacher-librarian at Williwaw Elementary School in the Anchorage School District. She has

lived and taught in many different regions in Alaska. She is a member of AASL.

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