

# Building a Classroom Library Based on Multicultural Principles

## A Checklist for Future K-6 Teachers

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### Introduction

Building a classroom library while infusing multicultural (MC) content and multiple perspectives into the learning environment is an important job for teachers. Students need to have direct access to meaningful and relevant texts, and the classroom library is the optimal location. As the United States population becomes more diverse, educators must focus not only on developing their own cultural awareness but also on assisting their students in developing their cultural awareness. Obtaining the knowledge and skills to build personal classroom libraries that are inclusive and encompassing of the rapidly changing student demographics is one way of helping students acquire cultural awareness (Crisp et al., 2016).

According to Nieto (2000), all educators' decisions may have an impact on students' lives, and "this is true of the curriculum, books, and other materials we provide for them" (p. 357). Teacher educators are instrumental in shaping future teachers and must model how to select quality literature when building a classroom library.

Teacher educators should strive to assist teacher candidates in building anti-bias libraries in early childhood and elementary programs with a wide variety of literature. Teacher educators' responsibilities must reach a bit further regarding the scope of this task and should facilitate a growing understanding of culture in

regard to its influence on learning and teaching in order to prepare students for an increasingly diverse society. One way to recognize children, and to appreciate and value their cultures, is through a classroom library that corresponds with our ever-changing world.

Undoubtedly, teacher candidates wonder where and how to begin the process of selecting the best texts for their future libraries. How is it possible to know which books are the highest quality children's literature that represent a diverse reading list and demonstrate universal human experiences across a variety of cultures?

In this article, we recommend that by using the six MC principles (Bennett, 2014) as a foundation and employing an evaluation checklist (see Appendix B) designed to elucidate literary criticism and absence of bias, teacher candidates will be able to develop and expand classroom libraries in the most culturally responsive manner.

The purpose of this article is to underscore critical attention on educating our nation's teachers by developing a critical eye for high-quality MC literature that is available for the classroom as well as an ongoing commitment to seeking out the most effective array of literature for the children in their classrooms.

### Definition and Benefits of Multicultural Literature

According to Cai and Bishop (1994), MC literature "challenges the existing canon by expanding curriculum to include literature from a variety of cultural groups" (p. 59). Xenophobia, or the mistrust or fear of people who are strangers or different than oneself, is in part responsible for our global intolerance of different groups of people (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2016).

MC children's literature is about the

social, emotional, and cultural experiences of previously underrepresented groups of people. The literature's purpose is to validate these groups' experiences due to differences in race, gender, language, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Gopalakrishnan & Persiani-Becker, 2011).

Short (2016) also defined MC literature as texts that focus on the lives of people from underrepresented and/or marginalized groups, and Cai (2002) indicated that MC literature

involves diversity and inclusion, but, more importantly, it also involves power structure and struggle. Its goal is not just to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences, but also to ultimately transform the existing social order in order to ensure greater voice and authority to the marginalized cultures and to achieve social equality and justice among all. (p. 7)

It helps students reflect on themselves and others, change their attitudes, and understand different cultures (Cai, 2008).

High-quality MC literature may aid in teaching children about the positive differences and similarities among people in addition to providing children with a variety of opportunities to engage in MC children's literature. According to Anderson (2009), quality MC books enrich readers' appreciation of persons of various cultures and help them overcome stereotypical views.

Additionally, high-quality MC literature helps students to develop cross-cultural understanding (Norton, 2009). Gopalakrishnan and Persiani-Becker (2011) take a critical issues approach by advocating for using authentic literature to deal with similar issues that MC education deals with: power, gender, race, class, authentic representation, and cultural authenticity.

Given the broad range of cultural dimensions and experiences within groups,

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many authors, illustrators, educators, and researchers have different points of view about how to define cultural authenticity. Morgan (2011) stated that culturally authentic children's books lead readers to an accurate understanding of a group of people. If a group is portrayed in one way, most often negatively, and the characters do not reflect diverse perspectives and roles within the group, the book will likely not be considered culturally authentic. Also, illustrations and passages will likely be viewed as stereotypical if they are offensive to a minority group.

Bishop (2003) noted that MC children's books should provide both culturally specific and universal qualities. Culturally authentic children's books present a group's social issues accurately and honestly, and the illustrations show an accurate cultural setting with characters appearing with different physical characteristics. Some books describing poor attitudes against minority groups are not necessarily inauthentic if these books are historically accurate, and this can sometimes lead to further debate among educators when identifying whether a book is culturally authentic.

### Challenges in Creating a Multicultural Library

Since 1985, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison has provided annual statistics about children's books published by and/or about people who self-identify as members of diverse cultures. In a recent report, Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, and Townsend (2015) stated that across approximately 3,500 books published in 2014 and received by the CCBC, approximately

11% contained significant content, topics, characters, and/or themes about African or African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American, or Latino or Latino American people.

According to the CCBC, the number of MC books has remained stagnant for more than 20 years (Horning, 2013). Other researchers have identified similar disparities across these and other cultural identities, including race, religion, socioeconomic status and class, gender, disabilities and developmental differences, and sexual identity (Blaska, 2004; Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Crisp, 2015). Owing to this gap in diverse literature, there is a definite challenge for new educators who are seeking access to high-quality MC children's books.

### Banks's Theoretical Model of Multicultural Education

The theoretical framework supporting this investigation extends from Banks's comprehensive model of MC education. Banks (2010; Banks & Banks, 1997) described four approaches to integrating MC content in the curriculum.

The *contribution approach* is when teachers integrate isolated facts, short stories, and examples of success from the culture of ethnic or cultural groups into the curriculum without changing the structure of their lesson plans.

The *additive approach* implies the integration of special units of knowledge about ethnic and cultural groups into lesson plans while the organization and structure of the curriculum remain unchanged.

The *transformative approach* enables students to view a particular topic from

multiple and diverse cultural perspectives. This approach implies a complete transformation of the curriculum and in many cases a conscious effort of the teacher to deconstruct his or her own cultural beliefs, frames of reference, or preconceptions.

The *decision-making* and *social action approach* is an extension of the transformative approach: It includes the elements of the transformative approach, but it does not end with the exploration and understanding of the topic through diverse perspectives; it requires that the students learn how to make important decisions and take action to change the social reality. In the social action approach, it is not sufficient for students simply to read, discuss, and explore societal inequities and injustices.

Banks's model is illustrated further in the six principles of MC goals outlined by Bennett (2014). See Figure 1 to view these principles.

### Evaluating and Choosing Multicultural Literature

Teachers can learn how to choose appropriate books for children not only for learning about genres, cultural differences, and cultural concepts but also to discuss difficult issues through a critical perspective. With a critical issues approach in mind, the books highlighted in this article take into account that the classroom library is the first place to look when developing lessons specifically to discuss difficult issues.

For example, *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014) is an autobiographical children's book depicting the feelings of a transgender child. In the book, Jazz states,

#### Figure 1

#### Bennett's (2014) Multicultural Principles/Goals

Principle 1: *Developing multicultural perspectives*

Balance standard Eurocentric curriculum with the perspectives and histories of women and people of color. Assist students in seeing events and a variety of experiences from diverse perspectives.

Principle 2: *Developing cultural consciousness*

Expand the personal awareness that other people in the world have different experiences, histories, values, beliefs, viewpoints, and perspectives.

Principle 3: *Increasing intercultural competence*

Ability to interact, reach out, and collaborate with people of different cultures.

Principle 4: *Combating racism, prejudice, discrimination*

Become aware of racist and sexist behavior. Develop empathy. Avoid stereotyping.

Principle 5: *Developing awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics*

Knowledge of prevailing world conditions, trends, and developments. Knowledge of the world as a higher interrelated ecosystem subject to surprise effects and dramatic ramifications of simple events.

Principle 6: *Developing social action skills*

Awareness, knowledge, skills, attributes, and behaviors needed to work toward social justice.

“I have a girl brain but a boy body.” Jazz’s gender identity, portrayed in a realistic manner, explains her predisposition for traditional female characteristics, her sense of confusion, and the importance of supportive family and friends.

Selecting books with a critical issues approach in mind is essential, especially for teacher candidates who may be hesitant about discussing topics with which they themselves are uncomfortable. Cochran-Smith (2000) noted that preservice teachers should be challenged to critically assess their own mental “constructions” and preconceptions of the lives of minority students, as well as what type of curriculum and pedagogy is most important to them.

In one study, through extended engagement with MC children’s texts, instructors were able to create an opening for students to share and appreciate their different experiences as a foundation for building a classroom community (López-Robertson, 2017). It is essential to construct a classroom library that reflects the unique qualities of the children in the classroom, as well as the global community.

There is powerful research documenting that children need to see themselves reflected in the books in their classrooms (Books, 2007; Koss, 2015; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014), and when teachers provide children with reading material that reflects their lives and experiences, children show academic progress and demonstrate positive attitudes toward reading (Brown, 2002; Gay, 2000; Smolen, Collins, & Still, 2008).

However, according to Harris (2012), it is impossible to become acquainted with all of the available MC literature, so beyond acquiring knowledge about a child, recommendations from friends, colleagues, and professional organizations and publications can also serve as a source. As a culturally responsive educator, the important decision about which books to make available to students cannot be underestimated.

**The Anti-bias Checklist and the Six Multicultural Principles**

We acknowledge the challenges facing today’s new teachers when seeking to create a high-quality MC library for their classrooms. To aid new teachers, we worked to establish a system by which to analyze resources and understand the different forms of bias in children’s literature (Banks, 2009; Gallavan, 2010a, 2010b). Because teachers frequently use their personal classroom libraries to develop thematic lesson plans, the authors chose to

focus on reviewing key features that make a lesson plan MC using Bennett’s (2014) principles.

Following these principles and the work of multiple researchers (Howe & Lisi, 2013; Norton, 2011) in the area of analyzing MC literature, we evaluated and ultimately compiled a list of high-quality MC literature that could serve as a beginning point for new teacher libraries.

**Evaluation method.** To be included on the recommended book list (see Table 1), we selected books that could be used to address one or more MC goals or principles as developed by Bennett (2014). We synthesized the research (Howe & Lisi, 2013; Norton, 2011) into a checklist with 21

questions that could simply be answered “yes” or “no.” They also included a column that could be marked “n/a” if the evaluation question did not pertain to the text being read (see Appendix B for complete evaluation criteria). This checklist focusing on literary criticism and the absence of bias was used to review MC books found in the authors’ classroom libraries.

We have each been collecting MC children’s books for more than 20 years. For this study, using the checklist, we separately evaluated MC literature from classroom libraries and then met on two separate occasions to discuss our evaluation of the books. We reviewed more than 80 books, and while most met several of the

**Table 1**  
**Recommended Multicultural Books**

<i>Multicultural principle</i>	<i>Book title and author</i>	<i>Key terms and themes</i>
1. Developing multicultural perspectives	<i>Knock Knock: My Dad’s Dream for Me</i> by Daniel Beaty	Fathers and sons African American Separation
	<i>Amelia to Zora: Twenty Six Women Who Changed the World</i> by Cynthia Chin-Lee	Women Biography
	<i>I Am Jazz</i> by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings	Transgender
	<i>Two Mrs. Gibsons</i> by Toyomi Igus	Biracial Memoir Intergenerational relationships
	<i>Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World’s Fastest Woman</i> by Kathleen Krull	Athletes Racism Women Biography
2. Developing cultural consciousness	<i>Ruby’s Wish</i> by Shirin Yim Bridge	Sexism China
	<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> by Matt de la Peña	City and town African American Grandmothers
	<i>Nino Wrestles the World</i> by Yuri Morales	Identity Imagination Latino culture
	<i>My Diary from Here to There</i> by Amada Irma Perez	Emigration and immigration Bilingual
3. Increasing intercultural competence	<i>The Sandwich Swap</i> by Queen Rania al Abdullah and Kelly DiPucchio	Intolerance Friendship Social skills
	<i>The Name Jar</i> by Yangsook Cho	Names Personal identity Korean Americans Schools
	<i>Mango, Abuela, and Me</i> by Meg Medina	Immigration Bilingual Family

(continued on next page)



criteria on the checklist, the books included were deemed to meet a higher percentage (>80%) of the evaluation criteria while also addressing one or more of the multiple goals of MC lesson planning (see Appendix C).

The criterion most often neglected and/or debated in this process was the authenticity of the represented culture (Items 7a and 11) either in the illustrations or in the narrative. In previous studies, this controversy was discussed as a challenge in MC

literature (see also Bishop, 2003; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Morgan, 2011).

**Organizing the literature.** Following the evaluation, we sorted the chosen texts into categories representing Bennett's (2014) MC goals or principles. The 25 books chosen as examples of high-quality MC children's literature are recommended for use in educator preparation programs (EPPs) and elementary classrooms to

highlight and enhance positive similarities and differences for students among many cultural groups and to develop lesson plans using the MC principles.

The process of using a checklist as well as having a focus on MC goals provides teacher candidates with solid selection criteria to build a high-quality MC classroom library and jump-start the design of MC lesson plans. Finally, by adding key terms and themes to each selected book, the scope of a diverse classroom library broadens.

**Table 1**  
**Recommended Multicultural Books (continued)**

<b>Multicultural principle</b>	<b>Book title and author</b>	<b>Key terms and themes</b>
4. Combating racism, prejudice, discrimination	<i>El Deafo</i> by CeCe Bell	Deafness Friendship
	<i>Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music</i> by Margarita Engle	Chinese– African–Cuban Courage
	<i>Helen's Big World: The Life of Helen Keller</i> by Doreen Rappaport	Blindness Deafness Friendship
	<i>Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah</i> by Laurie Anne Thompson	Disability Ghana
5. Developing awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics	<i>Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i> by Duncan Tonatuih	Historical perspectives Mexican Americans
	<i>The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind</i> by William Kamkwama	Drought/famine Africa Experiments/ projects
	<i>Mama Mita: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya</i> by Donna Jo Napoli	Deforestation Naturalresources
	<i>One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia</i> by Miranda Paul	Ecological awareness Recycling
6. Developing social action skills	<i>Four Feet, Two Sandals</i> by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed	Homelessness Poverty Refugees Muslim
	<i>Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls</i> by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo	Overcoming odds Biography Women
	<i>Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez</i> by Kathleen Krull	Migrant farmworkers Biography Boycott
	<i>Sequoyah: The Cherokee Man Who Gave His People Writing</i> by James Rumford	Native Americans Written language Biography
	<i>Iqbal, a Brave Boy for Pakistan; Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan</i> by Jeanette Winter	Injustice Bravery Pakistan

## Conclusion

The checklist and books discussed in this article are recommended for EPPs to share with teacher candidates as a general model of how to critique children's books that are absent of bias and also address MC principles and goals. Throughout EEPs, students should be encouraged to develop lesson plans addressing one or more MC goals, and teacher educators are encouraged to assist teacher candidates in compiling books for their future classroom libraries.

Additionally, this checklist could be used with in-service teachers as a discussion starter during professional learning communities and at professional development meetings to aid staff in addressing issues of controversy and responding to the diverse beliefs, perspectives, and experiences integrated into the MC practices in the broader school community.

The referenced books are a beginning list and in no way representative of all classrooms. Getting to know the children in each classroom is one of the most important factors when selecting texts (Delpit, 2012). Preservice teachers should also read the important work of Derman-Sparks (1989, 2016) for further guidance on selecting anti-bias children's books.

There is no doubt that building a quality MC classroom library is a complex task. The job requires personal awareness of the classroom demographics and ongoing collaboration with families and professionals to ensure that the selected literature reflects all children's cultures. According to Harris (2012), it is impossible to become acquainted with all of the available MC literature, so beyond acquiring knowledge about a child, recommendations from friends, colleagues, and professional organizations and publications can serve as a source. To increase cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching, selecting quality MC children's literature is critical in educating our children.

While book choices have improved over past decades, the lack of quality MC children's books currently published is still disappointing (Horning et al., 2015). Even though the number of children of color in the U.S. continues to rise, the number of books published by or about people of color has stayed the same or decreased. It is ultimately up to each educator to take action, make a commitment to seeking the necessary high-quality texts, and prioritize the value of building and continually growing a rich MC classroom library.

It must be a top priority for our students not only to see themselves reflected in the classroom and school libraries but also to receive the educational equity that is the promise of our nation.

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### Appendix A Additional Resources

The following lists contain additional sources teachers may reference when searching for quality MC children's literature.

#### General Multicultural Awards

The Batchelder Award: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/batchelderaward>  
 Carter G. Woodson Book Awards: <https://www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson>  
 The Jane Addams Children's Book Awards: <http://www.janeaddamspeace.org/jacba/>  
 Notable Books for a Global Society: <http://www.clrsig.org/nbgs.php>  
 The Coretta Scott King Awards: <http://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/ckbookawards>

#### Award Lists for Hispanics/Latinos

Pura Belpré Award: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>  
 Tomás Rivera Book Award: <http://www.education.txstate.edu/ci/riverabookaward/>

#### Award List for LGBTQ

Rainbow Project Awards and Booklists: <http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/rainbow-project-book-list>

#### Award List for Special Needs

The Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award: <http://daddcec.org/Awards/DollyGrayAwards.aspx>

#### Award List for Native Americans

American Indians in Children's Literature: <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>

#### Award Lists for Asian Pacific Americans, Including Middle East

Arab American Book Award: <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward>  
 Asian Pacific American Libraries Association Literature Awards: <http://www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature-awards/>  
 South Asia Book Award: <http://southasiabookaward.org>  
 Middle East Outreach Book Council: <http://www.meoc.us>

### Appendix B: *Literary Criticism and the Absence of Bias: An Evaluation Tool for Multicultural Literature*

- |   | Yes | No | N/A |
|---|-----|----|-----|
| 1. Does the book avoid only presenting one type of thinking [bias]?   |     |    |     |
| 2. Does the book avoid discrimination? [portraying a person or group in a particularly positive or negative way]                                      |     |    |     |
| 2a. Will children be able to recognize the characters in the text and illustrations as belonging to the intended race and not mistake them for white? |     |    |     |
| 3. Are all cultural groups meaningful additions to the book [tokenism]?   |     |    |     |
| 3a. Do non-white characters solve their problems without intervention by whites?  |     |    |     |
| 4. Does the book avoid unfairly negative perceptions and/or viewpoints [prejudice]?   |     |    |     |
| 5. Does the book avoid racism [a negative attitude toward or treatment of people based solely on their race]?   |     |    |     |
| 6. Does the book treat all genders as equals [sexism]?  |     |    |     |
| 6a. Does the book reflect an awareness of the changed status of females?  |     |    |     |
| 7. Is the book absent of stereotypes [the belief that all the members of one particular group think and behave in a certain way]?                     |     |    |     |
| 7a. Are the illustrations authentic and non-stereotypical?  |     |    |     |
| 7b. Is the focus on the everyday life of the culture group [exotica focuses only on extreme examples of the culture]?                                 |     |    |     |
| 8. Does the book portray physical diversity?  |     |    |     |
| 9. Are social issues and problems depicted frankly, accurately, and without oversimplification?   |     |    |     |
| 10. Does the author accurately describe contemporary settings?  |     |    |     |
| 10a. Is the focus on routine aspects of life [foods, fashions, festivals]?  |     |    |     |
| 11. Are the factual and historical details accurate?  |     |    |     |
| 11a. Does the book rectify historical distortions or omissions?   |     |    |     |
| 12. Does the book avoid the use of inappropriate language?  |     |    |     |
| 12a. Does dialect have a legitimate purpose, and does it ring true?   |     |    |     |
| 13. Are the authors or illustrators from the same cultural group as the characters portrayed in the text?   |     |    |     |

#### **Multicultural principles**

Yes

Developing multicultural perspectives  
 Developing cultural consciousness  
 Increasing intercultural competence  
 Combating racism, prejudice, discrimination  
 Developing awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics  
 Developing social action skills

Note: Adapted from Bennett (2014), Howe and Lisi (2013), and Norton (2011)

**Appendix C**  
**Recommended Book Sample**

Employing “Literary Criticism and the Absence of Bias: An Evaluation Tool for Multicultural Literature”

Title of book: *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation*

Author of Book: Duncan Tonatiuh

Percentage of positive evaluation as shown below: 95%

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Does the book avoid only presenting one type of thinking [bias]?		X	
2. Does the book avoid discrimination? [portraying a person or group in a particularly positive or negative way]	X		
2a. Will children be able to recognize the characters in the text and illustrations as belonging to the intended race and not mistake them for white?	X		
3. Are all cultural groups meaningful additions to the book [tokenism]?	X		
3a. Do non-white characters solve their problems without intervention by whites?		X	
4. Does the book avoid unfairly negative perceptions and/or viewpoints [prejudice]?	X		
5. Does the book avoid racism [a negative attitude toward or treatment of people based solely on their race]?	X		
6. Does the book treat all genders as equals [sexism]?	X		
6a. Does the book reflect an awareness of the changed status of females?		X	
7. Is the book absent of stereotypes [the belief that all the members of one particular group think and behave in a certain way]?	X		
7a. Are the illustrations authentic and non-stereotypical?	X		
7b. Is the focus on the everyday life of the culture group [exotica focuses only on extreme examples of the culture]?	X		
8. Does the book portray physical diversity?		X	
9. Are social issues and problems depicted frankly, accurately, and without oversimplification?		X	
10. Does the author accurately describe contemporary settings?	X		
10a. Is the focus on routine aspects of life [foods, fashions, festivals]?		X	
11. Are the factual and historical details accurate?	X		
11a. Does the book rectify historical distortions or omissions?	X		
12. Does the book avoid the use of inappropriate language?	X		
12a. Does dialect have a legitimate purpose, and does it ring true?	X		
13. Are the authors or illustrators from the same cultural group as the characters portrayed in the text?		X	
<i>Multicultural principles</i>	Yes		
Developing multicultural perspectives			
Developing cultural consciousness			
Increasing intercultural competence			
Combating racism, prejudice, discrimination	X		
Developing awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics			
Developing social action skills	X		

Note: Adapted from Bennett (2014), Howe and Lisi (2013), and Norton (2011)