

Read the section in *Literature Representing Diverse Perspectives* called Criteria for Evaluating and Selecting Multicultural Literature (p. 100-104). There are six specific questions that the textbook offers to point educators in the right direction for choosing culturally relevant books. Read through the six questions, rank the questions in the order that you believe is most important to least important for a teacher to consider when building a classroom library. Explain the rationale behind your rankings.

explores what it means to move to Jerusalem as a teenager when she has been raised in St. Louis, and recounts how she struggles to understand cultural differences and the way they affect her identity. Books such as Mary Hoffman's *The Color of Home* show readers that despite language barriers, the basic human need to communicate about things that are important to each of us—home, family, community—can be done through illustration and interpretation. In her *Breadwinner* trilogy, Deborah Ellis explores what it means to be a female child living in modern-day Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. In *The Breadwinner*, 11-year-old Parvana hides her gender identity in order to obtain a job to feed her family when her father is suddenly taken away. In *Parvana's Journey*, after her father's death, she sets out to find her missing family. *Mud City* switches to the story of Parvana's friend, Shauzia, and describes how she survives life in the streets as she longs to escape to France.

Criteria for Evaluating and Selecting Multicultural Literature

With the growth in the number of multicultural books, it is important to select those of high quality. Naturally, when judging the quality of multicultural books, a teacher should apply the criteria for evaluating the various genres of children's literature that are discussed throughout this text. In addition, there are specific questions to consider regarding multicultural books:

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

Do the Author and Illustrator Present Authentic Perspectives?

The author should maintain an insider's mindset and point of view when writing about a cultural group to portray it authentically. Voices such as Patricia Polacco's and Pat Mora's convey an insider's perspective because these authors write of experiences based on their own heritage. Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt* and Mora's *A Birthday Basket for Tía* both tell of the authors' personal lives. However, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, the crucial issue is not heritage by fact of birth, but whether the author thinks as a member of the group or as an outsider looking in. Careful research and experience living within the culture contribute to Demi's insider voice in a book such as *Liang and the Magic Paintbrush*. Outsider perspectives that offer authentic portrayals include contemporary photo essays such as those by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith, in which she depicts the daily lives of children who have a particularly strong ethnic heritage. Her subjects vary from Vietnamese Americans to different Native-American tribes, but in each case, she offers as true a portrayal as possible highlighting things that would be interesting to those both within and outside the culture.

Illustrations should be accurate, true to the time period portrayed, and culturally authentic. They must not stereotype, homogenize, or ridicule any cultural group. Racial groups should

ILLUSTRATION 4.6

This collection contains stories about women in African-American folktales, fairy tales, animal stories, supernatural tales, legends, and biographical accounts. ("Her Stories" by Virginia Hamilton, illustrated by Leo & Diane Dillon. Blue Sky Press.)





TOP SHELF 4.2

GROWING UP IN A WORLD OF POLITICAL OR SOCIAL UNREST

Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez

The Only Road by Alexandria Diaz

The Other Side of Truth by Beverley Naidoo

Red Scarf Girl by Ji Li Jiang

Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo by Zlata Filipovic

depicted with a variety of physical features that are not overemphasized. Illustrations play a major role in transmitting cultural images, especially in picturebooks. Often, the cover illustration sends an immediate message about a book's perspective.

Is the Culture Portrayed Multidimensionally?

Cultural groups should be presented multidimensionally to help readers realize the depth and breadth of experiences within cultures. For example, *El Chino*, a biography of Billy Wong by Allen Say, tells the story of a son of Chinese immigrants who became a bullfighter despite the expectations others had of him. To pursue his dream, he had to clash with those expectations. His critics said, "Who's ever heard of a Chinese athlete?" and "Only the Spaniards can become true matadors." But he remembered what his father said: "In America, you can be anything you want to be." Presenting a culture's multidimensionality means portraying the members of that culture in a range of ways. A book should especially be free of any tokenism, in which cultures might be represented only to give a head count for politically correct inclusion.

Cultural groups should not be presented through images that could lead to stereotyping. There is no particular experience that is so universal that it can be defined as "The _____ Experience." Rather, multiple dimensions of all cultures should be presented objectively, without bias. Roles of cultural members should also be varied, as in Mildred Pitts Walter's *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World*, in which the African-American grandfather serves as an important role model for his ten-year-old grandson. During a visit to his grandfather's ranch, Justin discovers that cowboys must become self-sufficient by learning to do the jobs that Justin had earlier deemed "women's work."

Are Cultural Details Naturally Integrated?

The cultural details necessary to make a story come alive should not impede the flow of the story. These details should be presented in context so that cumbersome explanations are not necessary. If longer explanations are needed, footnotes or endnotes can serve to clarify. Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate* is filled with cultural details. The hardships endured, the power relationships and the actions they lead to, the dialogues among the Chinese workers, and the dialogues between the Chinese workers and their white bosses are all described with a completeness that gives readers insight into the lives of the men who left their families behind in the hope of getting rich in a foreign land. These details are necessary for readers to deepen their understanding and empathy.



ILLUSTRATION 4.7

Ikarus Jackson, the new boy in school, is out-cast because he has wings, but his resilient spirit inspires one girl to speak up for him. *Wings* by Christopher Myers, 2000. Used by Permission of Scholastic, Inc.



ILLUSTRATION 4.8

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick. "Differing abilities and physical challenges bring two seeming opposites to forming a strong bond of partnership and friendship. (Used by Permission of Scholastic, Inc.)"

Are Details Accurate and Is the Interpretation Current?

Details must be accurate and true to the situation in which they are presented. Factual errors, omissions, and changes may indicate sloppy research and presentation. Sometimes, these problems may actually reflect an attempt on the author's part to meet the expectations of a mainstream readership that has preconceived notions of cultures. Series books that focus on children in various countries are sometimes guilty of such intentional errors. One book featuring a child in the Netherlands included all the preconceived images that mainstream readers might expect to find: A blonde girl wakes up, puts on her wooden shoes, and passes a windmill and a field of tulips on her way to school!

There are also series books that are written according to a formula, such as books about other countries in which authors fill in the blanks of standardized formats. In many cases, these authors have no firsthand experience with the country they are discussing. Currency of interpretation can sometimes be evaluated by considering how recently the book was published and assessing the thoroughness of the revision. Books that claim to cite "current" statistics should be carefully analyzed to determine whether the statistic reported is still appropriate years after the book is published. Sometimes, the interpretation of factual information is more influential than the

facts themselves. The author's understanding of the culture determines his or her choice of words, which in turn influences the readers' perceptions. For example, reference to a Japanese father as "honorable father" is a literal translation of the word *otoosan*. The "o" at the beginning of the word for father denotes the honoring of the person addressed. However, constantly referring to each adult as "honorable" may lead readers to an exaggerated, stereotypical view that is not in keeping with the actual personal interactions described in the story.

TEACHING IDEA 4.1

CONNECT BOOKS WITH SIMILAR THEMES, ACROSS DIFFERING CULTURES

Present a set of books that have similar themes, but represent different cultures. Examples of themes are the search for freedom, immigration, coming of age, friendships/peer relationships, and intergenerational relationships. Have children realize the universality of many themes, but also how the details of the stories differ if they are culturally bound. For example, collect immigrant stories. Be sure to include stories of immigrants who came through Ellis Island generations ago, immigrants who came more recently under dangerous circumstances, and recent immigrants who are fortunate enough to freely travel back and forth to their homelands. Consider the variety of reasons and ways in which people have immigrated to the United States. Find similarities in their experiences as well as differences. Share books like *Grandfather's Journey* by Allen Say that speak to nearly every first-generation immigrant's feelings when it closes, "As soon as I am in one place, I'm homesick for the other."

Is Language Used Authentically?

The language and dialect spoken by characters should authentically portray the kinds of interactions that are typical of those characters, and terminology that refers to aspects of culture should be acceptable by contemporary standards. For example, Gary Soto writes from the perspective of a Mexican American who grew up in California. Readers who have a background similar to his sense a true voice of their experiences. In his book *Pacific Crossing*, Soto portrays two teenage Mexican-American boys as foreign exchange students in Japan. Soto uses terminology and phrases that Mexican Americans might use to communicate with each other. He also follows the Japanese language's very strict rules of verbal exchange, which take into consideration the gender, the age, and the familiarity of the speakers. Similarly, Spanish-speaking readers often note that when English language books insert a Spanish word but then follow it up with the English term, that "double-word use" is unnatural and inauthentic.

Is the Collection Balanced?

It is important to present children with a balanced collection of multicultural books. The term "collection" refers to books that are available in a school, classroom, or public library as well as the books selected to serve as teaching units within a classroom. Budget constraints, space limitations, and the need to present readers with the best possible choices make careful decisions regarding book collections a necessity. Readers need to be able to find recommended books readily, not buried under an avalanche of mediocre books. It is generally accepted that purchasing multiple copies of excellent books is better than including mediocre books simply to increase the size of the collection. Because a great number of high-quality multicultural books are available today, there is no need to include inadequate books simply to fulfill a quota.

To compile a balanced multicultural collection, a teacher or librarian should assess needs and match available quality books with those identified needs. In assessing needs, consideration should be given to (1) readers' preferences, (2) existing multicultural books in the collection, (3) curricular needs, (4) the availability of quality multicultural books, and (5) provision of a strong selection across genres. In addition, the compiler should ensure that adequate numbers of books are available for recreational reading, for teacher read-alouds, and for placement in the classroom library.

Consider Readers' Preferences. Both teachers and librarians need to acquire an understanding of the general background knowledge and the preferences of the readers for whom the particular collection is being developed, including the range of materials they enjoy and the types of books they choose. Often, children will be interested in reading books about their own cultural group, but that is not always the case. Some readers will voluntarily read books about other cultural groups; others might need to be introduced to and encouraged to select such books.

Survey Multicultural Books Already in the Collection. Multicultural books that are already in the collection form the core of the collection and help determine what is needed. Overselecting or underselecting certain types of books can be avoided by conducting a careful inventory of existing books in the collection. Is there an overabundance of folktales from various cultures? Are there enough contemporary stories about people of diverse cultures? Are there books that show multiple



ILLUSTRATION 4.9

Esperanza Rising, by Pam Muñoz Ryan. Scholastic, 2000. A girl from an Aristocratic Mexican family must navigate a new life as a farm worker in Depression-era California. (Used by permission.)

TEACHING IDEA 4.2

IDENTIFY CULTURAL MARKERS

Cultural markers are found in culturally authentic books. They are the details that are true to a culture—artifacts, character behavior, language use, and physical descriptions. Select a picturebook that includes many cultural markers, and have children list all that they encounter in either the text or the illustrations. Remove the cultural markers and retell the story without the details that make the story rooted in a specific culture. Discuss how the details personalized the story to a specific culture. Try substituting equivalent details from another culture, and consistently make those changes throughout the story (names, places, language, foods, etc.). Some students may want to try their hand at re-illustrating the story to fit the revised version. See if they can include illustration details that are also culturally specific.

TOP SHELF 4.3

IMMIGRANT STORIES

Grandfather's Journey by Allen Say

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson

by Bette Bao Lord

Journey of the Sparrows by Fran Leeper Buss

GEORGE

ALEX GINO

ILLUSTRATION 4.10

The world sees George as a boy, but George knows she is not. She wants to play the role of Charlotte in "Charlotte's Web," and faces questions of identity as a transgender person coming out. (George by Alex Gino, 2017. Used by Permission of Scholastic, Inc.)

perspectives? Familiarity with the existing collection also enables a teacher or librarian to weed out and discard books that are not culturally appropriate.

Assess Curricular Needs. It is important to assess curricular needs to determine what is needed to supplement units of study. A literature-based curriculum calls for high-quality books to be used in all curricular areas. As teachers and librarians work together to obtain books that fit the needs of the curriculum, they should attempt to include books that extend beyond the basic information and enhance multicultural understanding.

Determine the Availability of High-Quality Multicultural Books. Determine the availability of quality multicultural books, because no matter what the needs are, only high-quality books should be considered. Obtaining lower-quality books simply to fill a shelf is not recommended.

Provide a Strong Selection Across Genres. Another goal in establishing a balanced collection of multicultural books is to provide a variety of different genres. For example, when creating a collection of books about Mexico, the teacher or librarian should make a point to include folklore, history, informational books, picturebooks, historical fiction, biography, poetry, and modern realistic fiction. There should be books set in Mexico as well as books about Mexican Americans. The books must represent a broad range of experiences and voices if readers are to understand the diverse nature of Mexico and its people.

Awards for Multicultural Literature

Multicultural books qualify for all of the general awards given to children's literature, such as the Caldecott, Newbery, and Sibert medals. Several multicultural books have been recipients of such awards. For example, Ed Young was presented the Caldecott Medal for *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China*. Linda Sue Park was presented the Newbery Medal for *A Single Shard*. The same year, An Na was presented the Sibert Medal for *A Step from Heaven*. Such recognitions have caused some to question the continuation of ethnicity-based awards (Aronson, 2001). However, the need for awards that are designated specifically for the purpose of examining and awarding books and their creators for the criteria of cultural depiction continues. Awards are sometimes given to previously unpublished authors and illustrators to encourage the writing and illustrating of books on multicultural subjects, and have played an important role in launching the careers of authors and illustrators. Awards provide public recognition for a book, author, or illustrator, and serve as selection and evaluation tools.

The Coretta Scott King Award

At an American Library Association conference in 1969, after lamenting the fact that a "minority" author or illustrator had never been awarded the Newbery or Caldecott medal, school librarians Mabel McKissick and Glyndon Greer were encouraged by publisher John Carroll to launch a new award highlighting the accomplishments of African-American authors and illustrators. The award was named in honor of Coretta Scott King to "commemorate the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr."