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Turning the Pages of Children's Literature: Dismantling Racial Inequities

By Millicent M. Musyoka, Hadeel Alawad, and Sulaiman Adeoye

Many deaf and hard of hearing children face significant challenges in language, literacy, social, and academic development. These challenges increase for deaf and hard of hearing children who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Cannon & Luckner, 2016). To address these challenges, philosophies, policies, and practices should support full inclusion. Deaf and hard of hearing children from ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse backgrounds enrich many public school classrooms.

However, addressing inequities based on disability, race, or ethnicity is about more than placement. Questions still remain about teachers' practices, and few teacher preparation programs in the United States provide training on how to work with deaf and hard of hearing children from diverse racial, ethnic, and language backgrounds (Cannon & Luckner, 2016). Yet teachers need tools for addressing inequities and dismantling systemic racism, and effective tools may be found in children's literature.

Diversity Inclusion—Teaching to All

In deaf education, “diversity inclusion” has come to mean engaging and empowering students who come from marginalized communities through knowledge gleaned from curriculum content (Gay, 2018). In children's literature, children see themselves and their peers in the stories shared and discussed in class. When one group is over-represented—as has occurred historically in the case of White children in North America—systemic inequities occur. When children of color do not see themselves in literature, they feel marginalized, inferior, and even insignificant. The over-

Photos courtesy of Robin Williams Evans, Wayne Evans, and the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center



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Left: When children of color and/or children with disabilities don't see themselves represented in literature, they can feel marginalized, inferior, and even insignificant. Using multicultural literature in the classroom helps students understand, respect, and accept the physical and cultural differences of their peers (Golos & Moses, 2013).

representation of one community and the near nonrepresentation of other communities in classroom materials is part of what is meant by systemic educational racism.

Teachers, whose goal is to promote racial and cultural equity, will find significant support through the use of multicultural children's literature (Hollander, 2004). Children's literature—material read to infants and read to and sometimes by young children—contains relatable characters, accurate language, and illustrations to support children's understanding. Multicultural literature features children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Use of multicultural literature can allow all

teachers to promote equity and support restorative justice in their classrooms (Gopalakrishnan, 2011).

Promoting Diversity through Reading

As the demographics of classrooms change throughout the United States, inclusion of multicultural literature becomes especially desirable. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), 44 percent of all children in American classrooms were from minority groups, and the number is expected to rise to 62 percent by 2050. The shift in the demographic composition of the student population doubly affects the deaf and

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Right: When deafness is portrayed from a socio-cultural perspective, deaf and hard of hearing children learn to recognize and value their Deaf identity, the Deaf community, and Deaf culture.

hard of hearing student population, a minority group within minority groups (Alfano, Radlinski, & García del Corro-Helbig, 2022; Musyoka, 2022). In fact, 55 percent of deaf and hard of hearing students attending educational programs in the United States are from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013).

The Council for Exceptional Children (2018) supports multicultural education, encouraging strategies that promote curricula programming that is responsive to diverse populations across multiple educational settings. In its mission statement regarding teacher education standards, the Council on Education of the Deaf (2020) emphasizes best practices that focus on current research and embraces diversity and multiculturalism. Yet Gay (2018) noted that approximately 70-95 percent of textbooks used in classrooms still overstate the importance of the cultures and contributions of White people, while the culture and contributions of people of color are not only minimized but, in many cases, omitted. The literature adopted and used in many schools and programs for deaf and hard of hearing children is probably not an exception. In fact, Musyoka and Adeoye (2021) found that this literature, too, was limited in diversity.

Further, individuals of color are under-represented among professional personnel. Teachers, pre-service deaf education teachers, resource specialists, and general education co-teachers are mostly individuals who are White; this means students of color may lack role models. Consequently, educational standards in deaf and hard of hearing



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education mandate the integration of diversity inclusion into classroom teaching practices (Cannon & Luckner, 2016).

Multicultural Literature: Enduring Benefit

The use of multicultural literature supports children's understanding and appreciation of culture and their development of self-image, self-esteem, and sense of purpose (Husband, 2019; Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2016). Further, this literature helps students understand, respect, and accept the physical and cultural differences of their peers (Golos & Moses, 2013). Consequently, negative stereotypes—often fueled by ignorance, fear, or hatred—of minority

Ideally, the cultural details not only enhance the narrative but also provide readers with an understanding of the culture in which the characters live.

groups may be addressed as children become more understanding, accepting, and respectful of individual differences (Gopalakrishnan, 2011; Husband, 2019). Additionally, exposure to different cultures through literature allows students to celebrate, honor, and respect differences in cultures—both of the characters in their text and of the individuals in their classrooms (Mandarani & Munir, 2021). Finally, reading literature that allows students from minority

cultures, as well as students from majority cultures, to connect to their own lives may also accentuate their pleasure in reading, which is critical for lifelong learning (Mandarani & Munir, 2021).

Previous research has identified various reasons for bringing children's multicultural literature into the classroom (Mandarani & Munir, 2021; Musyoka & Adeoye, 2021):

- To allow diverse students to see themselves and get inspired by possible options in the future
- To assist students in understanding the lives of others and respecting the perspectives of diverse cultural groups
- To promote equity and social justice by modeling positive behavior and equal treatment toward diverse individuals that extends to the community
- To improve healthy interactions by overcoming stereotypes or biases in the classroom and community
- To develop a positive home-school link
- To support collaborative learning strategies

Diversity, Inclusion, and Deaf Literature

Musyoka, Adeoye, and Alawad (2019) found that diversity in literature for deaf and hard of hearing children in

elementary school—like that of literature for all children—is limited. Most studies show deaf and hard of hearing characters from linguistically and ethnically diverse backgrounds are neglected (Golos & Moses, 2013; Musyoka & Adeoye, 2021). Further, deaf and hard of hearing characters are portrayed too often from a medical view (i.e., enduring or overcoming a physical deficit), as opposed to a socio-cultural view (i.e., part of a vibrant culture and community of individuals with their own language and appropriate behaviors). Deaf and hard of hearing characters are portrayed as having disabilities as opposed to differences (Golos & Moses, 2013; Pajka-West, 2010). This misrepresentation can have far-reaching consequences, leading young deaf and hard of hearing children to devalue themselves and their communities.

On the other hand, when deafness is portrayed from a socio-cultural perspective, deaf and hard of hearing children learn to recognize and value their Deaf identity, the Deaf community, and Deaf culture. Musyoka and Adeoye (2021) encourage teachers of deaf and hard of hearing children to analyze their syllabi, instructional approaches, and materials to ensure they represent students from all cultural groups in their classrooms.

Criteria for Selection

Perhaps the critical criteria for selecting multicultural children's literature for the classroom involves the accuracy of both the text and the illustrations in reflecting the culture of the narrative, characters, dialogue, and values of the material (Harper & Brand, 2010; Husband, 2019). Ideally, the cultural details not

Children's Literature in the Classroom: STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE APPRECIATION OF DIVERSITY

Various strategies can be employed for effective interaction with multicultural children's literature. The strategies below focus on teaching before, during, and after reading multicultural children's literature.

BEFORE children begin interacting with the literature:

- Teachers evaluate and select literature that includes characters who are deaf, have disabilities, come from a variety of cultures, and ideally are representative of the students in their classroom.
- Teachers identify issues in the literature selected, and they and their students share their own experiences related to those issues.
- Teachers engage students in dialogue on related inclusivity.

DURING the interaction with the literature:

- Teachers guide students in various activities:
 - Discussing the pictures in the book
 - Reading the story
 - Retelling the story using signs or oral skills
 - Discussing the characters in the story
 - Engaging in dramatic play to identify changes in the characters' feelings
 - Role playing relationships or behaviors
 - Drawing or painting
 - Discussing related experiences
 - Discussing various multicultural issues, including race, ethnicity, language, gender, and socio-economic status
 - Clearing up any misconceptions or stereotypes
 - Discussing the characters in the story
 - Discussing how students' perceptions have changed
 - Discussing how students can best be supportive of peers
 - Providing opportunities to ask questions

AFTER the interaction with the literature:

- Teachers integrate activities such as role playing, bringing in guest speakers, and having students do artwork and compose poetry.
- Teachers, especially those working within thematic units, integrate the themes and issues from the book into other content areas.
- Teachers facilitate a library visit to collect books that build students' further knowledge of inclusion.
- Teachers engage students in a book-making project in which students create their own books based on the discussions held in class. Students also use their art skills to include images in the books.

only enhance the narrative but also provide readers with an understanding of the culture in which the characters live. When a single character from a minority culture appears within a narrative that includes mostly characters from the majority culture, the character representing the minority community should be an integral part of the story. Harper and Brand (2010) note that teachers need to pay attention to how authors interweave plot, characters, setting, theme, and point of view to create an age-appropriate story. Negative stereotypes should be rejected (Harper & Brand, 2010; Husband, 2019).

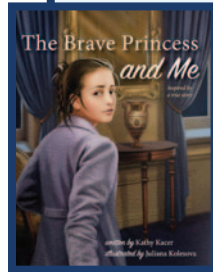
When characters have disabilities, there are specific criteria that are identified as necessary when selecting children's literature (Taylor et al., 2020):

- Positive representation of the character
- Role of the character
- Emphasis on disabilities or what the character does
- Stereotyping abilities of a character
- Representations of interactions between disabled and non-disabled characters
- Portrayal of disability in a variety of settings
- Impact of disability on the plot

A teacher's selection of inclusive deaf children's literature should not focus only on narratives involving Deaf culture. As deaf and hard of hearing children in their classrooms may have additional disabilities and hail from different cultural backgrounds, teachers should ensure students acquire information about different Deaf cultural groups as well as about the Deaf community and Deaf culture. Since it may be challenging to find children's literature that is inclusive of characters who are deaf or hard of hearing, from different cultural groups, and/or who have disabilities, teachers need to be intentional as they compose their classroom collections.

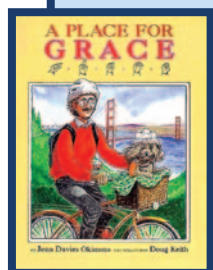
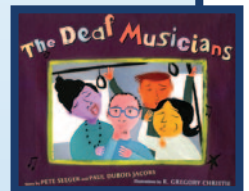
Children's Books with Deaf Characters of Color

Very few children's books include deaf and hard of hearing children of color. Below are some good ones:



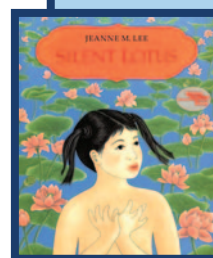
- ***The Brave Princess and Me*** by Kathy Kacer and Juliana Kolesova
- ***Cajun's Song*** by Darlene Toole
- ***The Deaf Musicians*** by Pete Seeger, Paul DuBois Jacobs, and R. Gregory Christie
- ***Dina the Deaf Dinosaur*** by Carole Addabbo

- ***Enrique Speaks with His Hands*** by Benjamin Fudge
- ***Hands & Hearts*** by Donna Jo Napoli and Amy Bates
- ***I am Deaf*** by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos and Marta Fabrega
- ***I Can't Hear Like You (Talking It Through)*** by Althea
- ***I Have a Sister—My Sister is Deaf*** by Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson

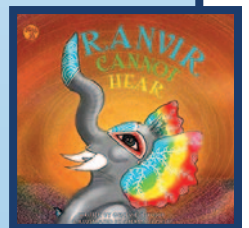


- ***Lucia alto y claro/Lucy: Loud and Clear*** by Lucy Lavan and Beatriz Iglesias
- ***Max aprende la lengua de señas*** by Adria Fay Klein and Mernie Elizabeth Gallagher-Cole
- ***A Place for Grace*** by Jean Davies Okimoto and Doug Keith
- ***Ranvir Cannot Hear*** by Genevieve Yusuf and Shermain Philip

- ***River of Hands: Deaf Heritage Stories*** by Symara Bonner, Jason Brace, Kayla Bradford and the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf
- ***Secret Signs: Along the Underground Railroad*** by Anita Riggio



- ***Shay and Ivy: Beyond the Kingdom*** by Sheena McFeely and Casie Trace
- ***Silent Lotus*** by Jeanne M. Lee
- ***Smart Princess and Other Deaf Tales*** by Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf
- ***Splash, Splat!*** by Alexis Domney and Alice Crawford



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