

2008-01-01

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### Recommended Citation

Mhic Mhathuna, M. and Hill, U.: Intercultural Books in Practice in Vision into Practice, Proceedings of Centre for Early CDevelopment and Education Conference, Dublin Castle, CECDE, February 2007, pp, 180-187.

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## INTERCULTURAL BOOKS IN PRACTICE

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### **Introduction**

This paper examines the practical use of intercultural and multicultural books in Early Years settings in the Irish context. Mendoza and Reese (2001: 1) define intercultural and multicultural books as “picture books that depict the variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within society.” Multiculturalism implies an emphasis on celebrating cultural difference, while interculturalism takes a broader view of culture and considers issues such as discrimination and racism (Murray and O’Doherty 2001: 58; INTO 2002: 2). We use both terms in this paper and focus on picture books in particular as they provide a child-centred focus for providing input and sharing ideas with young children from birth to six years of age.

The 2006 census ([www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)) tells us that Ireland has its highest population since 1861 and that migration is the dominant factor in this increase. This is a new experience for Ireland as we adapt to the scale and diversity of recent immigration and, is a very different experience from countries such as the U.K. and the U.S.A. who have experienced different patterns of immigration. Policy developments within the Irish Early Education sector also reflect changing Irish society. One of the core principles of *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE 2006), advises

that quality early childhood settings should provide rich and varied experiences which support children's ability to value social and cultural diversity, within the cultural heritage of Ireland. The *Diversity and Equality Guidelines* (2006) published by the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) refer to picture books explicitly and ask childcare providers to consider images, text and language when selecting children's books.

### **Methodology**

Drawing from Irish and international diversity literature, a questionnaire was devised, piloted, and posted to seventy early years centres in the Dublin area in October 2006. The centres involved provide practice placements for Early Childhood Education degree level students in the Dublin Institute of Technology. While surveys can be limited by the scope of design and method, they may provide the best way to canvas widely within a particular cultural group (O'Leary, 2004). The limitations of this method are that we may be only hearing the voices of practitioners who have an interest in this topic or who wish to express their views. Responses from thirty-five settings were received or 50 per cent of those contacted. The responses to questions regarding criteria for selecting multicultural and intercultural books, the books recommended by practitioners and the parents' views will be discussed in this paper.

### **Criteria for Selecting Intercultural Books**

Practitioners were asked to identify three important factors when choosing these books. Thirty five responses were received and following careful analysis, a number of common elements emerged:

***Inclusion:*** Twenty practitioners mentioned various aspects of inclusion.

***Diversity:*** Thirteen people mentioned diversity. Practitioners thought that intercultural books created awareness of and respect for other nationalities. Diversity in social backgrounds, family structures and skin tones should be portrayed, as well as those of the children in the group.

***Celebration/Information:*** Ten practitioners mentioned celebration/ traditions/information regarding people from other countries and cultures. Some emphasised customs, costumes and festivals. Others were more interested in general lifestyle; such as how people live, what they eat and what they wear.

***Stereotyping:*** Seven practitioners specifically mentioned the danger of presenting stereotypical images and stories to the children. They advised that people should be depicted appropriately and not just in traditional dress. “They should accurately reflect other countries and religions.”

***Equality:*** Five people mentioned equality. “Books should recognise equality with old and young, disabled and able, colour and race.” There should be no exclusion and they should be respectful of all.

***Story:*** Sixteen people referred to the story per se. The books should contain a good story of interest to all the children, based on experiences relevant to all young children. The “multicultural aspect should be woven into story.”

***Age appropriateness:*** Fifteen practitioners cited age appropriateness as being important. “The pictures and story should be attractive and developmentally appropriate for pre-school children.”

***Illustrations:*** Ten people referred to illustrations. They said that the illustrations should be colourful, realistic and positive. They should be large and clear, with real-life photos as well as illustrations.

***Language:*** Six practitioners referred to the importance of age-appropriate language. Some practitioners read books in different languages and showed the children different scripts e.g. Cyrillic or Arabic. Other practitioners found dual language books, with the text in English and another language, very good.

### **Discussion on Criteria for Selecting Intercultural and Multicultural Books**

The criteria identified by the practitioners and by Irish and international authors on diversity were compared, to see how the perspectives of each group were reflected in the criteria they articulated. Practitioners and authors wanted a positive message to be given about diversity. They both warned about the danger of stereotyping and wanted people to be depicted appropriately in their everyday lives as well as at festivals or in traditional costumes. They both advised that books should feature the children of minority groups within the Early Years setting. Both practitioners and authors value multicultural books for the insights they can give to children in regard to valuing each other and the linguistic, religious, cultural, gender and class backgrounds in the setting and beyond. (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000).

Overall, however, there was a greater emphasis on children in the practitioners' survey. They stressed that the story should be relevant to all the children in the group as well as reflecting the background of the international children. Some practitioners preferred a close connection to the children's experiences and others highlighted the importance of extending the children's knowledge. The age-appropriateness of the story and the text was a major concern of practitioners and many stressed the importance of finding good books with a story that the children were interested in and could follow. They also wanted books with large, clear pictures that the children could see. This emphasis reflects the experience of practitioners in reading stories to children. Clearly, the story must hold children's attention if the session is to proceed smoothly and a good storyline must be a priority with intercultural as well as all other types of books.

The criteria in the literature tended to be more issue focused. Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000), Murray and O'Doherty (2001) and Mendoza and Reese (2001) ask if minority groups outside the early years setting are portrayed in the books. Derman-Sparks et al. (1989), Dau (2004) and OMC (2006) include gender issues and children with additional needs. Power is discussed in the literature from a critical pedagogy perspective. Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (2000) ask if the majority ethnic characters always hold power and make the most important decisions. (Mendoza and Reese (2001: 19) and Willoughby (2004: 27) raise the issue of the authenticity of the story and illustrations and warn that bias, stereotypes and misinformation may be hidden. Issues such as discrimination, racism and the use of the anti-bias approach to counter these prejudices feature strongly in the diversity literature by authors including Derman-Sparks et al. (1989), Murray and O'Doherty (2001), OMC (2006) and Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006). One practitioner

thought that such issues were related to the developmental stage of the children. “We would discuss issues like this (discrimination) with the after-school children.”

There was a great deal of similarity between the practitioners and authors, with practitioners placing a greater emphasis on focusing on children and authors promoting critical analysis of the portrayal of diversity. This reflects the roles and concerns of both parties, with practitioners working directly with groups of children and authors trying to raise awareness of critical issues.

### **Recommended Books**

Over fifty books were recommended. The full list of books that the practitioners recommended is available in the on line resource section on [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie). There were more non-fiction than fiction books, thirty-three v. twenty-two. The fiction stories were either set in Africa, dealt with everyday experiences in children’s lives in western countries, or were fantasy stories.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author, date, publisher</b>	<b>No. of recommendations</b>
<i>Handa’s Surprise.</i>	Eileen Browne. (1995). London: Walker Books.	08
<i>Handa’s Hen.</i>	Eileen Browne. (1995). London: Walker Books.	04
<i>So Much.</i>	Trish Cooke. (1996). London: Walker Books.	04

<i>We're going on a Lion Hunt.</i>	David Axtell. (2001). London: Ted Smart/ Book People.	03
<i>Amazing Grace.</i>	Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch. (1991). London: Frances Lincoln	03

**Table 1: The five most recommended fiction books.**

The non-fiction books dealt with themes such as celebrations, the lives of children around the world, skin tone, hair, religion, food and cookery, family structures and children's rights.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author, date, publisher</b>	<b>No. of recommendations</b>
<i>Watoto Pack.</i>	Trócaire. Maynooth: Trócaire.	06
<i>All kinds of people.</i>	Emma Damon. (1995) London: Tango Books	03
<i>Children just like me.</i>	Barnabas and Anabel Kindersley. (1995). London: Dorling Kindersley	03
<i>Oxford First Book of Children of the World.</i>	Rebecca Treays. (2000). Oxford : Oxford University Press.	02



<i>Wake Up World.</i>	Beatrice Hollyer. (1999). London: Frances Lincoln.	02
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**Table 2: The five most recommended non-fiction books**

### **Discussion on Recommended Books**

The high number of information type books (thirty-three non-fiction v. twenty-two fiction) shows that practitioners view intercultural books as a tool to celebrate diversity, to inform and educate, and to widen the cultural knowledge base of the children. (Marshall (1998: 197) states that books can help children to appreciate their own uniqueness as well as the characteristics that make others unique and practitioners say that children are very interested in learning about cultural difference in a non-judgemental way, in aspects such as life-style, clothes, skin colour, food and animals. It would be easy to label such books as belonging to a “tourist” or surface approach to diversity (Dau 2004: 31) but one practitioner said that some children in her group were delighted to recognise clothes, food and celebrations that they experienced on their visits to their parents’ country of origin. Sims Bishop (cited in Mendoza and Reese 2001: 5) sees a dual role for multicultural children’s literature: it can serve as mirror or as a window. Children may see their own life reflected in a book or it may be an image of someone else’s life. In trying to avoid the danger of stereotypical portrayal of cultural diversity, we may be missing an important dimension of diversity, the portrayal and celebration of difference.

Very few comments in the survey referred to issues of discrimination or racism, an issue which featured highly in the diversity literature outlined above. Yet many practitioners were aware of related issues such as stereotyping and the value of portraying a range of family structures and cultural backgrounds. It is extremely important that adults working with young children are aware of “the difficulties involved for children from marginalised backgrounds, that all cultures carry equal status and that all children are equally represented and can feel that they belong.” (Murray and O’Doherty 2001: 42). However, theories of developmentally appropriate practice and other constructivist approaches to education advise that learning should be based on the children’s prior knowledge and experience. Mendoza and Reese (2001: 21) advise that it may be in the best interests of children to have a solid grounding in accurate, culturally sensitive images before attempting to deal with books that portray problems. The positive images can be seen as contributing to a body of prior knowledge, a base from which to question and critique bias. This last step of critical pedagogy (Ramsey 2006: 281) is a challenge for all settings and may be one that not all settings have considered.

### **Parents’ Reported Views on Intercultural and Multicultural Books**

Twenty-six people responded to the question on parents’ views on their use of intercultural and multicultural books, out of the total of thirty-five settings. Ten practitioners said that they received positive feedback from Irish and newcomer parents about their use of intercultural books. “They (parents) always appreciate the children learning more about the world around them.” Eight practitioners stated that they had

never consulted parents on this issue. Six other practitioners stated that parents rarely commented on book use. “Cannot answer this as parents rarely comment on stories.”

Ten practitioners responded to the question on the accuracy of the newcomer parents’ home background. Three practitioners felt that newcomer parents were happy about the depictions of their home country/background but three other practitioners felt that parents were dissatisfied. One practitioner felt that the books they have did not reflect all the children in their services and that it was difficult to find books on countries other than those in Africa. Eight people answered the question on the accuracy of the portrayal of newcomer families in Ireland. Three practitioners felt that parents were satisfied with this aspect and one service described how they used photography to create their own books to reflect the children’s experience of early childhood education. However five settings said that books did not reflect the families’ current lives.

### **Discussion on Reported Parents’ Views**

The importance of the link between parents and practitioners is well identified in practice and research in Early Childhood Education and Diversity. “Establishing real dialogue between service providers and families will help bridge the gap between home culture and the setting.” (OMC 2006: 28). Positive responses to this question were given by the settings that had consulted parents. As Seitzinger Hepburn (2004: 65) states “Parent-provider partnerships are crucial in being able to work together so that the early care provider can sensitise their approaches to the culture of the child’s home and so that the parent can learn about the providers’ practices to support child development.” Fourteen

services indicated that parents were not consulted or informed of their work in this area and nine settings did not answer this question, which may indicate that this is an area they should consider.

## **Conclusion**

The practitioners who responded to this survey showed a great interest in multicultural and intercultural books. They viewed these books as a tool to celebrate diversity, to inform, to educate and to widen the cultural knowledge base of the children. They were also aware of the many issues which surround the use of multicultural and intercultural books in Early Years settings, including respect and equal representation of all cultures, the danger of stereotyping and the age appropriateness of the stories.

Practitioners reported receiving positive responses from parents who were consulted about these books and this is an area that would benefit from further consolidation. This consultation could address the issue of the authenticity of the portrayal of different cultures and offer opportunities to explain Irish culture to those new to the country.

Based on the strengths, skills and knowledge shown by practitioners working with young children and the review of the literature, several issues in relation to training and practice emerge:

- In-service training needs to build on practitioners' experience and to take their views on what is appropriate for young children into consideration. The views of current practitioners should also inform pre-service education and training.

- Insights from international research and experience will continue to be helpful in analysing the dynamic Irish situation;
- Settings need to involve parents in the selection, reading and discussion of intercultural and multicultural books.

Finally, we would like to thank the practitioners who responded to the survey very much for their cooperation. It is through such collaboration that progress can be made in relation to practice and research for the benefit of all children in Early Years settings.

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