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**THE INTERCULTURAL POTENTIAL
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND AN
EXPLOITATION STRATEGY**

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ABSTRACT

The present Master's thesis contains the analysis of three children's multicultural picturebooks in order to answer the following research questions: *How is culture represented in the picturebooks under examination? To what extent and how the three books selected can develop younger children's intercultural competencies?*

Regarding the first research question, the representation of culture in the three picturebooks was examined and compared with the definitions and the results found by previous research.

To address the second one, one activity for each picturebook was conceived to determine in which manner the selected literature could support the development of children's intercultural competencies in early childhood education.

For the creation of these activities, we used as objectives some of the skills found in the models of intercultural competence previously established by Byram (1997; 2008) and Clouet (2008).

The outcomes showed that the three picturebooks under examination represent the concept of culture differently from the ones analysed in previous research, favouring the "dynamic" and "dialogic" aspects of culture and avoiding over-generalizations.

In addition, they narrate situations of intercultural encounters, more than illustrating the characteristic of specific cultures, providing students with the opportunity to empathize with the protagonists and reflect and discuss the difficulties and benefits of meeting culturally diverse people.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Council of Europe has been concerned with human rights, democracy, and the defence of justice and equality since the 1970s.

The 2005 Wroclaw Declaration on 50 years of European cultural cooperation, together with the Warsaw Declaration and the Action Plan in the same year, highlighted the “importance of intercultural dialogue, exchange, and education in order to build a common European future based on the values and principles of the Council of Europe” (Council of Europe, 2014: 10).

The White Paper added that all individuals should develop intercultural competence in order to actively participate in a globalised society, which is not an innate skill but needs to be learned, practised, and preserved throughout life (Council of Europe, 2014). In addition, UNESCO (2006) claimed that “Intercultural Education is a response to the challenge to provide quality education for all” (p:22). In fact, education concerns both the personal development of individuals and their active participation in the community, thus it plays an essential role in the advancement of society (UNESCO, 2006).

Accordingly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development supports a fully inclusive society, which can be reached only through an equitable, intercultural, and quality education (Cerviño Abeledo, 2021; Aparicio Gervás & León Guerrero, 2022).

Spain has always been a rich cultural territory in history and is currently one of the nations which receives more immigrants in the European Union, especially Andalusia is one of the regions that hosts more foreigners (Cerviño Abeledo, 2021).

According to the data in EDUCAbase (2020), 33% of the students enrolled in all stages of education, except for higher education, are foreigners, plus schools underline that situations of conflicts are more frequent in those centres that have a more extensive cultural diversity, as the majority are due to racism or xenophobia (Cerviño Abeledo, 2021).

Henceforth, the urgency to face the challenge of intercultural coexistence by educating young citizens to accept, appreciate, respect, and understand each culture and identity. It is essential to change the perspective of education, evaluating differences as a collective enrichment and enhancing the intercultural dialogue in a peaceful environment (Cerviño Abeledo, 2021).

1.1. Justification and relevance

Globalization and incremented mobility significantly influence every aspect of life-work, school, family, community, and media-making encounters with otherness increasingly common in people's and children's daily lives. (Barrett, 2007; Girik Allo, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2021).

Nevertheless, we are witnessing an escalation of prejudice, discrimination, and hate manifestations connected to socio-economic inequalities and intercultural misunderstandings (Council of Europe, 2013).

Hence, many governmental and non-organizations, such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO, and many researchers and scholars in the education field have highlighted the importance of introducing an intercultural approach to education, as schools are believed to play a crucial role in the formation of children's identities (Zachos, 2022).

Aparicio Gervás and León Guerrero (2022) suggest that intercultural education should begin in early childhood education when children build the foundations of children's identities and personalities. Likewise, Róg (2015) claims that including an intercultural approach to preschool education "may help shape future societies and prepare students for functioning in diverse conditions" (p:180).

In addition, research found that prejudice and negative racial behaviours can begin in early childhood between the age of 3 and 6 years (Harper & Bonanno, 1993; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011; Mascadri, 2019), therefore effective interventions must start from these ages before these attitudes settled in adulthood (Mascadri, 2019).

As a consequence, children "from the earliest ages, should be able to appreciate the richness of a diverse range of cultures and be helped in practical ways to recognize and challenge stereotypes" (Torkos & Egerău, 2022: 86).

Accordingly, this Master's thesis proposes initiating the teaching of multicultural diversity from early childhood by reading multicultural children's picturebooks in the classroom. According to Brinson (2012), "reading to young children from culturally diverse, family-centred literature benefits children of all backgrounds" (p:30), and Kelly-Ware and Daly (2019) assert that "picturebooks can act as both mirrors and windows on the world; as mirrors, they can reflect children's own lives, as windows they can give children a chance to learn about someone else's life" (p:1).

However, we need to remember that narratives only provide the input and context for

conversation and discussion (Madrid & McLaren, 2014), and the concepts learnt during the reading should be practiced through related activities. Therefore, this Master's thesis also proposes an exploitation strategy aimed at increasing younger children's intercultural awareness and understanding of otherness.

1.2. Objectives

As aforementioned, picturebooks are an essential tool in early childhood education and can be used to facilitate young children's exploration of diversity.

Therefore, this research intends to analyse three children's books to answer the following questions:

1. How is culture represented in the picturebooks under examination?
2. To what extent and how the three books selected can develop younger children's intercultural competencies?

1.3. Structure

This Master's thesis includes the analysis of the intercultural potential of three recent books, which are:

- *That's not my name* (2022) written by Anoosha Syed
- *Gibberish* (2022) written by Young Vo
- *Dumpling Day* (2021) written by Meera Sriram

Following the examination of the books, a strategy for their exploitation in the Early Childhood classroom, focused on children aged 4 and 5 years old, was proposed through a set of activities aimed at developing students' intercultural awareness and empathy.

This Master's thesis includes a total of 7 chapters: chapter 2 covers the literature review, namely all the research conducted on the employment of multicultural picturebooks in the early childhood classroom; chapter 3 includes the explanation of the theoretical frameworks on which the study is based; chapter 4 describes the research design, thus the way the books were selected and evaluated and the related activities created; chapter 5 contains the analysis of the three books and the display of the activities; chapter 6 includes the conclusions and, finally, chapter 7 comprises all the references used for the creation of this Master's thesis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last two centuries, there has been extensive research on intercultural education, although little regarding early childhood.

Generally speaking, most researchers acknowledge that the employment of reading multicultural books in the classroom can lead to positive results.

In 1990, Rasinski and Padak admitted the power of literature in promoting multicultural and intercultural recognition and introduced a structure for implementing children's literature when approaching cultural differences.

According to the study carried out by Evans (2010), exposing children to quality multicultural literature may encourage them to "appreciate differences among ethnic groups, develop new perspectives, and eliminate ethnocentrism" (p:100).

She underlines that more research is necessary on implementing multicultural literature in the classrooms of younger children since the ability to discern different people develop during preschool and primary education. Furthermore, she believes children of all ages can be critical readers with the right strategy.

She conducted a qualitative study analysing whether combining the reading of multicultural literature with written responses and active discussions in primary school would change students' perspectives on others and improve tolerance. The outcomes showed that it was possible to have a positive impact on students' perceptions and understanding of others through the use of innovative critical literacy practice. Actually, thanks to this practice, children had the opportunity to "observe and appreciate other cultures, discover their own ethnic identity, question issues of diversity, and move toward more empathy and tolerance of others" (Evans, 2010:101).

However, focusing on the context of early childhood, there are four chief studies concerning the reading of multicultural stories in the classroom:

The former is an article on the analysis of four picturebooks carried out by Kelly-Ware and Daly (2019) to observe how they depict multicultural issues, relying on both the narrations and the illustration, concluding that literature could be a potentially valid tool to delve into diversity.

The authors believe that early childhood settings "are ideal places for providing early learning experiences about diversity and difference which can be supported and reinforced using the picturebooks" (p: 1).

The four texts selected were very prominent in New Zealand: *Mirror* by Baker (2010),

This is our house by Rosen (1996), *Morris Micklewhite* by Baldacchino (2014), and *It's okay to be different* (2001) by Parr.

Subsequently, Garces-Bacsal (2020) wrote a paper providing a list of picturebooks originating from different countries to broaden early childhood educators' literary repertoire to read in the classroom. The books selected by the author specifically target the five social and emotional learning competencies (SEL).

She underlines that although research evidence has demonstrated the advantages of diverse picturebooks to endorse a more culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers feel uncomfortable discussing diversity, races, and racism in the classroom, especially in early childhood, as they think those topics are too complex for younger readers.

However, she asserts that an increasing number of educators are employing diverse books and stories to broaden the consciousness of their students.

Garces-Bacsal also reports a qualitative study that exposed a group of five-year-old children to multicultural picturebooks on topics such as racial diversity, equality, and injustice. As a result, children seemed to have positively changed their attitudes towards African and African-American people, and books seemed to provide students with the opportunity of thinking critically about social justice.

One of the most recent studies, conducted by Aparicio Gervás and Montserrat León Guerrero (2022), involved 4/5-year-old students from an educational centre. It was a longitudinal and experimental project combining the employment of an imaginary story about diversity as a unifying thread and music and body language to transmit the concepts. The study found that 72% of the children involved in the study intended to develop positive attitudes through communication and dialogues, being able to empathise with otherness, whereas 28% showed violent behaviours and intolerance.

The total of the children in the study had positively evaluated the use of the tale as a unifying thread for all the activities performed and as an element of self-analysis. Following the results of this research, the majority of the students were capable of evaluating the difference as a positive factor, learning to discriminate and compare, and acknowledging both differences and similarities. They discovered that empathy and cooperation are essential strategies for the coexistence of social groups and learnt to react positively to everyday problems.

Furthermore, they understood that the feelings surfacing when meeting otherness can lead to selfish and negative behaviours which need to be defeated through knowledge and collaboration.

Finally, the last study on this topic, conducted by Bennett, Alberton Gunn, van Beynen, and Morton (2022), focused on books concerning religious diversity. In their paper, the four authors designed a rubric to evaluate multicultural literature representing different religious groups and then selected a list of 54 books that satisfied their criteria. They identified four main themes, namely immigration and refugee, holidays, sharing memories and stories, and building understanding and empathy.

Moreover, they provide a few examples from each category and strategies to implement them in the early childhood classroom.

It is crucial to underline the results of the study carried out by Southard, Morgan & Zeigler Hill (2014), as they differ from those obtained by previous research. Their research intended to verify whether only exposing children to culturally authentic African American literature in the classroom, without a comprehensive multicultural framework, would boost the self-esteem of Black children and improve that of other children towards them. The outcomes were unexpected, as they showed that the culturally authentic book facilitated the stereotype threat for Black children, causing them a moderate loss of academic confidence. According to the authors, some of the books employed for their study, probably the ones related to negative episodes in the history of Black people (i.e. slavery) may have led to these results, and they suggest focusing less on unfavourable historical events.

Many studies suggest the criteria and frameworks to evaluate and select quality multicultural books. Higgins (2000) created an evaluation checklist for evaluating multicultural children's books considering stereotypes and literary quality, based on the works of Day (1994), Sims Bishop (1992), and Slapin, Seale, and Gonzales (1992). Mendoza and Reese (2001) discussed the major pitfalls when selecting multicultural books making examples from existing literature: first of all, multicultural books, even very popular, carry unreliable and potentially misleading images of specific cultural groups (i.e. Native Americans in the award-winning *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* written by Seattle). Hence, just looking for highly acclaimed and award-winning books is not sufficient; secondly, it is implausible that a single book could provide a comprehensive description of a determined culture (i.e. the Mexican American culture in the books *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting, 1994 and *A Gift from Papa Diego* by Alire Saenz, 1998); thirdly, teachers can be limited by the lack of recognition of an author/illustrator and/or

the lack of access to certain books; finally, evaluating and selecting good-quality literature may seem overwhelming as teachers already have busy schedules.

Salas, Lucido, and Canales (2002) also invite teachers to be cautious selecting multicultural books and choosing high-quality and authentic books following a list of criteria.

Boles (2006) identified four major themes of multicultural literature: racism, poverty, gender equity, and religious belief (Brown, Davis, Liedel-Rice & Soeder, 1995). Furthermore, she determined four main cultural categories: Middle-Eastern, Indian, South American, and other cultural groups.

Gopalakrishnan (2010) in her book proposes two principles: selecting books that have a wide audience appeal and provide the opportunity for critical analysis and deeper discussion.

Shultz (2010) suggests beginning the selection by analysing the artwork from the cover, as it is the first feature children would notice and provides the readers with some questions to wonder when examining the illustrations and the story in the books.

Gutiérrez Sebastián (2016) in his book provides a framework for evaluating both the narration and the illustrations of children's picturebooks, pointing out some problems and factors that could influence them negatively.

Finally, Rapp (2019) also recommends a selection process, presenting a set of criteria taking the cue from the K12 Reader.

In conclusion, we can observe that much still needs to be investigated regarding strategies for implementing multicultural literature in the classroom, especially in early childhood settings, and many scholars are calling for more research on the topic.

Therefore, this Master's thesis could be a response to this lack of research.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter will explain the theoretical concepts used to write the present Master's thesis, starting from the theories that support the arising of stereotypes during children's early childhood, followed by the definitions of the concepts of culture, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and intercultural competence, ending with a description of multicultural literature's pedagogical implications.

3.1. Stereotypes and Discrimination in Early Childhood

Stereotypes emerge from the instinctive cognitive process of social categorization, which is people's predisposition to produce simplistic assumptions about others, forgetting about their own identities; in addition, they usually are so deeply grounded in the individual's subconscious that people do not even realize that they hold these preconceptions (Annenkova & Domysheva, 2020). However, whether positive or negative, they often lead to negative consequences, misunderstanding, or even cultural discords (Man, 2020; Annenkova & Domysheva, 2020).

Numerous studies showed that both stereotypes and discrimination have many implications for the victims' well-being; indeed, people subjected to these phenomena fear reinforcing the already negative perspective others have on them and their group (Man 2020). It has long been claimed that these negative attitudes lead to severe social issues, including social segregation, bullying, hate crimes, and even international conflicts (Raabe & Beelman, 2011).

Devine (1989, as mentioned in Raabe & Beelman, 2011) considers children during their early childhood as more vulnerable to environmental influences, hence they are more prone to the generation of implicit prejudice.

As a consequence, as stated by Róg (2015: 181), the common belief of children being generally free of stereotypes and open towards otherness is only a "myth". In fact, children begin to identify people of diverse ethnic groups between the age of 3 and 5 and are more rigid than adults (McKown & Weinstein, 2003, as cited in Róg, 2015). This is consistent with the "Social Identity Development Theory" created by Barrett (2007: 276-277), also described by Byram (2021), which established that around the age of 3, children would start first to recognize "racial and ethnic cues" and then, they will

“gradually become able to identify and distinguish members of different groups” (Byram, 2021: 67). At the age of 4, children start to have a preference for their own cultural group, while at around the 7 years of age, they start to “actively dislike out-groups” (Byram, 2021:67). The studies conducted by Barrett and Short (1992) and Barrett and Al. (1999; 2003) reported that children around 5-6 years of age hold stereotypes of specific national groups which continued until at least 12 years of age (Barrett, 2007).

Although Aboud’s Cognitive-Developmental Theory establishes that children’s in-group favouritism should decrease after the age of 6, there is no certainty on the other hand, they occasionally “become more (rather than less) negative through the course of middle childhood” (Barrett, 2007: 268).

García-Peinado, Martínez Peiret, Morales Pillado & Vázquez Sepúlveda (2011) consider that younger children are already able to learn the ability to solve conflicts. Some studies revealed that children from the age of 4 already feel empathy and a sense of justice (Turiel, 1983, as mentioned in García-Peinado, Martínez Peiret, Morales Pillado & Vázquez Sepúlveda, 2011) and understand that others may have different opinions from their own. From this postmodern point of view, children are able to express and share their ideas, and perspectives as fundamental members of their society (García-Peinado, Martínez Peiret, Morales Pillado & Vázquez Sepúlveda, 2011). Thus, intercultural education during early childhood is not only necessary but achievable.

3.2. Definitions and Approaches to Culture

The term “culture” has been interpreted in various ways and has changed its meaning over time.

Nowadays, it prevails the simplistic idea that culture is “the collective heritage of the national groups and identified with a particular ethnic group”, under the assumption that each nationality has its own established and homogeneous culture (Byram 2009: 5).

Contrarily, another currently spreading perspective of culture considers it as multifaceted and diversified in a wide array of values, beliefs, and traditions and “as a dynamic process through which both meanings and the boundaries of groups and communities are renegotiated and redefined according to current needs” (Byram, 2009: 5). Therefore, the term “culture” incorporates numerous meanings. In the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001, in UNESCO, 2006) it was defined as “the set

of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group” (p:12).

According to Corbett (2003: 20), “culture” comprises the ideologies and conjectures considered by a specific social or ethnic group as “common sense”.

Thus, it refers to all the aspects concerning “individual’s ways of thinking, believing, feeling and acting as a member of society” (UNESCO, 2006: 12).

Espinar and Raigón Rodríguez (2019), Danielsen (2020), and Zoni Upton (2018) refer to the difference between big “C” culture and small “c” culture: the former applies to the most visible and objective elements of a specific culture, such as arts, music, and so on. The latter, instead, represents the most subjective aspects of a culture, such as its hidden socio-cultural behaviours.

These two types of culture can be represented through the “iceberg model of culture” developed by Hall in 1976 (as mentioned in Zoni Upton, 2018). This model entails that some aspects of culture are seen as “*above the water*” (such as clothing, and food) while others are “*under the water*” (behaviours, attitudes, beliefs) (Madrid & McLaren, 2014; Zoni Upton, 2018).

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013: 18-21) categorize four main types of culture:

- Cultures as national attributes: culture is seen as “the particular attribute of a national group” (p:18). Thus, culture is viewed as geographically bounded, recognizable, and static, without considering the internal cultural diversity within a nation.
- Cultures as societal norms: culture is described according to its traditions and meanings.
- Cultures as symbolic systems: this perspective complies with the views of culture proposed by Lund (2007) as “the lens through which people mutually create and interpret meanings” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013: 20). Hofstede (1991, as cited in Lund, 2007) regarded culture as “the software of the mind” (Lund, 2007: 26) thus the “shared rules that tell us how to behave and act within a particular group” (p:26)
- Cultures as practices: this view acknowledges that culture is “dialogic” and “dynamic” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013:20-21). Cultures are “the resources that

individuals draw on to construct sustained courses of action and to develop new courses of action in response to changed circumstances” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013: 21). This means that cultural identities are fluid and incoherent and develop through the interaction with others.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) recommend that teaching culture should integrate different interpretations of “cultures”, as the aforementioned four categories are not mutually exclusive.

Gómez Rodríguez (2015) suggests four key rules to teach “culture” avoiding over-generalisations and stereotypes: considering deep and not only surface culture, as it is the former which “often causes misunderstanding and confusion” (p: 169); keeping in mind that culture is transformative and not static, as it constantly evolves depending on the time, on the region, on the class and on the generation (Corbett, 2003; Chaouche, 2016); dealing with contentious culture and not only with the congratulatory one, therefore, taking on a more “critical approach” and teaching its more controversial aspects through debates; examining culture as a heterogeneous concept and not homogeneous, acknowledging that there are exceptions and that a society can include different subgroups and subcultures.

3.3. Multiculturalism and Interculturalism

The term “multiculturalism” was born in Canada in the late 1950s and was proposed to officially refer to the situation involving the diverse cultural and social groups coexisting within the nation and the reinforcement of their uniqueness (Dudek, 2006). Multiculturalism is believed by Canadian scholars to be grounded on the ideology that the coexistence of distinctive cultures may be an advantage for society and on the philosophy that a multicultural environment should encourage mutual respect, appreciation, and support among diverse social and ethnic groups (Pascua Febles, Marcelo Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina, 2007; Brosseau & Dewing, 2009).

Nevertheless, these conditions are not limited to Canada, as an example, the Council of Europe (2009) also discusses about European societies presenting some degree of heterogeneity as they comprehend a wide array of voices, beliefs, and traditions. The Council of Europe (2009) furtherly points out that the view in which each state has a distinct cultural practice with the minorities operating separately in their own space

conditioned by the prevailing cultural traditions does not correspond to reality. In truth, the boundaries among ethnic groups are uncertain: “Minority cultures are themselves internally pluralistic, and the symbols and values of their various constituent groups are open to negotiation, contest and change” (Council of Europe, 2009: 4).

Many associations and scholars underline the importance of arranging an educational approach that raises individuals’ awareness of multicultural issues and enhances dialogue among diverse groups (UNESCO, 2006; Byram, 2009; Anghel & Lupu, 2014). These educational strategies should be aim at the acquisition of intercultural competence, namely the ability to achieve “attitudes and behaviours based on acceptance, tolerance and mutual respect” towards cultural “others” (Anghel & Lupu, 2014:52).

Hence, the term “interculturalism” was coined in Europe during the 1980s to indicate a “more active” approach to multiculturalism since it is not limited to acknowledging the coexistence of diverse social and ethnic groups but supports the dynamic relationship between them (Zachos, 2022: 42).

According to Barrett (2013), “interculturalism builds upon the foundations of multiculturalism” (p: 26). Although both terms involve the recognition of cultural differences, the advancement of integration and the dissolution of the disadvantages and inequalities often endured by minorities, interculturalism is primarily concerned with intercultural communication, cooperation and exchange (Barrett, 2013). Sanchez Fernández (2001, in Pascua Febles, Marcelo Winitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina, 2007) asserts that the term “interculturalism” is intended to support an education emphasizing not only the respect for minority practices but for all cultures and aims at teaching citizens to observe others under a different perspective in order to interpret their feelings and thinking schemes in favour of mutual understanding. Similarly, Lasonen (2006, cited in Medellín Márquez, 2020) distinguishes multicultural from intercultural education, as the former refers to supporting immigrant groups when adapting to their new home countries, whereas the latter prepares learners to understand other languages and cultures, promoting intercultural cooperation.

In sum, although researchers have different opinions on the distinction between these two terms, many of them view multiculturalism as being mainly concerned with the

social inclusion of minority groups, while interculturalism is more related to the dialogue and cooperation among people from different cultural backgrounds.

3.4. Intercultural Education

Various European scholars started to use the notion of “intercultural education” in the 1980s (Demirbaş, 2012). The main objectives of this kind of education proposed in the final report of the 1992 International Conference on Education and reported by UNESCO (2006: 27) are: defeating exclusion; facilitating integration and school accomplishment for everyone; endorsing the appreciation of cultural diversity; advocating international understanding.

Furthermore, UNESCO (2006) established three principles in order to “guide international action in the field of intercultural education (p:31): the first one is respecting the ethnic identities of all learners by providing them with a “culturally appropriate and responsive quality education” (p:32); the second one corresponds to teaching all learners the “cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society” (p:32); the third and last one entails preparing all learners to “contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals” (p:32) belonging to different ethnic and social groups.

The combination of the “cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills” mentioned by UNESCO (2006:32) is often referred to as “intercultural competence”.

A model of intercultural competence was King and Baxter Magolda’s (2005, mentioned in Deardoff & Bok, 2009) attempt to represent the “levels of intercultural maturation” (p: 21) which established initial, intermediate, and mature levels. According to this model, investigation, examination, and intercultural dialogue may allow individuals to achieve more mature levels of competence (Deardoff & Bok, 2009).

As intercultural competence (IC) is expected to enable learners to successfully participate in intercultural dialogues without generating misunderstandings is often connected to “communicative competence” (Sercu, 2006, in Demirbaş, 2012: 1014), Hence, the “Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence” (ICC), conceived by Byram (1997, mentioned in Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von-Ditfurth, 2007; Lee, 2013; Byram, 2021), which established five main categories of competencies identified under the French term “savoirs”:

- *Savoir* or knowledge: knowledge of cultural groups and their traditions and products in one's own and others' country
- *Savoir comprendre* or skills of interpreting and relating: the ability to interpret documents, events, and meanings from another culture, then analyse and compare them with those from their own;
- *Savoir être* or attitudes: acquiring positive attitudes towards otherness, namely curiosity, openness, empathy, and so on;
- *Savoir apprendre/faire* or skills of discovery and interaction: the ability to gain new knowledge on culture and cultural practices and put knowledge, skills, and attitudes into practice during communication and interaction;
- *Savoir engager* or critical cultural awareness: the ability to think critically about own's and other's cultures and practices.

Clouet (2008, as cited in Lee, 2013: 301) additionally expands the model of IC, pinpointing that it is a “combination of social and communicative skills”, namely empathy, conflict resolution ability, teamwork ability, adaptability, foreign language awareness, awareness of cultural speech differences, strategies for coping with interactional struggles, reflection on others' cultures, and tolerance of ambiguity.

Byram (2008, as mentioned in Kearny & Ahn, 2013) himself delineates the most relevant components of intercultural education that should be taught to younger children, including cultural knowledge (*savoir*) and the attitudes of openness and curiosity (*savoir être*). These should develop more easily in the earliest years before they are completely absorbed by their own cultural context. Furtherly, he claims that they should also be able to gather and correlate knowledge about their own and foreign products and traditions (Kearny & Ahn, 2013). He reminds that although it is not possible for younger children to exhaustively achieve the intercultural communicative competence, during the early stages the foundations should be settled.

On the other hand, García-Peinado, Martínez Peiret, Morales Pillado & Vázquez Sepúlveda (2011), as mentioned in chapter 3.1.1., highlight that recent empirical research found that younger children are able to acquire the abilities to solve conflicts, that they can show a stance of empathy at only 2 years of age and already have an instinctive sense of justice at 4.

3.5. Multicultural Children's Literature

“Over the course of time, literature has been considered one of the artistic and cultural manifestations which better defined the identity of a place” (Pascua Febles, Marcelo Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina, 2007: 90, personal translation).

Unquestionably, the criteria for examining children's literature cannot be the same employed for other kinds of literary production since it is evident that literary texts are influenced by their targeted recipients (Pascua Febles, Marcelo Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina, 2007).

McDowell (1976, mentioned in Grenby & Reynolds, 2011) attempted to determine the fundamental elements of children's literature, compared to adult fiction:

“Children's books are usually shorter, they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism [...] children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order” (Grenby & Reynolds, 2011: 6).

According to Pascua Febles, Marcelo Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina (2007: 95-96) children's books should present the following characteristics: the language needs to adapt to the comprehension skill of the recipient; the didactic aim is always present, although it is advisable that it would not constrain the creation and selection of the texts; the importance of illustrations as instruments for the enrichment of the wording and an aid for its interpretation.

Aparicio Gervás and León Guerrero (2022: 8, personal translation) claim that “stories are a fundamental educational strategy in the formation of individuals” and are essential resources proposing a “first social and emotional view of the world” to children.

Additionally, Brinson (2012) underlines that “books about culturally-diverse families and related activities can nurture positive self-concepts in young children, build upon their innate cultural capital, and attune them to be understanding and appreciative of cultures other than their own” (p: 32).

One of the features of multicultural children's literature is that it usually involves characters from a minority cultural background, normally immigrant children who live between two worlds, experiencing internal psychological conflicts in which they feel as if they need to choose one culture and leave the other in order to be accepted by others, and external hostility which complicates their integration (Pascua Febles, Marcelo

Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina, 2007).

According to Evans (2010), the implementation of multicultural literature in the classroom should: advocate positive representation of the characters showing legitimate behaviours, endorse “high literacy quality” (p: 94) with engaging plots and accurate illustrations, promote ethnic heterogeneity, prevent the spread and reinforcement of prejudice and stereotypes, expanding children’s perspectives, eliciting reflections.

Pascua Febles, Marcelo Wirnitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina (2007) identified three main categories of multicultural books:

- 1) the “literature of differences” (p: 152, personal translation), which are narratives that promote the respect of others independently from their dissimilarities; these stories teach children not only to appreciate the other but to understand that everybody has the right to be different;
- 2) multicultural texts addressing cultural, ethnic, and religious differences with characters from different countries and often situated in ordinary daily contexts;
- 3) books about immigration and emigration that reveal the feelings of migrants living in a totally unfamiliar environment, including their struggles, dissatisfactions, ambitions, and dreams, aimed at stimulating empathy of the recipients towards these people.

Rasinski and Padak (1990:580) pinpoint that “literature can do more than help children to develop an awareness and internal value system about multicultural events and issues”, it encourages positive attitudes. They add that reading multicultural literature should be followed by a debate on the topic and related activities, which should be sensitive but also critical (Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

4. METHODOLOGY

A list of 30 books was drafted after researching over the internet recent award-winner multicultural picturebooks directed to children aged 3 to 5.

Many of the awards' websites suggested by Bennett, Alberton Gunn, van Beynen & Lou Morton (2021) were examined, together with the ones recorded by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and the Rutgers University Libraries searching for picturebooks published from 2020 to 2023. Unfortunately, not all the picturebooks found during the research were accessible over the internet thus it was impossible to evaluate their suitability in the interest of the present Master's thesis. The picturebooks available were divided into three broad categories: the ones concerned with one cultural aspect (or more) of a specific ethnic group, such as festivities, and arts, and those which included the comparison of more cultures and others which described situations of immigrant children facing intercultural issues.

With respect to the present research, the picturebooks selected represent the last two categories, inasmuch that they depict situations of intercultural encounters.

Furthermore, they fall into the three classifications designed by Pascua Febles, Marcelo Winitzer, Perera Santana & Ramón Molina (2007) that can also be found in chapter 3.1.5. of the present Master's thesis: "That's not my name" written by Anoosha Syed can be considered as part of "literature of difference" as it promotes the appreciation of everyone's name and the concept that even the most distinctive name should be pronounced correctly in respect of others; "Dumpling Day" written by Meera Sriram belongs to the category of multicultural text concerned with cultural and ethnic differences in their everyday lives since it displays the traditional cooking practices of ten families coming from ten different countries; "Gibberish" by Young Vo can be acknowledged as a "book of immigration/emigration" since it involves the struggle of an immigrant child trying to integrate into a new world whose language he does not speak.

In accordance with the rules established by Gómez Rodríguez (2015), all books examined embrace the perspective of culture as transformative and heterogeneous. Additionally, they may stimulate reflection and discussion with younger children. These picturebooks do not introduce the characteristics of a specific culture but reveal

realistic issues that may happen during intercultural situations or, in the case of “Dumpling Day”, the portrait of an enthusiastic encounter among people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The analysis of each book will start with a brief introduction and summary, followed by the observation of the artwork and illustration on its cover, since it is the first element to attract children’s attention (Schultz, 2010: 37).

Many scholars, as mentioned in chapter 2 of this Master’s thesis, have proposed a series of criteria to consider when evaluating and analysing multicultural children’s picturebooks, and the following list present those concurred by most of them:

1. The relatability with children’s lives otherwise, according to Meier (2003, as cited in Boles 2006), they will not feel engaged.
2. In order to avoid stereotypes, the characters, the settings and the cultures, together with the story, should be described in an authentic and positive manner (Bennett, Alberton Gunn, van Beynen & Lou Morton, 2021);
3. The language used to write the text, which should be simple and appropriate, involving brief but meaningful dialogues, and may include rhythmic or symbolic language (Gopalakrishnan, 2010);
4. The illustrations should be realistic and complementing the text (Gopalakrishnan, 2010; Bennett, Alberton Gunn, van Beynen & Lou Morton, 2021);
5. They should encourage reflection and critical discussion (Salas, Lucido & Canales, 2002; Gopalakrishnan, 2010; Bennett, Alberton Gunn, van Beynen & Lou Morton, 2021; Garces-Bacsal, 2022);
6. Whether the author’s life can be related to the story, as it would confer more reliability to the book, indeed “a cultural insider is more likely to get it right” (K12 Reader, par 2, as mentioned by Rapp, 2019: 18).

The reading of the aforementioned books, followed by a sequence of related activities involving critical thinking and cooperation, may lead children to the development of the attitudes (*savoir être*), namely openness and understanding of otherness and the skills of relating (*savoir comprendre*), in particular comparing and contrasting the situations or knowledge expressed in the books with their own life, which are the ones suggested by Byram (2008, as mentioned in Kearny & Ahn, 2013) to be at the basis for an effective

intercultural learning for younger children.

However, the objectives of the activities proposed in the following chapters will be expanded with the model of ICC conceived by Clouet (2008, as cited in Lee, 2013: 301) by including empathy, teamwork ability, and strategies for coping with interactional struggles.

From the cover, we have no clue of the ethnic background of the protagonist, and although it is noticeable that her skin is tanned, her clothes do not have any cultural connotations. Therefore, no stereotype can be detected by observing the cover.

Furthermore, the picture is enlightened by the presence of the colourful speech bubbles, which provide dynamism to the scene and imply that the speech plays an important role in the story. Finally, the title is big and in capital letters, and the font is simple and comprehensible in order to be more easily readable for younger learners.

In sum, the story involves a young girl named Mirha, who during her first day of school has to face an issue that many foreign children probably experience: nobody can pronounce her name correctly, not even the teacher. This is the cause of unhappiness for Mirha, who, given her young age, is unaware of how to inform others that they are mispronouncing her name without being impolite or inappropriate, thus she reluctantly accepts the situation.

She reaches a moment when she considers changing her name after one of her new classmates proposes to call her Maya because it is easier. However, her Mama is not pleased by the suggestion, and she convinces Mirha that her name is special also because of its uniqueness.

At the end of the book, Mirha starts telling everybody when they mispronounce her name, and her classmate apologizes for his previous suggestion of finding her an easier name. She also finds out that other children have unique names and remarks on the importance of pronouncing them correctly.

The characters who actively participate in the story are few and highly recognizable by children (family, schoolmates, and the teacher), the settings also are very familiar (home and school), and all are represented realistically. Although the narrative does not start in the best way, at the end of the story, the protagonist finds a solution to her problem conveying a valuable positive message: our names are important and deserve to be pronounced correctly.

Children effortlessly connect with this book because of the authenticity and familiarity of the characters, settings, and situations.

The situation described relates to the author's experience who openly stated in an interview with Khadejah Khan (2022) released on the website diversebooks.org, that people constantly mispronounced her name, her gym trainer included (as in one of the

illustrations of the book). Indeed, Anoosha Syed is a Pakistani author who frequently moved to different countries because of her father's job and currently lives in Canada. She furtherly discloses that her husband, Danyal, also experienced the same situation, and everyone still calls him Daniel.

Therefore, it can be considered authentic as it was drawn from the author's real-life experience, and with the increasing number of foreign students enrolled in schools, a progressively frequent event.

Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that the attitudes and the language of the characters in the book have received little criticism that can be found in the blog "Islamic School Librarian": the former is related to the attitude of the main character, Mirha, whereas the latter to the conversation during which Mama explains to her why she should not change her name.



Figure 2. A new schoolmate of Mirha asks her if he can call her Maya. Mirha would like to shout at him but she does not.

Firstly, Mirha has been judged to behave inappropriately and impolitely because in one of the pictures she seems to be screaming against one of her schoolmates. However, the writer of the blog also admits that the story is clear on the fact that Mirha does not really shout at people, it is just her thinking. All in all, Mirha seems to be acting just like a girl of her age who is not able to overcome a rather difficult position. Probably, whoever made such an assumption must have misread or judged the story from the images.



Figure 3. Mirha's Mama explains why her name is special, comparing her name with Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Michelangelo.

Secondly, the writer of the aforementioned blog considers the conversation between Mirha and her Mama as unrealistic. In reality, the language used is simple and appropriate for the targeted recipients, although there is an exception, perhaps, in one scene in which Mirha's Mama refers to three important historical personalities, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Michelangelo. It is clear that these characters are not really age-appropriate, in the sense children as young as Mirha are not very likely to know them. The author could indeed have chosen characters that are closer to children's experience, however, they can be introduced, in a few simple words, to the children when reading the story and then, they can be furtherly explained after the reading of the book; it could be a way to familiarize with new people and new words. Additionally, this is only one page of the entire book.

Another comment provided by the author of the blog is that there is limited reference to Mirha's Islamic background. In fact, we can observe from the first picture that her family seems to have almost completely adapted to the culture of their hosting country. This can be justified by the claims of scholars, such as Gómez Rodríguez (2015), Chaouche (2016), and Corbett (2003), who argue that culture is constantly changing among generations, especially if it comes into contact with another. However, it is important to acknowledge that the tale narrated is just Mirha's reality and it does not presume to portray the Arabic culture or all the families coming from that specific background, but the lifestyle of a particular family with Arabic origins. Indeed, this is one of the pitfalls identified by Mendoza and Reese (2001) when selecting multicultural

picturebooks, meaning the “assumption that a single book about a group can adequately portray that group’s experience” (p:10-11).

The whole story provides two main links with the Arabic culture which are Nani’s traditional clothes and Mirha’s own name.



Figure 4. The first illustration of the picturebook in which Mirha says goodbye to her family before heading to school.

In the first illustration of the book, Mirha’s grandma, Nani, wears the traditional Muslim hijab. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2023), the custom of women wearing a hijab has spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula to south-eastern Asia, northern Africa, and southern Europe. Thus, we may assume that Mirha’s family might have Arabic origins, although the book does not provide further specifications.



Figure 5. Mirha's Mama is explaining the meaning of her name and the motivation behind it.

Deeper into the story, Mama tells Mirha that her name derives from Arabic, thus explicating their origins. In the first picture, we can observe that the name Mirha has been typed in Arabic. Furthermore, in the second illustration, we can spot colourful lamps and stool, whose style is often associated with their culture. Nevertheless, none of these elements narrows down the list of Countries from which they could be, as Arabic is spoken in many Countries and compasses many dialects. In this scene, Mama explains to her daughter that the name “Mirha” means “happiness” in Arabic. Curiously, by researching the internet, it appears that the most common meanings of the name “Mirha” actually are “Light of Allah” and “Agile”. Nevertheless, on the website names.org, we can observe that not everybody agrees on this, and there are people believing that it means “Spreader of happiness”, “Cause of happiness”, or “Happy, myrrh”. This is supported by two other websites, Islam QA and islamweb.net, which state that it can mean “extreme joy”.

As a result of the many varieties of Arabic and the many cultural subgroups that speak this language, the name “Mirha” have different meanings; some are more popular than others, which does not imply that the author misinterpreted the name, but only that she has chosen a less common meaning.

Nonetheless, the aim of the book is not to represent the Arabic culture but to transmit the idea that none should be ashamed of being different, on the contrary, they should be proud of their uniqueness.

This is achieved through colourful and dynamic illustrations representing an extensive variety of characters, with a wide range of different physical attributes, such as hair and skin colours, eye shapes, and so on.



Figure 6. Very diverse children talk about their names and explain their meanings or reasons.

Names are part of our identity, and are often culture-related. Indeed, some names are more common in a specific society, whereas others are not, although they might be familiar somewhere else. Hence, we might say that names are probably the first elements of other cultures children unconsciously encounter at school.

Mirha’s story may act as the input to encourage children to reflect on their own and others’ names, their meanings and significance, and how they would feel in that situation.

Consequently, the focus of “That’s not my name” is to spread awareness of what children endure when they carry names that are unpopular in their host country because related to their culture of origin. Thus, the importance of this book which carries a significant message in a supportive and engaging manner, with bright colours and predominantly simple language.

5.2. “Gibberish” by Young Vo

“Gibberish” written and illustrated by Young Vo, and published in 2022 by Levine Querido, targets children aged 4 to 8. It was also found in the list of Bank Street Best Books of the Year 2023, and according to the publisher’s website, it is a Charlotte Huck-recommended book and was selected as the Best of the Year 2022 by Kirkus, the Chicago Public Library, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Public Library among others.

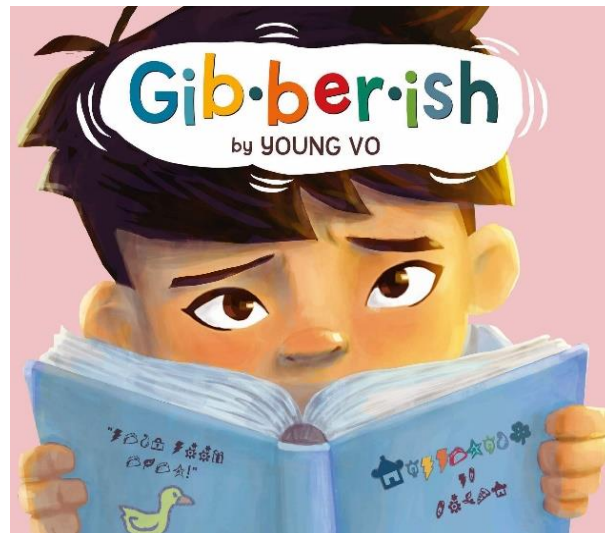


Figure 7. The front cover of "Gibberish" by Young Vo.

Starting from the book's front cover, we can see a young boy with an unhappy face who covers his mouth with a book.

The shape of the boy's eyes tells us that he may come from the eastern part of Asia, although not exclusively.

The book he is holding seems to be written in an unfamiliar language, and the words are represented by small symbols instead of letters.

Its title, this time, is written in small letters, however, the inscription is huge, simple, and colourful, appearing pretty attractive.

"Gibberish" by Young Vo tells the story of a young boy named Dat who moves to another country and struggles to integrate with his peers. The story told is very simple, but concerns a rather common situation for immigrant children: Dat lands in a new country after a long journey and has to go to the new school without speaking the language. Although his mom warns him that people would speak "gibberish" (hence, the name of the book), the situation is more complicated than he thought; indeed, he is surrounded by a completely unfamiliar environment. The young boy was not expecting to feel loneliness and confusion on his first day of school. Eventually, he meets a girl in the playground that enlightens his day and plays with him.

Afterward, on the bus, the same girl starts to explain to him the new language with drawings instead of words in order to convey her message. This strategy works out, and Dat discovers the meanings of some new terms and the name of his new friend, Julie.

Finally, the two characters arrive home and introduce each other to their moms.

As the previous picturebook, “Gibberish” also involves only a few actively participating characters who, although the distortion of their features, are easily recognizable (Dat, Mah, the bus driver, the teacher, and finally, Julie and her mom), in addition, the settings surrounding the events are definitely familiar for children.

Similarly, it starts by describing an unfortunate experience, but the ending is bright and cheerful.

Furthermore, there is absolutely no reference to Dat’s culture, as the only focus is on encouraging children to empathize with his situation, independently of where he comes from.

In an interview conducted by Tom Hall (2022) on the WYPR radio website, Young Vo confirms that Dat’s story is relatable to his own since he was an immigrant child arriving from Vietnam in the United States. In another interview with Minh Lê (2022) for Politics and Prose, he adds that he also learned to draw before knowing how to read. Furthermore, he remarks that his friends were essential for him when learning the language, and this is the significant message he aims to transmit: solidarity and collaboration to support the integration of a foreign peer who seems to be lost.

Many other details about “Gibberish” are revealed by Young Vo during the interview for Politics and Prose, and the most relevant for the analysis of the book will be disclosed in the following paragraphs.

Dat’s situation can be rather realistic as many children of immigrant families could find themselves in the same condition. Many of them can relate to this story, while it can open others’ eyes to how these children feel when they start a new life in a completely different world. It aims at genuinely portraying immigrant children’s issues and increasing non-immigrant readers’ awareness and empathy towards their newcomer peers.

The language is simple, and the dialogues are brief, as the focal point of the story is the protagonist’s struggle in communicating with others. Part of the dialogues are written in “gibberish”, meaning a coded language surrounding Dat that he does not understand yet, and which, as a consequence, is designed to be unintelligible for the readers as well.

The illustrations of the book were created to be understandable even without the text, as revealed by the author himself in the interview for Politics and Prose, who designed

them before writing the wording. In this way, Young Vo thought that children could connect with the book even without understanding the words. In addition, he specifies at the end of his picturebook that in the illustrations we can observe the use of different techniques for the visual style: pencils and watercolours although all the lighting is consistently digital.



Figure 8. Dat's story begins talking about his journey until he arrives at a bus stop to go to school.

They have been conceived by means of very interesting strategies of “estrangement” (Grenby & Reynolds, 2011: 164). From the beginning of the book, we can observe a rather peculiar characteristic: the environment is all in black and white, whereas the little boy and his mom are in colours. According to the author, the black and white represent the isolation of the protagonist from the rest of the world, while around Dat and his mom, there is a circle of trust and love.

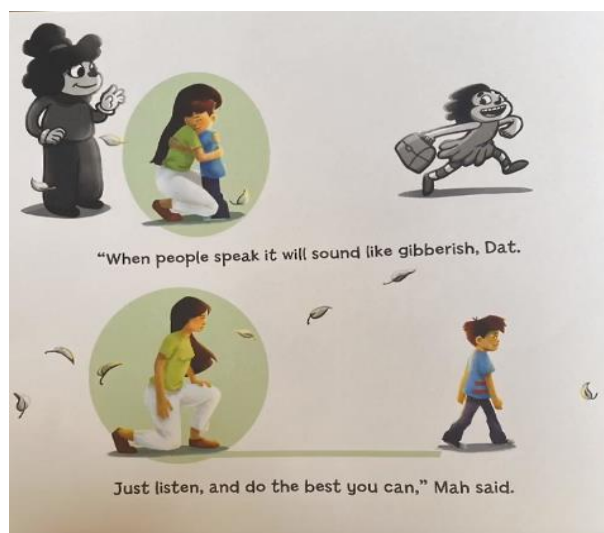


Figure 9. Dat says goodbye to his Mah and, at the same time, he says goodbye to his comfort zone.

Once more, it is possible to notice that Dat and his Mah are colourful and bright, encircled by what seems to be a bubble, while the other two characters at the bus stop are in black and white.

Another peculiarity is that these two figures present distinctive cartoon-like features, which will persist till the final pages.

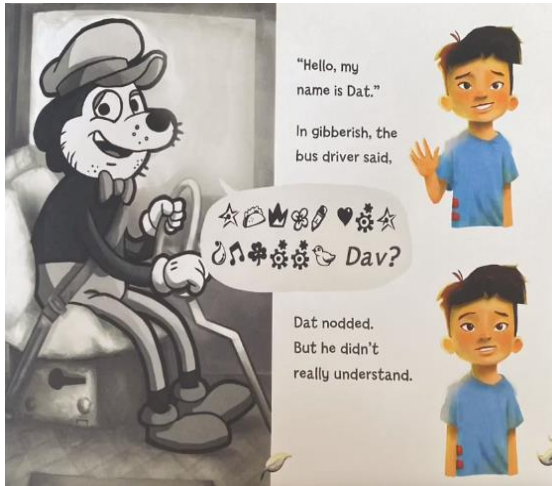


Figure 10. Dat gets on the bus and introduces himself, but he does not understand what the bus driver says.



Figure 11. The teacher talks to Dat and still, he does not understand.

In the illustrations above, we can observe how the author represents “gibberish”, like a set of symbols that can be easily recognizable (for example, a star, a flower, and a pencil). However, they are difficult to interpret and understand. Furthermore, we can see here a connection with the previous picturebook: both the bus driver and the teacher mangle Dat’s name (Dav and Dan).



Figure 12. Dat realizes that all his classmates speak "gibberish".

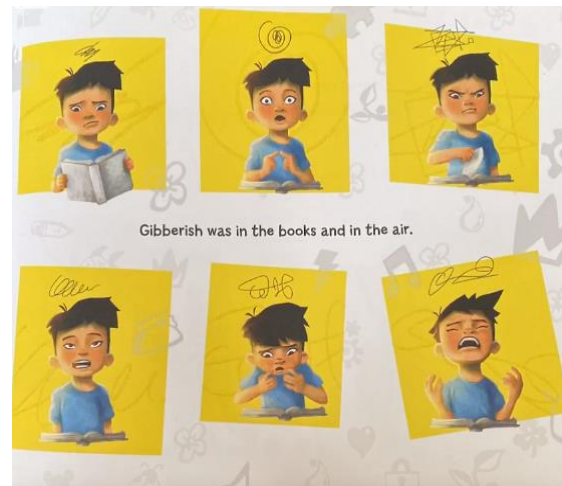


Figure 13. Dat understands that "gibberish" is everywhere.

In the illustrations above, we can actually perceive the confusion, frustration, and isolation felt by Dat. We can observe that all of Dat's classmates speak and understand "gibberish" and can actively participate in the lesson, while he cannot.

Both scenes are permeated with "gibberish" symbols, as Dat realizes that it is everywhere.

In the second illustration, it is possible to notice that Dat is enclosed in yellow rectangles, which is another strategy of estrangement used by the author, explicated during his interview.



Figure 14. Dat feels alone as in the playground nobody wants to play with him.



Figure 15. The girl plays with Dat in the playground and we can see Dat starting to feel more and more comfortable.

The three illustrations above show Dat's lonely path toward the playground, where he finally meets someone that talks to him. Although they do not understand each other, they start playing, and we can see that the corners of the rectangle around Dat are smoothing until it turns into a green circle, which is a sign that Dat is starting to familiarize with her. We can say that, metaphorically speaking, she is becoming part of his circle.



Figure 16. Dat's new friend extracts her notebook and starts explaining "gibberish" with drawings to him.



Figure 17. Finally, we find out the girl's name which is Julie who has taken on more familiar and colourful features.

Dat spends the rest of the day alone and still has problems with "gibberish", nevertheless, on the bus, he meets the girl from the playground again, and they start to communicate through drawings.

During the process in which she describes the words with drawings, her foreign features start to fade, and we start to see the colour of her dress till she becomes exactly like Dat, a little girl in all her colours, whose name is Julie.

During the interview, Young Vo explains that each symbol in the book is a letter, and the "words" in gibberish can be deciphered by looking at these pages in which Julie teaches Dat the language. However, he underlines that there is no logic to the actual symbols; they are random and do not make sense in order to represent "gibberish" authentically.



Figure 18. While Julie associates the word "tree" with a Mediterranean one, Dat thinks about palms; they own different "models of mind" (Lund, 2007: 27).

During his interview for Politics and Prose, Vo also pinpoints the illustration displayed above, in which Dat and Julie draw the words. In this picture, it is possible to observe that Julie draws her version of a tree while Dat draws his version of a tree. It is a powerful way to indicate that different people may have their own perception of the same words. This perspective is coherent with the definition of culture supported by many scholars such as Lund (2007), according to which it functions as "a 'perceptual lens' through which we see and make sense of the outside world" (p:26-27). Correspondingly, we can see that while Julie associates the word "tree" with a type of tree that is more common in her area, which could be an oak or maple tree, on the other hand, Dat links the same word with a more tropical tree, like a palm, which was more familiar to him. Therefore, they own two different "models of mind" (Lund, 2007: 27).

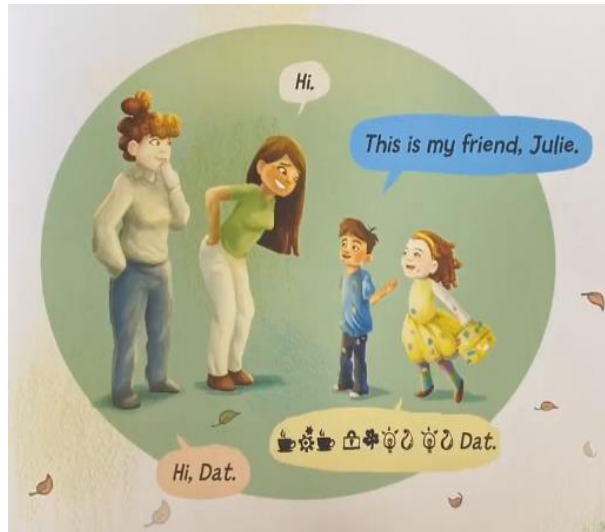


Figure 19. Dat and Julie arrive at the bus stop and meet their mothers.

When Dat arrives home, everything is more colourful and recognizable to him, even Julie’s mom, and Dat’s world is enlightened again, thanks to his new friend. Not only do Julie and her mom take on more familiar features and colours, but we can see they are all surrounded by the previously mentioned green circle as to indicate that they are finally part of Dat’s circle.



Figure 20. The text recalls the beginning of the story and Dat's journey and ends with Dat that finally feels at home thanks to Julie.

The last picture implies that after flying on a plane, sailing on a boat, and riding on a school bus, Dat finally feels at home with his new friend. By reading the entire picturebook, it is possible to notice that this last sentence recalls the beginning of the story. It is interesting how Young Vo, as highlighted by Minh Lê during the interview, conveys that the long journey undertaken by Dat and his Mah does not end with them

arriving in the new country. On the contrary, that is just the beginning of their adventure.

The author Young Vo attempts to show Dat's "cognitive and emotional processes involved in cross-cultural engagement" (Grenby & Reynolds, 2011) by depicting all the elements of the new country as different and incomprehensible in black and white and by representing Dat's isolation through rectangles and his "comfort zones" as circles. The technique of combining reality with fantasy to represent the unfamiliar new country had already been employed by Shaun Tan in his graphic novel "The Arrival" published in 2006. Grenby and Reynolds (2011) consider that through this technique "readers are positioned to align themselves with the protagonist" and relate to him while he is discovering the new environment (p: 164).

Nevertheless, the author of "Gibberish" preferred to represent unfamiliar people with the appearance of cartoon characters with the purpose of rendering them more identifiable for younger children as he explained during the interview for Politics and Prose. Furthermore, Vo adds contrast and dynamism to his illustration by playing with colours and shapes.

In conclusion, "Gibberish" by Young Vo represents a wonderful input to guide children to reflect on their own and others' emotions, inspiring them to empathise with Dat and understand him.

It represents all those children that have to move to a different country but do not own the appropriate instruments to understand and integrate into the new environment, giving them a voice.

In addition, it opens other children's eyes to the struggle their foreign peers are living and will, hopefully, make them more understanding and collaborative towards them.

5.3. “Dumpling Day” by Meera Sriram, Inés de Antuñano and Laurel Jackson

“Dumpling Day” is a picturebook that originated from the collaboration of three women: Meera Sriram, the author Inés de Antuñano, the illustrator and Laurel P. Jackson, the recipe creator, published by Barefoot Books in 2021. It was found in the list of winners of the Skipping Stone Honour Award 2022 and targets children aged 4 to 9.

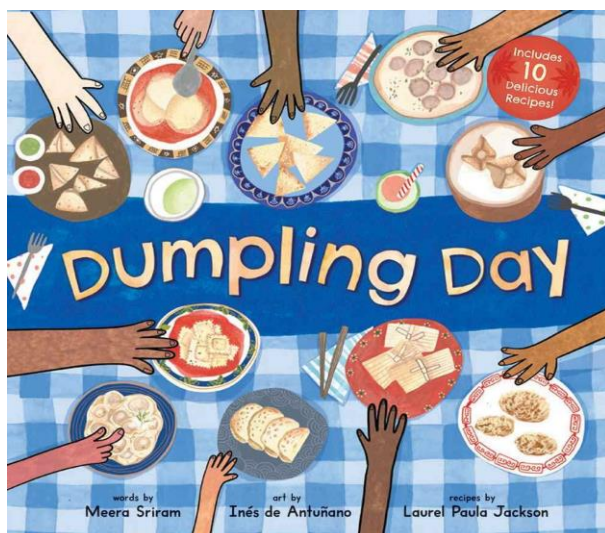


Figure 21. Front cover of "Dumpling Day" by Meera Sriram, Inés de Antuñano and Laurel P. Jackson

Already from the cover, we can see that this picturebook is different from the other two, as there is no main character on the front, but there are ten hands of different colours and many dumplings of different shapes, served in different ways.

The arrangement of the dishes on a background resembling a tablecloth conveys the idea of a picnic. Among the cutlery, we can notice the presence of chopsticks, the traditional oriental utensils for eating food.

The title of the book in the middle is simple and big and stands out in bright yellow on a blue background. At the top of the cover page, a red mark states that the book includes ten delicious recipes.

“Dumpling Day” describes a party celebrated by ten multicultural families in an unnamed town.

It depicts the efforts of each family in preparing dumplings following the traditional recipes of their culture: the Indian Samosas, the Pennsylvaniaian apple dumplings, the

Chinese wu-gok, the Nigerian fufu balls, the Japanese Gyoza, the Israeli bourekas, the Mexican Tamales, the Syrian shish barak, the Russian pelmeni, and the Italian ravioli. At the end of the story, all the families meet for a picnic, during which they share all this delicious food.

Overall, the characters are familiar to children as they are family members, and similarly, the settings are all places very close to children's life, the household, and the park. Many different scenarios are considered, and they are all rather authentic: from the mother talking on the phone while her older children are cooking to the grandfather furtively tasting the food while the rest of the family is cooking.

The three authors of the book are passionate about cuisine and multiculturalism, and, at the end of the book, they left short comments about themselves: the writer, Meera Sriram, who moved to the United States from India, states that while living in cities with other immigrant families, food was always the reason which brings them together, as a "wonderful cultural bridge"; the illustrator, Inés de Antuñano specifies that she conducted copious visual research in order to represent each family correctly; the recipe creator, Laurel P. Jackson also researched about the history of each dumpling with the purpose of selecting the most appropriate recipe for each one of them.

Meera Sriram, during an interview with the Center for Teaching Through Children's Book (CTCB) Director, Christina Moorehead (2022), asserts that she drew inspiration from her own life experience as an immigrant to create the book since she participated in many multicultural events similar to the one depicted in "Dumpling Day!", during which she would exchange recipes and bond over food. Furthermore, she remarks, like the other two authors, that considerable research was carried out in order to find the most diverse types of dumpling possible in terms of shape, colour, texture, flavour, size, and cooking methods. Indeed, she underlines the analogy that lies beyond the story in the book: people, like dumplings, are different from each other but also the same, maybe more similar than different, she adds during another interview with MCBBD Ig Live (2022).

This last book is rather different from the other two for many reasons: there are no main characters, but it joins many families together, the tones are joyful and peaceful throughout the whole book, the language is rhymed and creative with words from the original languages, and there is an explicit explanation, at the end of the book, of the

provenience of each dumpling. All these characteristics turns “Dumpling day” into a very attractive book for children, together with all the colours used in the illustrations.

“Dumpling Day” is not only a multicultural picturebook but, it can be also considered a nursery rhyme created for teaching how to count. Therefore, the language is rhymed and engaging, although very simple. Another peculiarity in the text is the integration of a word in the original language of each family: for instance, *didi* is Hindi for “older sister”, and *gor gor* is Cantonese for “older brother” and so on. Throughout the text, it is possible to notice how the author attempts to highlight the differences between each dumpling in terms of taste but also of cooking methods and ingredients (as mentioned above): “*samosas*” are “spicy”, “apple dumplings” are “sweet”, “*wu-gok*” is “fried”, while “*tamales*” are “steamed”, “*gyoza* is filled with pork mix” whereas “*ravioli* burst with soft cheese” and so on.

Each illustration in the book represents one family cooking dumplings in their own special way:



Figure 22. In the first family, the mother and the older sister (*Didi*) are preparing Indian *samosas*.

The first family is Indian, and, from the illustrations, they seem to be monocultural. We can see that the older sister (*didi* in Indian) is the one cooking the *samosas*, perhaps with her mom’s help, while the younger brother and sister are tasting. Although there are limited references to their culture, we can observe an exposition of jars in the cabinet, which may represent the various spices used in the traditional Indian cuisine.



Figure 23. The second family consists of a Mom with her two children cooking a Pennsylvania Dutch recipe, apple dumplings.

The second family consists of a mom and her children, cooking apple dumplings, a popular recipe created by the Pennsylvania Dutch, a rural community of German ancestry who settled in the United States between the 17th and 19th centuries (Whipple, 2023). In the illustration, we can observe many details recalling the countryside and nature: a decorative plate representing a couple wearing hats surrounded by symbols that could be “hex signs” and many kitchen tools with birds, flowers, and hearts that seem to be characteristic of their culture. In addition, on the right side of the picture, someone left a straw hat which is traditionally worn by Amish men.

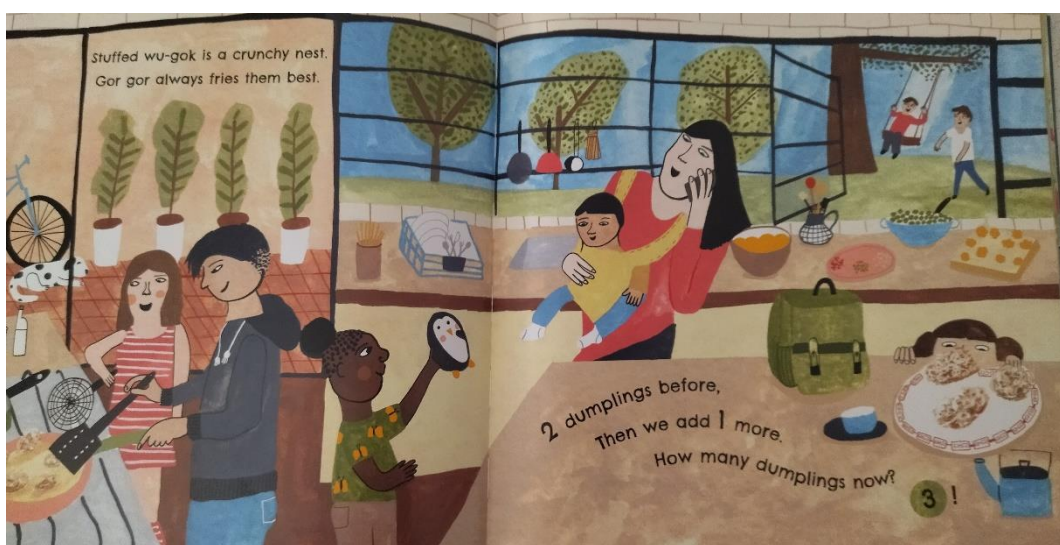


Figure 24. In the third family, Gor gor is frying the wu-gok a recipe that originates from Chinese culture, helped by his sister.

The third family is rather large and multicultural: the two older kids are cooking *wu-gok*, while the others are dealing with everyday life activities (the mom talking on the phone, the younger children playing with a soft toy while the other is looking at the food as she is about to steal it...)

From the illustration, we can assume that the parents have different ethnic features and the little girl with the soft toy has black skin, and can supposedly be a friend of the other girl or an adopted child.



Figure 25. In the fourth family, Auntie is cooking fufu balls, a west-African dish.

The fourth family is also large and multicultural in which auntie is cooking *fufu*, helped by a young girl. *Auntie* is a “Nigerian term of respect for grown-up women” as explained by the author at the end of the book. Furthermore, the illustrations present certain details that recall the Nigerian culture: Auntie’s turban that, according to Sinopoli (2019), in Nigeria is called *gele* and is considered the expression of women’s identity, joy, and beauty, and the African mask hanging on the wall. Additionally, the colourful geometrical shapes recurring on the pillows, the carpet, and the kitchen tools evoke African art.

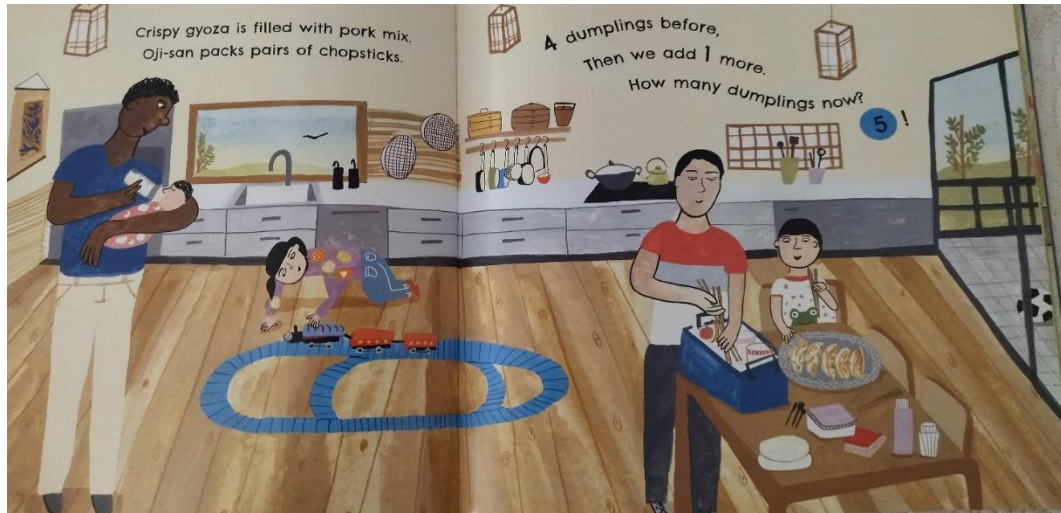


Figure 26. In the fifth family, the Japanese gyoza are ready, Oji-san is packing everything for the picnic.

In the fifth family, Oji-san (“uncle” in Japanese) and, supposedly, his nephew have just finished preparing gyoza and are preparing the picnic bag.

Here, we can observe an essentialist interior design which is traditionally Japanese, with a wide glass door in the garden and a wooden floor. Additionally, there is a simple painting evoking nature and a kakejiku, a Japanese hanging scroll, on the left of the picture (nomurakakejiku.com).



Figure 27. In the sixth family, the mother is cooking Israeli bourekas, helped by the older children, while saba is tasting them.

In the sixth family, we can observe teamwork in which the mom prepares the Israeli bourekas, while the older daughter is displaying them on a grill, and the older son is preparing the bag for the picnic, while “Saba” (grandfather in Hebrew) is tasting them and the younger children hope to try them too. It presents two main aspects of the Israeli culture: the *hamsa* or “hand of Fatima” which, according to Wikipedia, is traditionally believed to protect against evil, and the *kippah* worn by Saba, which Jewish men carry as a “sign of reverence and respect for God’s presence above” as claimed in an article of the blog My Jewish Learning.



Figure 31. In the seventh family, prima is steaming the Mexican tamales while the grandmother is wrapping them in a corn husk.

The seventh family is cooking Mexican tamales and we can observe *prima* (“cousin” in Spanish) steaming them and the grandmother wrapping them in a corn husk. On the side, two children, possibly the younger cousins, are playing with a dog.

The bright colours, the plate used for displaying the tamales, the decorations of the house, and the cacti at the window are all references to Mexican culture.

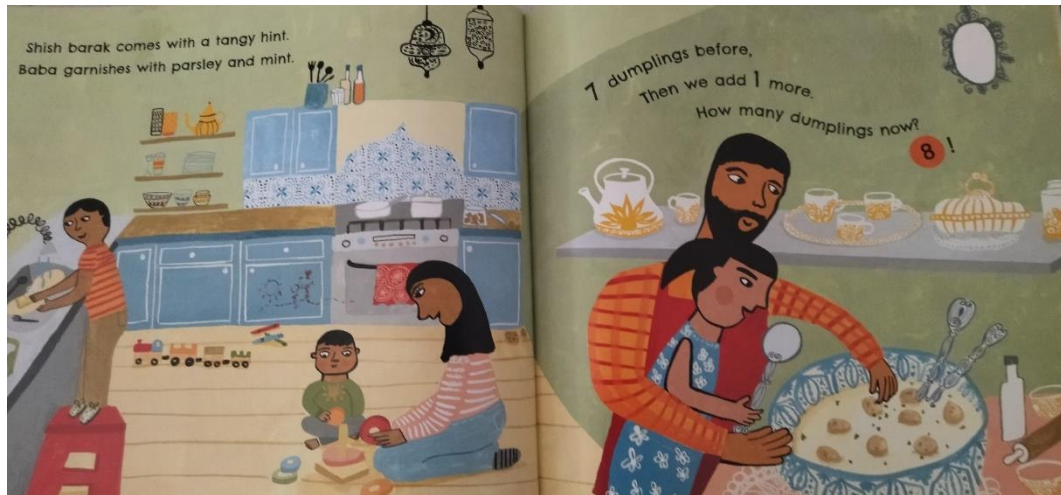


Figure 32. In the eighth family, baba and the daughter are garnishing shish barak, which come from the Middle Eastern tradition.

The eighth family depicts *baba* (“father” in Arabic) garnishing the shish barak with the help of his daughter while the older brother is washing dishes and the mom is playing with the younger child on the floor. The mosaic tilework above the stove is called *zellij* in Arabic (Wikipedia), and together with the floral motivations of the silverware and the crescent moon on the lamp, reminds of the Arabic culture. Furthermore, the mom is wearing the traditional hijab.



Figure 33. In the ninth family, the mother is making Russian pelmeni while babushka hands them over to the children to try.

In the ninth family, the mother cooks pelmeni while *babushka* (“grandma” in Russian) gives a taste to the three children. In this illustration, no recollection of Russian culture is observed.



Figure 34. The tenth and last family are cooking all together Italian ravioli, while bambino would like to try one.

Finally, the last family is the Italian one, cooking ravioli all together: the mom is making pasta with the pasta maker, the daughter is stuffing the pasta, the dad is cutting the ravioli, and the grandmother is cooking them in hot water, whereas the younger child is tasting them to see if they are ready. Even in this picture, we cannot see a recollection of the Italian culture.



Figure 35. All the family meet and celebrate "Dumpling Day" together at the park.

In the end, all the families meet to share the dumplings and enjoy the cultural exchange. We can observe that they are all enjoying the experience, who is eating and sharing, and who is playing.

On the whole, it is depicted naturally and realistically.

After the story and before the selection of recipes, there is a short explanation of the word “dumpling”, a small map showing where all the dumplings belong and the meaning of the foreign terms in the text.

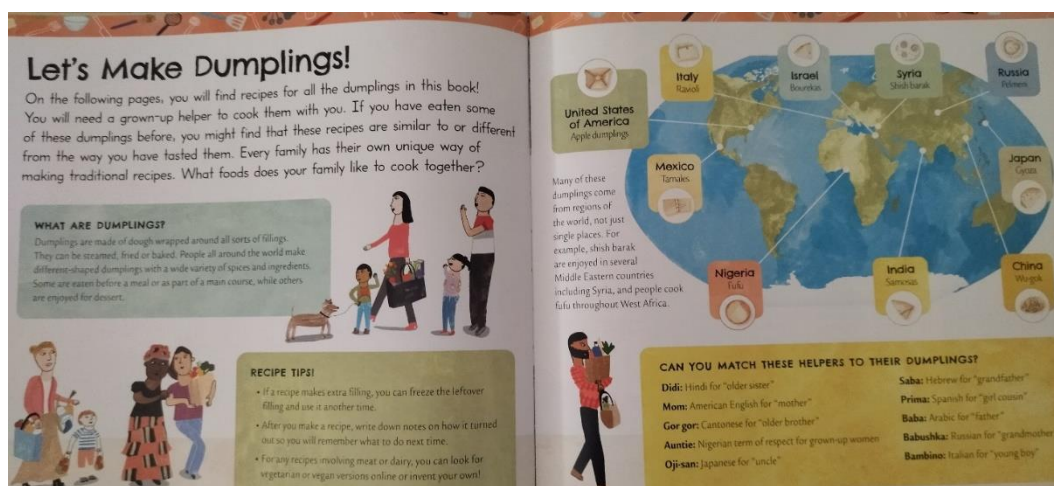


Figure 36. In these two pages, the author explains the meaning of "dumpling", provides some recipe tips, shows the origin of each dumpling with a small map, and displays the meaning of all the foreign words in the text.

We can observe that the illustrations represent both monocultural and pluricultural families; in fact, Meera Sriram underlines during the interview with MCB D Ig Live that today multicultural families are not always authentically representing their original culture because of the integration and the blending with other cultures. The author's point of view can be linked to the perspective of “transformative culture” (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015: 169). “Dumpling Day” can provide a unique input for a discussion on differences and similarities among all the families in the book, relating them to the ones of the students, underlying that as the dumplings, we can be simultaneously different and similar. Furthermore, it could be an excellent opportunity to converse about food and typical dishes.

Above all, it is a strategy to show children that not only culturally diverse people can find ways to connect and live together but that from these exchanges, we can all enjoy and learn.

5.4. Intercultural Activities

Activity 1: “That’s not my name!” by Anoosha Syed

According to Keller and Franzak (2015), the simple question about the name can be one of the most evident indicators of “a struggle between assimilation and acceptance” (p: 178), as they believe that altering or rejecting a name would be an effort to impose assimilation, even if agreed with the child, whereas supporting and accepting his/her original name would mean to promote an environment that values all children.

As a consequence, when a child’s proper name is mispronounced, pain and discomfort arise which may lead to the depreciation of his/her self-consciousness, self-exclusion, frustration, embarrassment, and a lack of sense of belonging.

Schools, families, and communities should cooperate to organize inclusive projects with the purpose of encouraging the correct pronunciation of foreign names, in order to contribute to the creation of a more welcoming and respectful environment for all children, independently from their provenience.

From the analysis and reinterpretation of the picturebook “That’s not my name!” by Anoosha Syed, a recreational activity was developed for the promotion of intercultural inclusion and the reciprocal reception of their own inner world.

Target age: children of 4-5 years of age

Objectives: - to expand the perception of space, corporal boundaries, and co-creation;

- to integrate own meanings and perspectives with those of others;
- to understand others’ differences;
- to develop empathy and sensitivity
- to learn the correct pronunciation of others’ names

Development:

Section 1: the teacher or educator will invite the children to sit in a circle and a sheet of white paper will be distributed to each child to position horizontally in front of them.

Once they are all set, they will be asked to bring their attention to their heart, by placing their hands at its proximity. It will be specified that they can close their eyes, in order to favour a higher concentration and inner connection. Afterward, they will be invited to

take deep breaths and accommodate their emotions.

The next step will be to ask them to think about their own name and draw the first item they have seen with their imagination once they establish the connection with their hearts.

The teacher or educator will explain that the drawing needs to be of small size and at the centre of the paper and that, when finished, at the teacher's signal, which will come every 60 seconds, children will have to pass the paper to their peer at the left.

Given the age of the children, it will be necessary to explain the correct side towards which to proceed, by asking them to raise their left hand and to memorize the classmate to whom they will have to pass the paper.

Each child in the circle will draw the meaning (s)he imagined for his/her name and the activity will end when each one of them will receive his/her starting paper.

The initial drawing of each child will appear altered by the presence of his/her peers' contributions.

At this point, the teacher/educator will ask pupils what they feel by observing their picture enriched with all the gifts their classmates donated to them and will be invited to express their like and dislike, in a manner that would allow the discussion of boundaries, acceptance, and cooperation with others.

Section 2: the teacher/educator will then introduce a simple nursery rhyme she created with the names of the children and their actual meanings interpreted from their original languages.

The idea beyond this section is to show children that their names have meanings and show them, using a nursery rhyme, which should be repeated continuously (ideally every morning when arriving, as a greeting song) and learnt, how to pronounce names correctly. In order to do this, the teacher/educator will need to ask for the collaboration of the parents for understanding the appropriate pronunciations and meanings of children's names.

Activity 2. “Gibberish” by Young Vo

“Language is one of the most universal and diverse forms of expression of human culture, and perhaps, even the most essential one” (UNESCO, 2006: 13) because it empowers future citizens in “democratic and plural societies” (UNESCO, 2006: 13).

Without speaking the language of their host countries, immigrant children may feel isolated and rejected. Because of a similar situation, children may build communicational and relational barriers with others, which may deeply mark their psychological, emotional, and social well-being.

Hence, the importance of teaching pupils to empathize with minority children and collaborate with them in order to help them understand and accept the new environment around them.

The analysis and reinterpretation of the picturebook “Gibberish” by Young Vo inspired the following activity aimed at children’s direct experimentation with otherness.

Target age: children of 4-5 years of age

Objectives: - develop empathy toward diverse children

- understand the importance of solidarity and collaboration
- develop critical thinking and strategies for interactional difficulties

Development:

Section 1: the situation of the book is reversed, and this time it is Julie that goes with Dat to his country of origin. A couple of children will be selected, and one will interpret Dat and the other Julie.

Those who interpret Julie will start speaking in “gibberish”, therefore inventing non-existing words, without semantic connections, in short sentences, and, in order to convey his/her message, (s)he can resort to everything that can be found in the room, from body language to the whiteboard in which (s)he can draw what (s)he is thinking. Those portraying Dat, instead, will have to interpret what Julie is saying in “gibberish” to their peers.

After about 60 seconds, also depending on the children’s feelings, the teacher/educator will ask another couple of children to take Dat’s and Julie’s place till all of them have participated.

Section 2: At the end of the activity, all children will be asked to reflect and share their emotions and eventual difficulties endured while performing both the role of Dat and Julie.

Activity 3. “Dumpling Day” by Meera Sriram, Inés de Antuñano, and Laurel P. Jackson

Since one of the fundamental principles of interculturalism is understanding that dialogues and exchanges among culturally diverse people are an enrichment and a benefit for society and not a threat.

The reading and examination of “Dumpling Day” allowed the development of the following activity whose purpose is not only to raise children’s awareness of other cultural traditions but also to support intercultural diversities and similarities.

For the achievement of the second section of this activity, the collaboration of children’s families is essential, which will be asked a long time in advance, in a way that all the families can find the time to participate and will be reminded to the parents multiple times because the cooperation of each child is considered valuable and enriching.

Target age: children of 5 years of age

Objectives: - to discover new intercultural traditional dishes

- to relate and compare own’s life with those of others’
- to understand that intercultural exchanges are an engaging and enriching experience.
- to develop curiosity and openness toward otherness

Development:

Section 1: after photocopying the pictures of the book and displaying them in a way that children can observe them all together, the teacher/educator will ask them to reflect on the differences and similarities of these families and compare them to their own familiar situation at home. Each child will be asked which one of the families in the pictures he/she relates more to.

Section 2: for this section of the activity, it will be necessary to collaborate with the families. All families of the children in the classroom will be asked to cook a typical

and/or familiar dish, a meal that the child is used to having, and take a picture of their family while preparing it and one of the final results and the ingredients.

Children will be asked to relive the experience with the help of the pictures provided by the parents and draw what they remember happened.

In the end, children will share their experiences and glue the photos and the recipe they recreated on a huge poster.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the answers to the research questions are presented in chapter 1.2. will be considered and discussed, together with the limitations of the investigation and the lines for future research.

Considering the first research question, we have observed that all three picturebooks under examination represent cultural diversity as “fluid” and “transformative”, evolving from generation to generation (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015; Corbett, 2003; Chaouche, 2016). This is consistent with the view of cultures as practices developed by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013: 20-21) which asserts that culture is “dialogic” and “dynamic” and changes through interaction with other cultures.

For instance, in “That’s not my name!”, Mirha’s family does not have the appearance of a traditional Arabic family: none is wearing traditional Arabic clothing, with the exception of Mirha’s grandmother. This may lead us to the conclusion that Mirha’s family integrated with the culture of their host country, although the grandmother still feels a strong attachment to her own culture of origin, probably because she lived respecting those traditions longer than the rest of her family.

The same is true for “Dumpling Day”, in which we can observe that most families are not always genuine representatives of their culture of origin because of integration and interaction with other cultures. Nevertheless, the elderly people seem to be the ones who still wear traditional outfits, such as the *gele* on Auntie’s head and the *kippah* on Saba’s. In “Gibberish”, instead, the “dialogic” aspect of culture is represented by the conversation through which Lucy and Dat share their own cultural meanings and perspectives of the same objects, influencing each other.

In addition, both the illustrations of “That’s not my name!” and “Dumpling Day” depict the heterogeneity and cultural diversity of modern societies: the former showcases an extensive diversification of characters in terms of eye, skin, and hair colour, eye shape, and hairstyle; the latter portrays both monocultural and multicultural families, proving that cultural groups do not live in isolation.

“Gibberish”, on the other hand, is more concerned with illustrating culture as a symbolic system (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013:20), coherent with Lund (2007:26), who considered it as the set of rules shared by a specific cultural group. In fact, the

environment around Dat is different and unfamiliar because he does not own the key to understanding others' meanings and behaviours.

Therefore, during the analysis of the three picturebooks selected for this Master's thesis, we have observed that the representation of culture is not as stereotypical, static, and homogeneous as claimed by those described in the books examined by Mendoza and Reese in 2001.

Perhaps, this is because the concept of culture has been changing in the last decades, and an increasing number of people are acknowledging its transformative and heterogeneous aspects.

However, it is always important to bear in mind that a single book cannot sufficiently portray the experience and culture of a whole group (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

With regard to the second research question, we observed that the aforementioned picturebooks present a high potential for developing children's intercultural competencies, as they show situations that can encourage children to reflect and empathize with the main characters.

As many scholars support the combination of the reading of multicultural literature with debates and related activities (Rasinski & Padak, 1990), this Master's thesis also proposes one task for each book for children aged 4 to 5 in order to show how each one of them can be used to support children's development of intercultural competencies.

Starting from the first activity, which emerged from the analysis of "That's not my name!", the aim was to enable children to reflect on their own names and others', their meanings, and their importance as a key element of individuals' identities.

Concomitantly, by drawing together, children learn to share and cooperate, understand that others have different points of view, and develop empathy and sensitivity. On the other hand, through the repetition of the nursery rhyme, children will learn how to pronounce others' names.

Inspired by "Gibberish", the second activity allows children to empathize with Dat and understand the feelings triggered by his situation. In addition, they learn various strategies to communicate with others (such as body language and drawing) and understand the importance of solidarity and teamwork.

Finally, the third activity allows children to share their own family and culinary experiences, relate and compare them with those of others', and acknowledge the

enjoyment originating from intercultural encounters and exchanges. In this way, they also develop the abilities of curiosity and openness toward others' perspectives and life experiences.

As previously mentioned, children are not expected to develop all the skills necessary to participate in intercultural encounters during their early childhood; nevertheless, they should start learning the foundations for developing them (Byram, 2008, as mentioned in Kearny & Ahn, 2013). Therefore, the activities aimed at increasing younger children's awareness of frequent intercultural situations, guiding them through the process of understanding and accepting their peers' differences, and encouraging them to be supportive and collaborative with them.

The present Master's thesis has some limitations as the sample of picturebooks examined was restricted to three and the creation of only one activity each due to the limited time available for its production.

Nonetheless, it will serve as a basis for future studies that could consider a larger sample of picturebooks in order to create a multicultural booklist and related activities.

Subsequently, it would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal and experimental project implementing the use of the aforementioned booklist in the early childhood classroom and observing their effects on children.

The main goal of the current research, as previously stated in chapter 2 of the present Master's thesis, was to address the lack of investigation on the integration of an intercultural approach in early childhood education through the reading of multicultural literature, as highlighted by Evans (2010). Although copious research underlines the effectiveness of using multicultural children's literature as an instrument to explore cultural diversity (Kelly-Ware & Daly, 2019), little has been conducted on its actual implementation in early childhood and primary classrooms, and more is needed (Evans, 2010).

In a nutshell, we can state that the present Master's thesis has been conceived as a base for further research on implementing multicultural literature as a strategy to lay the foundations for intercultural competencies starting from the early childhood classroom in order to facilitate its complete achievement in the future.

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