

READING REFUGEE STORIES: FIVE COMMON THEMES AMONG PICTURE BOOKS WITH REFUGEE CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program offers a quick path to permanent residency and adjustment to the United States, with the major objectives of economic success, community involvement, and local integration. The success of the program partly depends on the response of the American community towards refugees. Using the foundational idea that multicultural literature encourages learners to respect and accept people who are different from themselves, this article identifies five common themes among picture books with refugee characters. A total of 17 books were analyzed. A product of this research is a list of suggested picture books for exploring social inclusion with young readers. The list is organized to reflect the lessons or themes pulled from the analyzed texts. Suggestions for classroom discussions are also provided.

Patrick invited his second-grade students to the carpet. Last week he had read aloud a picture book titled, One Green Apple (Bunting, 2006), and this morning he shared The Big Red Lollipop (Khan, 2010). The main characters of the two books were elementary-age refugee characters who were adjusting to their new American lives. Patrick invited his students to identify common themes shared across the two books. Juan raised his hand and stated, "Both books had new students." Patrick encouraged further discussion by stating, "Tell me more about that." Juan added, "At first the new students did not play with one another, but then they became friends." Patrick thanked Juan for sharing his observations and rephrased Juan's conclusions as, "The two main characters, Farah and Rubina, were new to their schools and didn't know the other students. Both Farah and Rubina made it a point to meet other children, and the other children made it a point to learn more about Farah and Rubina. This effort is why the children became friends. We can describe this as 'taking action' to be included and 'taking action' to include others."

This example from Patrick's classroom illustrates the use of multicultural literature as a vehicle for building richer and deeper social knowledge among young readers. Martens et al. (2015) have shared that multicultural literature "encourages learners to respect and accept people who are different [from] themselves and break attitudes that are oppressive and prejudicial" (p. 609). Patrick, the teacher in the opening vignette, is pictured using two multicultural texts as channels to discuss with his second-grade students how to take action toward social inclusion of all beings regardless of cultural backgrounds. This lesson is one that has been reported to be present in a wide variety of multicultural texts (Martens et al., 2015). Therefore, it seems natural to use multicultural texts as vehicles for communicating such lessons to young readers.

What additional lessons might be present in multicultural texts? In this article, we explore this question using picture books featuring refugee characters. We chose to set the context of our discussion around refugees because they are a rapidly growing population in the United States (UN Refugee Agency, 2017), come from different cultural backgrounds, and can often feel or experience social exclusion after resettling in America – making them an important population to recognize in the classroom. The product presented from our findings is a list of suggested picture books, featuring at least one refugee character, that can be used for exploring social inclusion with young readers. By *social inclusion*, we are referring to the act of accepting and including all individuals into one's social realm regardless of cultural backgrounds.

The presented list is organized to reflect the lessons or themes pulled from the analyzed texts. The overall idea relates back to Patrick in the opening vignette. He used two books that shared one theme, and that theme became the focus of a class discussion. His lesson required students to analyze, evaluate, and compare multiple texts– all skills that have been considered complex for nearly a decade, if not longer (Gray, 1925). We are hopeful that the list featured in this article will be a resource for elementary teachers to replicate similar conversations in their classrooms.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Essential to the opening vignette is the idea that children's literature provides opportunities for young readers to reflect upon their culture and to learn about the culture of others. Brinson (2012) refers to such books as *mirror books* and *window books*. Mirror books reinforce the culture of the reader, while window books offer the reader an "opportunity to learn about other cultures by providing a window into new experiences" (Brinson, 2012, p. 30). Providing such literature in the classroom reinforces "a sense of community, enhance[s] young children's understanding of and identification with diverse cultures and families, and provide[s] immense enjoyment of a mosaic of literary heritages" (Brinson, 2012, p 32). This idea is not only essential to the opening vignette but also serves as the foundation for the present article.

Also setting the tone for the current discussion is the question posed by McBrien (2005) in *Educational Needs and Barriers of Refugee Students in the United States*– "Will we teach our children to be welcoming of newcomers by accepting the diversity of international cultures that they bring with them, or will we expect new Americans to cast off their heritage and assimilate into a distinctively *American heritage*?" (p. 357). Such questions are pertinent in today's world with 65.3 million forcibly displaced people– 21.3 million being refugees, half of whom are children (UN

Refugee Agency, 2017). With a high number of refugees being children, it is imperative that schools provide environments and curricula that empower children to take action toward social inclusion of all.

Foundational to the current project is understanding who is considered a refugee and why they resettle in the United States. The second edition of the *Handbook of International Law* (Aust, 2010) provides insight into defining the term *refugee*. This source shares that essential to the definition of a *refugee* is the historical 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which was finalized on July 28th of that year and enforced on April 22, 1954. Later, the convention was amended by the 1967 Protocol “extending the convention to cover all refugees, past, present and future” (Aust, 2010, p. 117). These two instruments, collectively known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, officially defined a refugee as a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (Aust, 2010, p. 117).

The 1951 Refugee Convention also laid down the following three durable solutions to a refugee crisis: voluntary repatriation, host country integration, and third country resettlement (UN Refugee Agency, 2011b). These solutions help explain *why* refugees resettle in the United States. According to the UN Refugee Agency (2011a), in many instances, the first two solutions become impossible due to the persistence of conflict, and the inability of the host country to accommodate the large and growing refugee population in their country. As a result, third country resettlement is often the most durable solution to a refugee crisis. Still, less than 1 percent of all refugees are resettled in third countries, and almost two-thirds of those are resettled in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

The United States has welcomed over 3.3 million refugees since 1975 (U.S. Department of State, 2017). It is important to understand that half of these individuals are children. Eminent in placing refugee children into schools is the Office of Refugee Resettlement’s Division of Children’s Services, established by the Refugee Act of 1980 (Pub. L. 96-212) (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2010). Public schools admit children based on their age and irrespective of their educational background. Most refugee children arrive with basic to no education, having lived and grown up in the camps for the most part, and with little knowledge of written and spoken English.

Refugees very rarely return to their homeland (UN Refugee Agency, 2011a); therefore, it is important that refugee children be provided high quality literacy instruction, as it will greatly impact their ability to contribute back to the community and to live successful lives in the United States. In addition to welcoming new students, teachers also educate American students about the background of their refugee classmates, while deepening their understanding of social inclusion, pluralism, and leadership. This realization is why we have chosen to produce a list of suggested picture books featuring refugee characters.

THE PICTURE BOOKS

The goal of our project was to analyze picture books that contain at least one refugee character and to identify the common inclusive themes amongst the identified texts. The product formed from this process is a list of suggested picture books for exploring social inclusion with young readers (see Table 1). In this section, we explain our process of identifying and analyzing the books.

The search for picture books was a two-step process. First, we wanted to locate books featuring at least one refugee character, so we searched our University database using the terms *refugee* and *picture books*. This search retrieved 13 relevant articles. The authors of these peer-reviewed articles examined a range of topics including themes within global literature (Martens et al., 2015), to pre-service teachers' knowledge of multicultural literature (Brinson, 2012). Among the 13 articles, we were able to collect the titles of 11 picture books featuring at least one refugee character. The second step of the process was to search directly for picture books through the local public library database. This search revealed six additional picture book titles, yielding a total of 17 books to analyze.

ANALYZING THE BOOKS

After collecting hardcopies of the 17 identified books, each book was read by two readers. The readers read the books individually and identified the texts' overall themes. Themes, as used in this analysis, were the underlying implied messages in the stories that often stepped beyond the literal interpretation (e.g., it is better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all). While identifying the texts' themes, the two readers wrote anecdotal notes in their fieldnote journals. The anecdotal notes included information about the characters and character traits, main events of the story, and the setting— thereby, providing evidence of the themes. Next, the readers compared their identified themes and anecdotal notes, reaching 100% consensus – there were no variations presented. Lastly and together, the two readers crafted the phrasing of the presented themes.

THE THEMES

The following five themes, which are also the lessons that teachers can discuss in their classrooms, emerged from the analyzed books: a) empowerment as achieved through education or a talent, b) peer relationships and how they change over time, c) perseverance through hardship, d) preservation of meaningful items and traditions, and e) sharing stories of family and culture. Table 1 features the five themes and lists the associated books.

Table 1.
Identified Themes

| Theme | Title, Author | Homeland |
|---|---|-------------------------|
| Empowerment as Achieved through Education or a Talent | <i>How I Learned Geography</i> (Shurevitz, 2008) | Poland |
| | <i>Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan</i> (Winter, 2009) | Afghanistan |
| | <i>Petar's Song</i> (Mitchell, 2003) | Europe |
| Peer Relationships and How They Change Over Time | <i>Four Feet, Two Sandals</i> (Williams, 2016) | Afghanistan |
| | <i>One Green Apple</i> (Bunting, 2006) | Middle East |
| | <i>The Big Red Lollipop</i> (Khan, 2010) | Middle East |
| | <i>My Name is Yoon</i> (Recoruits, 2003) | Korea |
| | <i>My Name is Sangoel</i> (Williams & Mohammed, 2009) | Sudan |
| Perseverance Through Hardship | <i>The Cats in Krasinski Square</i> (Hesse, 2004) | Poland |
| | <i>Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan</i> (Williams, 2005) | Sudan |
| | <i>Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan</i> (Winter, 2009) | Afghanistan |
| Preservation of Meaningful Items and Traditions | <i>Alfredo Flies Home</i> (Argueta, 2007) | El Salvador |
| | <i>The Librarian of Basra: A True Story From Iraq</i> (Winter, 2005) | Iraq |
| | <i>The Lotus Seed</i> (Garland, 1993) | Vietnam |
| Sharing Stories of Family and Culture | <i>The Color of Home</i> (Hoffman, 2012) | Somalia |
| | <i>The Roses in My Carpets</i> (Khan, 1998) | Afghanistan |
| | <i>Sitti's Secrets</i> (Nye, 1994) | Pakistan |
| | <i>The Memory Coat</i> (Woodruff, 1999) | Jewish living in Russia |

EMPOWERMENT AS ACHIEVED THROUGH EDUCATION OR A TALENT. Three of the 17 picture books featured characters who found empowerment through receiving an education or practicing a talent. For example, in *How I Learned Geography*, author Uri Shulevitz (2008) tells his childhood story of

being a Polish refugee during World War II. The story revisits the hours he spent studying his father’s world map as an escape from hunger and a venue to experience distant lands. Likewise, *Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter, 2009) takes place in Afghanistan and features a young girl empowered through education, while *Petar’s Song* (Mitchell, 2003) features a young boy in Europe during WWII who is empowered through the music he creates.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW THEY CHANGE OVER TIME. Nearly 30 percent of the analyzed books focused on peer relationships; making it the most common theme. The analyzed books approached peer relationships in a variety of ways including the following: a) saying goodbye to friends, b) being a new student, and c) meeting peers with cultural differences such as names and traditions. Table 2 lists the different approaches of peer relationships and the associated books.

Table 2.
Approaches to Peer Relationships

| Approach to Peer Relationships | Title and Author |
|--|--|
| Saying Goodbye to Friends | <i>Four Feet, Two Sandals</i> (Williams & Mohammed, 2007) |
| Being a New Student | <i>One Green Apple</i> (Bunting, 2006) |
| Meeting Peers with Cultural Differences (e.g., names and traditions) | <i>The Big Red Lollipop</i> (Khan, 2010) <i>My Name is Yoon</i> (Recoruits, 2003) <i>My Name is Sangoel</i> (Williams, 2009) |

Books that focus on peer relationships can deepen young readers’ understanding of social inclusion. For example, in *My Name is Sangoel*, author Karen Lynn Williams (2009) tells a story of Sangoel, a young refugee from Sudan. The story begins with homesick and lonely Sangoel in the fast pace of the United States when his classmates have difficulty pronouncing his name. This changes when Sangoel designs an ingenious solution to this problem, causing him to feel more socially included. Also focused on new, unfamiliar names and making friends are *My Name is Yoon* (Recoruits, 2003) and *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006).

PERSEVERANCE THROUGH HARDSHIP. The message of persevering through hardship was found in three of the 17 books. For example, *The Cats in Krasinski Square* by Karen Hesse (2004) features a Jewish girl who has escaped the Ghetto. She is aware that families who have remained on the other side of the Ghetto wall are hungry. Although she is risking her life, she disguises herself as a simple girl playing with cats. However, she uses the disguise to sneak food through the Ghetto wall for the hungry families.

Other books that carried the theme of persevering through hardship included *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Williams, 2005) and *Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter, 2009). In *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, Williams tells the story of Garang fleeing his village in southern Sudan and walking hundreds of miles seeking

help with thousands of other boys. Throughout the story, the band of thousands encounters numerous hardships, but through mutual support, their hope of finding a new home stays alive. Winter's (2009) *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* tells the story of young Nasreen, whose parents have disappeared, and her grandmother enrolls her in a secret school for girls. Throughout the story, Nasreen encounters hardship but perseveres to receive her education.

Preservation of meaningful items and traditions. *Alfredo Flies Home* (Argueta, 2007), *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story From Iraq* (Winter, 2005), and *The Lotus Seed* (Garland, 1993) are stories focused on preserving meaningful items and traditions. In *Alfredo Flies Home*, Alfredo and his family return to their first home in El Salvador for Christmas, creating a glimpse into his families' Christmas celebrations. The theme of preservation is also seen in *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story From Iraq* as the librarian saves the library books from being destroyed in the war, and in *The Lotus Seed* as a lotus seed travels through the generations of a family.

Sharing stories of family and culture. The following four books feature the theme of sharing personal stories of family and culture: *The Color of Home* (Hoffman, 2012), *The Roses in My Carpets* (Khan, 1998), *Sitti's Secrets* (Nye, 1994), and *The Memory Coat* (Woodruff, 1999). In *The Color of Home*, Hassan uses paint to share the story of his previous home in war-torn Somalia, and in *Roses in My Carpets*, a young boy moves into a refugee camp where he learns to weave carpets and revisit his memories of home. Personal stories are also told in *Sitti's Secrets* as she returns to her small Middle Eastern village on the other side of the world to visit her grandmother. Although Sitti and her grandmother speak different languages, the two are able to communicate through other means.

CONNECTIONS TO THE CLASSROOM

The 17 featured books can function as window books and mirror books, giving American students and refugee children something they can learn from or relate to within the classroom. Students can read such books and gain insight into experiences they have not undergone triggering them to build empathy, respect for others, and a growing appreciation for their own experiences. The five themes found within the featured books can provide pathways for organizing discussions addressing social inclusion. Essential to these connections is *how* the teacher shares the books and frames the discussion. Such ideas are explored further in this section.

Books focused on character empowerment, peer relationships, perseverance through hardship, preservation of traditions, and personal stories are pathways for discussions in elementary classrooms. Multicultural books that offer a *window* view into others' strengths, talents, traditions, and hardships humanize diverse characters. Likewise, such books can act as a *mirror* and empower young readers to celebrate their own talents, traditions, and personal stories. For example, books focused on peer relationships depict characters saying "goodbye" to friends and creating new friendships. Such books are a mirror to children who have left friends behind and those who have needed to make new friendships— both are experiences that refugee children have had while fleeing from their homes. Another example are the stories from Europe during World War II and also from the camps in Afghanistan, providing glimpses into perseverance through hardships. Such books provide insights into broken school experiences and the limited educational opportunities

for girls in other countries. The same texts might reinforce self-development and growth while providing encouragement and support. These texts may also influence admiration for refugee children, who persevere despite living through many hardships.

When sharing and discussing books in the elementary classroom, we suggest reflecting upon the following four statements:

- Refugees come from different countries and cultural backgrounds.
- Resettlement in the United States is not new but is rapidly growing.
- Resettlement to the United States is a lengthy process.
- Refugees have rights.

REFUGEES COME FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. Books featuring refugee characters have the potential of becoming powerful teaching tools in classrooms where there are several countries and cultures represented by refugee children. The UN Refugee Agency (2015) shares that, since World War II, the United States has accepted refugees from all parts of Europe and Asia. Following the Vietnam War in the 1970s, there was a wave of Vietnamese and Indo-Chinese refugees. In the late 20th and 21st centuries, refugees arrived from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Furthermore, it is a current reality that most refugees today come from areas which are conflict afflicted, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syrian Arab Republic, and many African countries, notably the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and Somalia.

Action item. Keeping in mind that refugees come from different countries and cultural backgrounds, it is important to select a wide range of books that represent various cultures. Sharing a narrow range of books that portray only one culture could potentially give children the impression that refugees are all alike and that they hail from one particular country or cultural background.

Also when selecting books, it is important to be mindful of the cultural differences presented in each story. The books mirror the experiences of refugee children during camp life, as in *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Williams & Mohammed, 2007), and reflect how they face challenges in the United States, as in *One Green Apple* (Bunting, 2006). Moreover, the stories represent the countries in which the characters previously lived. A teacher might use the illustrations to discuss items of unique clothing such as a *hijab* (a head covering worn by some Muslim females) and food that American-born students may be unfamiliar with, such as Tahchin (an Iranian rice cake). By doing so, books become passports for exploring multiple cultures.

RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES IS NOT NEW, BUT IS RAPIDLY GROWING. Resettlement of refugees in America has continued since the end of the second World War (UN Refugee Agency, 2015). Guiding resettlement to the United States is the U.S. Refugee Law of 1980, signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. *The American Presidency Project* shares Carter's (1980) *Refugee Act of 1980 Statement on Signing S. 643 Into Law*, confirming that, although the law aligned with the

definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention, it revised previous provisions and admission policies in the United States. Outlined within Carter's statement is the affirmation that the U.S. Federal Government will take responsibility for resettling refugees and help refugees become self-sufficient and contributing members of society. These historical facts are only a few demonstrating that resettlement in the United States has a long history.

Not only is resettlement an established process with a history, but in recent years there has been an increase in the number of refugees relocating to the United States. According to the most recently published statistics from the UN Refugee Agency (2014), in 2014 there were 48,911 refugees resettled in the United States, and this number increased to 52,583 in 2015 (UN Refugee Agency, 2015). This increase is important to note because it allows educators to foresee the increasing need to share and discuss multicultural books featuring refugee characters.

Action item. When sharing books featuring refugee characters, a teacher can choose books from different time periods to demonstrate that refugee resettlement is a part of history. For example, the theme of persevering through hardship guides the WWII story of *The Cat's in Krasinski Square* (Hesse, 2004) and is also an important lesson in the more recent story of *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter, 2009). Sharing books that represent various time periods helps students understand that third country resettlement is not a remote practice of the 21st Century, but instead an act of compassion that has been practiced for several decades.

RESETTLEMENT TO THE UNITED STATES IS A LENGTHY PROCESS. Ott (2011) shares that third country resettlement can take a minimum of two years to sometimes, the greater of twenty years. Furthermore, Ott reminds us that the United States offers "a relatively quick path to permanent rights with the requirement to apply for permanent alien status after one year, with the ability to apply for citizenship after five years, and with automatic citizenship to children born on the territory" (2011, p. 4). The years spent in refugee camps are not without experiences. Many refugees are forced to pick up the threads of their lives and keep on living while they wait out the process. Many children attend the schools in the camps, which are run by the UN Refugee Agency, Caritas, and other agencies. Most of the camp schools are quite basic, as their goals are to provide the children with a rudimentary education and teach them some English. As such, when they arrive in the United States, they bring with them memories of camp life.

Action item. Discussing the sequence of events and the timeline of stories is important, but it has additional importance when sharing a book that portrays refugee characters and the multiple places they have called home. Discussing with students the lapse of time, multiple settings, and the change in the characters' emotions can assist American students in gaining a greater understanding of this lengthy process. A book that illustrates long periods of time moving from camp to camp is *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Williams, 2005), while *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Williams & Mohammed, 2007) provides a deeper look into one camp placement.

REFUGEES HAVE RIGHTS. The 1951 Refugee Convention, despite its critiques over the years, has remained the cornerstone of refugee protection. As summarized in the second edition of the *Handbook of International Law* (Aust, 2010), the documents emphasize the protection of refugees

from political or other forms of persecution and are further underpinned by fundamental principles like non-discrimination, nonrefoulement, and non-penalization. Furthermore, the documents list the minimum standards for treatment without prejudice, including access to the courts, primary education, and work; as well as the provision of documentation (e.g., a refugee travel document in passport form). Such information is valuable for institutions, teachers, and students to know, as it can assist them in understanding the changing demographics in their schools.

Action item. It is important for teachers to be vigilant as to how other children behave toward refugee children. Framing read alouds and discussions to support these rights and not to contradict them can influence the relationships among students. The role of teachers is of paramount importance since they become the agents to help both groups learn about these rights and the rights of all individuals. Although a discussion of rights can develop from many books; it seems a natural fit for books in which the characters are in the process of relocating to the United States. One such book is *The Memory Coat* (Woodruff, 1999).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program offers a relatively quick path to permanent residency and adjustment to the United States, with the major objectives of economic success, community involvement, and local integration. Even though the treatment of refugees is guided by the 1951 Refugee Convention (Aust, 2010) and the U.S. Refugee Law of 1980 (Carter, 1980), the success of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program partly depends on the response of the American community towards refugees. There is an average of 60,000 refugees resettled in the United States every year and about 30,000 of these are children (UN Refugee Agency, 2017). As global conflict escalates, it is likely that the number of displaced people worldwide will rise. With this increase, it is expected that the classrooms in America will become even more diverse. From administration, to teachers and students, it is everyone's responsibility to promote social inclusion of all beings within the school environment.

This article focused on using multicultural literature as a pathway for generating discussions about social inclusion in the elementary classroom. Martens and colleagues (2015) remind us that multicultural literature "encourages learners to respect and accept people who are different [from] themselves" (p. 609). Therefore, it seems natural to use these texts as mirror books and window books to communicate such lessons to young readers. By doing so, it seems likely that the classroom will not only be made of diverse populations, but will also be a socially inclusive environment.

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