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Critical multiculturalism and countering cultural hegemony through children's literature

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Abstract

Children's literature is potentially a starting point to present critical multicultural concepts to young learners. It may also be a medium through which historical and contemporary ideologies of society are encouraged in the young learners. This process may be viewed as a form of cultural hegemony when the choices of literature and reading materials for children are deliberately selective for content and themes. The study is based on a critical content and thematic analysis of 15 multicultural children's literature picturebooks. It aims to examine the social construction of culture, characters, and literary genres through the process of critical multicultural analysis. Code categories through content analysis of selected children's literature picturebooks were formed by both directed and conventional content analysis. These code categories include content with a social justice/equity issue, themes involving inclusivity, discovering new worlds/other cultures, language/ethnicity/religion diversity, and multidimensional characters from minority or marginalised groups. This process provides insight into counter-cultural hegemonic elements in many forms of multicultural literature. Implications are discussed in terms of culturally responsive practice and multicultural education. These multicultural and picturebook narratives provide windows to society, informing readers and learners about diverse cultural experiences.

Keywords

Multicultural literature; critical multiculturalism; cultural hegemony

Introduction

Multicultural literature may be defined broadly as a body of literature that encompasses all literary genres but which typically emphasises primary characters who are members of underrepresented and/or marginalised groups whose racial, ethnic, religious or culture historically has been misrepresented or relegated by the dominant culture or ideology (Gates & Hall Mark, 2006). Two traditions of literature broadly defined are selective literature and oppositional literature (Connor, 2020; Schwartz, 1995). While the former is representative of the dominant worldviews and ideologies, oppositional literature



counters hegemonic thinking and perspectives. Oppositional literature, therefore, attempts to destabilise inequalities by representing diverse perspectives and is aligned to a critical multicultural viewpoint.

Multicultural children's literature can play a significant role in shaping and co-constructing the perceptions and perspectives of individuals to a varying degree. Literature has been described metaphorically as a mirror to our perceptions of life and a window through another's eyes by Bishop (1990). Children's literature and picturebooks are an invaluable resource for new language, concepts, vocabulary and lessons for young learners. Certain elements of children's literature support the transfer of ideas, concepts, problem-solutions and values from the fictional into the real world. Young learners also base what they learn through a variety of literature genres to cue how information and concepts can be transferred to new and real-world contexts or whether these are only applicable to fictional story worlds. A child's age and developmental stage may constrain what he or she may gain or learn through the interactive or shared book reading with the parent, teacher or in a guided book reading in a group (Strouse et al., 2018). The young learner's comprehension and the ability to translate these values and themes to real life contexts may be enhanced when the stories contain realistic characters rather than those with fantastical or animal characters (Kotaman & Balci, 2017). Such literature can help learners confront issues such as racism, poverty, gender equity and religious beliefs and facilitate understanding of more complex social issues and concepts related to cultural diversity. Gramsci's theory of hegemony/counter-hegemony suggests that we could consider new and diverse cultural modes through different approaches, such as critical analysis of diverse sources (Cortes-Ramirez, 2015). Children's literature, for example, may present a discourse of change or difference that is counter hegemonic to dominant ideologies and cultural norms in view of social and material inequities (Skerrett, 2017). This process may possibly provide opportunities to provoke action and advocacy for a social cause.

Studies have shown that pedagogical practice in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings in Australia and Denmark, for example, often promote monocultural viewpoints and results in the "othering" of children from cultural backgrounds that are not of the majority (Adam, Barratt-Pugh, & Haig, 2019; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010). As a result, cultural misunderstanding may arise because of a limited understanding, awareness and appreciation for cultures other than the dominant culture/s and ideologies in society. It is therefore important that young readers can experience and come to better understand their own and other cultures in authentic contexts that are relevant to the real world. The key objective of this article is to examine how children's literature and the picturebook may help to counter hegemonic ways of thinking and offer cultural viewpoints outside the dominant mainstream culture. Another approach is to examine the ways young learners can appreciate these other cultural perspectives and nurture the ability to empathise and contribute to their understanding of issues involving social inequities and possible solutions. Children's literature of the multicultural kind can provide young readers with a better understanding and awareness of cultural diversity and an appreciation of cultures other than their own, as well as social justice. Depictions and portrayals of social, ethnic and political variations potentially provoke readers to become aware of different ideologies and beliefs of contemporary society but also give voice to marginalised and minority groups (Graff, 2010; Leland & Harste, 2014). Educators can utilise these opportunities to challenge hidden cultural assumptions. Cultural, individual, collective and transnational identities of children are validated and portrayed in a variety of narratives with words and imagery in children's literature (Bradford, 2011; Pires, 2011). Stories that portray the experiences of immigrant refugees' characters from minoritised groups are forms of multicultural literature that can contribute to the disruption of hegemonic and dominant ideological beliefs, values and practices. These forms of story narratives offer different platforms and viewpoints from which new beliefs are developed and constructed. In a study by Graff (2010), teachers using children's literature that portrayed stories and lives of immigrants, themselves transitioned to new understanding of immigration as one that involved diverse groups and individuals whose identities are often constructed and represented for them by the dominant culture. It has been said that this form of multicultural literature puts a human face on a highly politicised and controversial subject (Dutro et al., 2008; Pires, 2011).

Children's literature can promote critical literacy in a number of ways. Leland and Huber (2014) outline several elements for identifying books that promote critical literacy. Such elements include the potential of enriching our understanding of cultural-historical perspectives as well as giving a voice to those traditionally silent or marginalised. Additional elements include critically reflecting on and questioning the dominant systems and ideologies found in our society and examining why certain groups are positioned as "others". Stories can also portray how people and individuals can act on important social issues and finally, these narratives explore how variations can actually make a difference, in terms of culture, language history, gender, race, age or disability. Bishop (1990) used the metaphors of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors to represent the idea that books are windows that are also sliding doors to worlds that can be real or imagined, as well as the familiar or strange. Human experience through literature is transformed as it reflects back on us as a metaphorical mirror and we are able to see it as part of our own lives and lived experiences.

Gramsci's theory

Cultural hegemony refers to the process of constructing a collective experience through the development of values and worldview perspectives. Gramsci's analysis explains how societal hegemonies are established by the mainstream and privileged through the belief systems, values and perceptions so that these become the accepted cultural norm (Cortes-Ramirez, 2015; Gramsci, 1975). Through providing opportunities to critically reflect and examine emergent patterns of thought, feeling and ways of life and through resisting affective hegemonies, a counter-hegemonic agency is thereby created. One of the major influences of Gramsci's theory was his stance on the relationship between counter-hegemony and the affective aspects of the subaltern, oppressed and marginalised (Zembylas, 2013). Gramsci believed that the role of affect through attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions is a vital aspect of the process that challenges normative views on social and political realities (Gramsci, 1975; Merriam et al., 2005). We can make a connection between affective pedagogy that is relevant to social emotional learning and values education which prompts learners to contemplate their role and the possibility of changing the status quo through the processes of critical multicultural education (Zaidi et al., 2016).

Liberal and critical multiculturalism

Liberal multiculturalism or pluralism provides a superficial overview of cultural diversity and maintains an essentialised and static view of cultural diversity and difference (Daniel, 2008). It does not address existing imbalances of power and the harsh realities where social and racial inequalities do exist. May and Sleeter (2010), on the other hand, define the process of critical multiculturalism as one that requires the uncovering of layers of identity, practice and seeking the deep-seated reasons for material inequalities and social inequities that exist in our current system. Critical multiculturalism looks more closely at issues within multicultural children's literature and deconstructs existing inequalities and power imbalances in everyday life (Chan, 2011; Graff, 2010). As opposed to a traditional or liberal multiculturalism perspective, critical multiculturalism calls for literature that is inclusive of minority cultures with characters and identities presented in a multi-dimensional, dynamic and well-rounded way (Connor, 2020; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Welch, 2016). Characters from minority cultures are presented with their own motivations and emotions in this form of multicultural literature, challenging hegemonic perspectives and viewpoints in society and going beyond tokenism and folklorism.

A multicultural perspective may merely constitute the observances and studying of cultural artefacts and practices of different cultures as in a liberal multicultural approach. Not all literature will be able to address the issues underlying everyday inequities and support positive transformative social change. Koltz and Kersten-Parrish (2020) use several examples where picturebooks provide a means by which children can learn about and react to social issues that the characters experience. The use of restorative circles and interactive conversations are ways by which topics about issues of social injustice

raised in stories can be integrated into classroom/centre discussions. Restorative circles can promote engagement and collaborations with role playing in a safe environment so that children have the “third space” (Levy, 2008) for dialogue and conflict resolution (Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020). Gutiérrez, (2008) talks about the construct of sociocritical third space in which the foundation of language and embodied practices creates a social situation that facilitates the development of a collective imagination and a shared social history (i.e., migrants) with a spectrum of challenges and trajectories.

Countering “otherness”

Welch (2016) suggests that the pervasive whiteness of children’s literature contributes to the development of racial biases and stereotypes and is an obstacle to the inculcation of values such as compassion and empathy towards others. A study conducted in the UK found that only four percent of children’s books from the national library database featured a black, Asian or minority ethnic character and only one percent had a minority group main character, while a quarter of these books with a minority character featured these people only in the background. This is despite the fact that 32.1 percent of children of compulsory school age in England were of minority ethnic group origins (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019; Onwuemezi, 2018). In the New Zealand context, much consideration has been given to the range of books that cater to diversity of readers, including ethnicity, language, disabilities and family types such as single parent, same-sex parents and blended family types (Daly, 2017). In terms of ethnicity, based on a population census in 2018 (Seatter-Dunbar, 2019), New Zealand’s population is becoming increasingly diverse with 70.2 percent (European), 16.5 percent (Māori), 15.1 percent (Asian), 8.1 percent (Pasifika) and 1.5 percent (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African).

Inclusive children’s literature celebrates diversity so that young learners and readers become open to these differences thereby countering prejudice such as everyday racism and ableism. Inclusive children’s literature can contribute to equitable and socially just outcomes for young learners. The availability, with the reading and sharing of this form of literature, help to emphasise the importance of recognising, valuing and respecting a child’s family, cultural heritage, language and values that are fundamental to socially just educational approaches articulated in educational policy. To a certain degree, children’s literature has been a tool by which historical and contemporary ideologies of society have been inculcated in young learners (Tesar et al., 2019). This inculcation may be viewed as a form of hegemony when the choices of literature and reading materials for children are deliberately selective for their content and themes that are relevant to contemporary policies and programmes. Thus, the choices of teachers and educators influence and steer the course of the content of the curriculum.

Monocultural, exclusive literature selections are potentially biased as opposed to multicultural literature that integrates and reflects the racial, ethnic and social diversity representative of our culturally pluralistic society and world. A study by Adam et al. (2019) with early childhood educators about their practice and a book audit found that the majority of children’s books in the centres portrayed viewpoints and ideologies of the dominant culture. The resulting consequence was that of reinforcing monocultural perspectives and the “othering” of children from minority cultural backgrounds (Adam, 2021; Adam et al., 2019). To nurture a strong sense of identity, as well as an awareness, understanding and respect of others, it is vital for young readers to see their own cultures and those of others portrayed in authentic ways that are relevant to real world contexts in a wide range of books. Therefore, one key purpose of this article is to explore how children’s literature can encourage counter hegemonic ways of thinking by offering cultural perspectives that are not of the dominant mainstream culture.

Methodology

Multi-layered analysis of a specific text or narrative through different lenses shape its interpretation. Thus, by juxtaposing literary, developmental, reader response, feminist, multicultural and critical multicultural lenses we may present critical questions about how the reader, the text and society are situated (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). The methodology in this study is primarily through a critical multicultural analysis approach (Daly, 2017; Graff, 2010). As texts are socially constructed, they also can be deconstructed.

Sampling strategy

The sampling strategy in selecting multicultural literature was the use of criteria that the picturebook were forms of oppositional literature (Connor, 2020; Schwartz, 1995). Fifteen children's literature picturebooks identified as culturally diverse were used in this study. These book titles were picked up from a limited selection of "culturally diverse" titles available on the open shelves in the children's section of New Zealand public library branches. Culturally diverse titles in this context refers to books where the content contains narratives and illustrated imagery that portrayed cultures and language/s outside the cultural norm of the "West". These titles had representations of other cultures other than mainstream cultures typically depicted in children's literature and picturebooks. These books generally catered for those up to eight years, although some of the lengthier and wordier books could be suitable for those up to nine to ten years, also depending on the reading and literacy competencies of the child.

Critical content analysis

Content analysis involves collecting and analysing qualitative data through the use of an objective coding schematic framework to identify patterns, themes, assumptions and meanings (Lune & Berg, 2017). The coding process enables the analysis of information content in the artifacts of material culture that could include images, illustrations, music recordings and text (Hanania, 2010). For this study, the material artifact is mainly the story narrative in the picturebooks as well as to some degree the images that accompany the narratives. With these texts, the units of analysis are defined through both syntactic and semantic levels (Titscher et al., 2000)

Three forms of content analysis have been identified by Hsieh and Shannon (2005): conventional, directed and summative. Although not all three approaches can be completely separated, the two main approaches used in this study were conventional and directed. With a critical multicultural theory focus, the use of content analysis with the material in this context was mainly a combined approach of both directed and conventional forms (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Brakas & Pittman-Smith, 2005). Direct content analysis uses predetermined normative code categories prior to the actual analysis from the picturebook narratives. The code categories formed through a directed analysis include categories dealing with a social justice/equity focus, themes involving inclusivity, discovering new worlds/other cultures, language/ethnicity/religion diversity, multidimensional characters from minority or marginalised groups, the use of tokenism and/or folklorism. Conventional content analysis uses codes that are derived directly during the analytic process and may be based on types, such as subject, theme and values; and features, such as language types, origins, types of conflicts (Brakas & Pittman-Smith, 2005; Holsti, 1968). The selected children's literature material was read and evaluated, notes were made on specific features and content in the story narratives while ticking the boxes if they fell into the different code categories (See Table 1). An elaboration of how these titles were accepted into the different code categories is found in the thematic analysis of the findings.

Findings

Thematic analysis

The main findings based on thematic categories illustrated in the stories are elaborated as found in Table 1. The main thematic code categories are illustrated and elaborated with the selected narratives in this section and are in the order of 1) code-switching and translanguaging, 2) discovering new worlds, 3) inclusivity and intercultural friendships, 4) multidimensional minority characters, and 5) social justice issues. These themes may form part of curriculum content through sharing of these narratives in educational settings and can be viewed as countering cultural hegemonic aspects of dominant ideologies and mindsets.

Table 1. Content Analysis into Code Categories of Selected Multicultural Children’s Literature

Books titles	Melatas Magic Pencil	Shu Lin’ s Grandpa	The Day Saida arrived	Leila in Saffron	Binging in the Chinese New Year	Ten Little Dumplings	Ciao, Sandro!	The Herd Boy	The Last Night of Ramadan	Maui – The Sun Catcher	Ruru’ s Hangi	The Wheels on the Tuk Tuk	The Day You Begin	Khalil and Mr. Haggerty and the Backyard Treasures.	My Day with the Payne
Code switching / translanguaging	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Cultural Pluralism		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>								<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Discovering new worlds/other cultures		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fantasy / Animal character							<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				
Folklorisation					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
Inclusivity/ Intercultural friendships		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Migrant / Refugee Narrative			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>								<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Multidimensional Minority Characters	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Race Ethnicity / Religion /Language	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Real life characters / events	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Social justice/equity issue	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>							<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>							
Tokenism					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>						<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			

Code-switching and translanguaging

Three of the 15 books analysed in this study have been written in English and another language. *The Day Saida Arrived* (Woodson, 2018) is a translation from the original Spanish version; *Maui—The Sun Catcher* (Tipene, 2016) has both English and te reo Māori version while *Ruru’s Hangi* (Robinson, 2020) is in three languages: English, Māori and Mandarin. Seven of the books contain words from a language other than English, which can be interpreted as forms of code-switching or translanguaging (Kersten & Ludwig, 2018). There is an intimate interaction between images and text. Picturebook research has demonstrated that this relationship is related to different narrative strategies that range from the simple retelling of what is shown directly through the images to more complex interrelations. At times there are information gaps that are expected to be completed by the reader, therefore requiring the capacity to decode a variety of visual and linguistic codes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013).

With nine of the 15 picturebooks analysed in this study, there is some use of the language of the minority culture represented in the story narrative woven into the English text. The two books that use the Arabic language explicitly are *Leila in Saffron* (Guidroz, 2019) and *The Day Saida Arrived* (Gómez

Redondo, 2020). The protagonist in *Leila in Saffron* was a young girl of Pakistani parents, learning to appreciate her cultural heritage. Arabic words for greetings, food and family members are woven into the narrative. With *The Day Saida Arrived* (Gómez Redondo, 2020), the differences and similarities between the English language and Arabic used by Saida, the Moroccan immigrant newcomer, are described by the child's narrative voice. Some of these Arabic words are integrated into the illustrations of the story. In *The Herd Boy* (Daly, 2012), which is a story set in South Africa, there are a number of words and phrases in a few variations of languages used in South Africa, mainly Afrikaans and Xhosa. These are explained in the glossary at the back of the book, as with stories like *Leila in Saffron* (Guidroz, 2019) and *Ciao, Sandro!* (Varni, 2021). In *My Day with the Panye* (Charles, 2021), although the main narrative text is in English, there are interjections and paraphrasing in Haitian Creole with words such as *Manman* for "Mama", *panye* for "basket" and phrases like "*Pitit, pitit, zwazo fe nichli*" for "*Little by little the bird builds its nest*".

Kersten and Ludwig (2018) argue that multilingual literature, especially picturebooks, are a means to encourage translanguaging through the promotion of a translanguaging third space for fostering multilingual literacy. This is based on the assumption that readers are at least somewhat familiar with both languages. With books that are bilingual or even multilingual (e.g., *Ruru's Hangi* [Robinson, 2020]) with the text in more than one language available, this translanguaging space may be regarded as a third space that allows learners to integrate and bring together different aspects of their linguistic repertoire into the coordinated meaning-making activity and the performance of "reading" the narrative. However, where readers or the child or children are not familiar with the other language, the use of codeswitching in languages may give them a glimpse of another world and culture through the language.

Discovering new worlds

According to Bishop (1982, 2007), there are both socially conscious and culturally conscious books. Culturally conscious books are those that depict the cultural traditions, customs, languages and the experiences of certain ethnicities in an authentic voice which is mostly from an insider perspective. These books communicate about specific nuances and experiences that are unique to certain groups, giving a window into the lives of such people. They may facilitate in the engagement of critical dialogue, questioning power relations from a broader perspective.

A few of the picturebooks selected incorporate the theme of discovering new worlds and cultures that are not of the dominant culture in New Zealand. Three of the 15 titles are of stories that placed a newcomer or newly arrived immigrant in the midst of the narrators' cultures and illustrated cultural differences and a positive exchange between cultures. Six of the 15 titles told stories from the non-dominant culture individual's viewpoint; they often place interactions within the context of another cultural setting such as Pakistan in *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), Venice in *Ciao, Sandro!* (Varni, 2021), South Africa in *The Herd Boy* (Daly, 2012) and Caribbean Haiti in *My Day with the Panye* (Charles, 2021). On a lighter note, the story *Ciao, Sandro!* is situated in the city of Venice. The protagonist is Sandro, a gondolier's canine companion who takes us through the streets and a few landmarks in the city to meet some of the people in the historical city. *The Wheels on the Tuk Tuk* (Sehgal & Sehgal, 2016) (the colloquial term in India and Thailand for a public transportation form like an open-air taxi or, in this case, a small bus with three wheels) is a colourful spin on the original version of *The Wheels on the Bus* (Hills, 1937) in a sing-along book. A ride on the tuk tuk in this narrative is a journey through Indian culture. The colourful illustrations symbolise the rich colours, smells, tastes and sights of the Indian town.

Inclusivity and intercultural friendship

In the code category “Inclusivity”, the two main titles that integrated this theme were *Shu Lin’s Grandpa* (Goodfellow, 2021) and *The Day Saida Arrived* (Gómez Redondo, 2020). In the former, the theme of inclusivity is woven throughout the story. Although in uniforms, the school has a diverse community as represented in the illustration of a variety of black haired, red-haired, blonde-haired, and hijab-wearing children. The opening page shows Shu Lin with her parents, a distance away from the chaotic crowd of children. The story narrative is through the eyes of another child, Dylan, who feels empathetic towards Shu Lin, who is not only a newcomer but also has habits that are different from the other children. They are curious but mostly unsympathetic towards the newcomer. Young readers may be introduced to a culture different from their own through the illustrations that depict various symbols of Chinese culture, including a Chinese fan and Chinese brush painting of dragons and pandas. Although Shu Lin’s grandpa does not speak English, he communicated through the sharing of his talent with Chinese brush paintings which Shu Lin’s classmates also got the opportunity to engage with. The story’s theme of inclusivity is through an empathetic viewpoint of another child as well as appreciation from the non-verbal language of an art tradition.

The Day Saida Arrived (Gómez Redondo, 2020) is the other main title that integrates the theme of inclusivity and is about friendship across cultures and languages. Figurative language represents the narrator’s viewpoint as a classmate, who searches for the newcomer’s words everywhere, including “beneath park benches, in the hollows of trees ... even inside the mouths of statues” (p. 8). Saida is an immigrant from Morocco and speaks Arabic, a different language to those in her class. The exchange between the girls becomes a learning journey for both and portrays both cultures as equal, explaining that initially Saida did not speak much, and her words did not come easily. Although when they did, Saida’s language was “full of B sounds and drew with those letters that sometimes look like flowers and other times like insects” (p. 14). The story is of a developing mutual friendship and how both girls explored “words of every shape, sound and size” (p. 17–18). In another title, *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018), the story is centred on Angelina and her classmates who are a culturally diverse group and who have just returned to school from their vacation. These two stories highlight the challenges faced by immigrants and newcomers as well as those who are not of the mainstream culture. The inclusivity theme is emphasised as the narrative encourages all who feel like an outsider to be courageous and to find their “voice”.

Four of the 15 titles specifically portrayed interactions and cross-cultural friendships in their narratives (see Table 1). Three of these titles have been discussed earlier. *Khalil and Mr Hagerty and the Backyard Treasures* (Springstubb, 2020) is about an unlikely intergenerational and intercultural friendship between a young boy and his older neighbour who share a common backyard. These stories portray the interaction of characters from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and help to nurture the attitude that does not see race as a barrier to friendship.

Multidimensional minority characters

The majority of the picturebook stories selected for this study have protagonists that portray people who are from a minority group in the country. Most of these children’s books analysed in this study have a main character that is of a minority ethnic origin. Multicultural children’s literature with the portrayal of minority characters as the protagonist help children identify not only with their own culture but also with the cultures of others, thus potentially promoting discussion about diversity (Koss, 2015). Human experience through such literature can be transformed as stories reflect back on us so that we see these characters as part of our own lives and lived experiences. Multidimensional characters from a minority culture are portrayed not just through a description of physical traits but in other dimensions, including the way they interact with other characters, experience inner conflict and are also described in terms of other character quality traits, strengths and weaknesses. Many of the titles in the selected literature have

protagonists who are represented in a more multidimensional way. *My Day with Panyé* (Charles, 2021) is one example where a young girl, Fallon, in Haiti, a country in the Caribbean, is keen to learn the practice of the traditional way of carrying a panyé or a basket on her head. The narrative also highlights the nurturing relationship between the mother and daughter through the imparting of wisdom and skills. The story is imbued sensitively with a sense of grace, destiny and belief in one's traditions and culture. Her sense of dismay is shared when she is unable to balance the panyé on her first attempt. Her *manman* is encouraging and when Fallon finally balances the panyé, she is able to say: "The panyé means we are graceful when the load is heavy. We are strong, even when the earth is not..." (p. 28).

Social justice

Stories that had themes that involve a social (in)equity issue include *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017) and *The Herd Boy* (Daly, 2012). Although *Malala's Magic Pencil* alludes to a folktale, the story itself is an autobiographical narrative. Malala grew up in a war-torn country and when girls were forbidden under the Taliban regime to attend school and receive an education, she started to speak up publicly for the right to education for girls. In real life, Malala has been recognised for her courage and advocacy and became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Such picturebooks can create awareness of social inequities in other societies different from the reader's own environment and context.

Socially conscious books have the purpose of introducing a cultural group and its unique experiences and features to the mainstream so as to make them "socially conscious" of the non-mainstream group and also at times to create awareness of the trials and tribulations of that group, usually a minority or marginalised group to the mainstream (Bishop, 2007). This can be both from an insider or outsider perspective. The main purpose of these picturebooks is to create an awareness, engender an empathetic and/or sympathetic response and contribute to greater tolerance and understanding for racial integration. This response may be through the depiction of a social issue that engenders an empathetic response towards a group or individuals that have undergone an experience such as war, poverty and so on (Gopalakrishnan, 2011). These are often told from an outsider perspective and sometimes from an insider viewpoint as in *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017). *The Day Saida Arrived* (Redondo Gómez, 2020), *Shu Lin's Grandpa* (Goodfellow, 2021) and *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017) are examples of narratives where this contribution to a greater awareness and empathetic response towards social injustices or inequities may be found.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides an exploration of critical approaches to analysing multicultural literature, specifically 15 picturebooks sourced from a local public library. Critical multicultural analysis integrates various perspectives and connects reading to personal, interactive, socio-political, historical and multicultural factors (May & Sleeter, 2010). The discussion that follows relates the selected book titles to four levels of multicultural education as well as the potential and challenges faced in using children's multicultural literature and picturebooks.

The degree or depth that the various forms of children's multicultural literature help promote and encourage multicultural education differs. Correspondingly, there are four levels of multicultural education that can be defined (Banks, 2013; Banks & Banks, 2004; Gopalakrishnan, 2011). These levels are described as the contributions approach at level one, followed by additive, transformative and finally social action approach at level four (Banks, 2004; Banks, 2013). Each level will be discussed in terms of some of the children's literature titles used in this article. The first level is also known as the contribution approach. It is almost a tokenistic or tourist approach where food, festivals and celebrations of the cultures are introduced. It is a rather superficial approach but may be an effective way to introduce new cultures to the young who might be unfamiliar and unacquainted with anything else other than their

own cultural norms (Pires, 2011; Schoorman, 2011). Books like *Bringing in the Chinese New Year* (Lin, 2008) and *Leila in Saffron* (Guidroz, 2021) adopt this approach. *Leila in Saffron* (Guidroz, 2021) brings in the perspective of the appreciation of one's own culture or another's uniqueness. This contribution approach may be useful for very young readers; however, it may be an inadequate approach in some respects for older readers.

The second level of multicultural education is known as the additive approach and builds on the underlying foundation with sharing of experiences and traditional stories and folktales from different cultures. In the classroom, this may also include discussing the significance of certain cultural practices or having someone of a particular culture talk about their first-hand experiences in their country. *Maui—The Sun Catcher* (Tipene, 2016) is an adaption of a Māori folktale, which can be the subject of an interactive discussion about the story and its origins. This story is also a little different as it is a modern version of a Māori mythological tale *How Maui Slowed the Sun*, retold in a modern-day setting by Tim Tipene (2016). The tale is given a contemporary twist with Maui given a superhero status, donning a crusader costume.

The third level of multicultural education is labelled transformative and helps the student to see concepts, issues, events and themes from the perspective of individuals and communities from different ethnic and cultural groups (Banks, 2013; Banks & Banks, 2004). *The Last Night of Ramadan* (Hamed, 2007) gives an insider view and authentic account of the Muslim culture through a cultural-historical, social and spiritual journey through the experiences of a young boy in the month of Ramadan. The narrative brings in the peaceful inclusion of people of other faith, such as their Jewish and Christian friends. The author's intention was to write this story primarily for non-Muslims so that others may better understand the traditions and values that Islam shares with other religions (Brakas & Pittman-Smith, 2005). *Shu Lin's Grandpa* (Goodfellow, 2021) and *The Day Saida Arrived* (Gómez Redondo, 2020) provides opportunities in the classroom to discuss issues of inclusion.

The fourth and final level of a multicultural curriculum is known as the social action level which engages students and learners to take "social action" and be an advocate themselves or work on a project to contribute towards equitable solutions or a just cause. This could be seen as a rather big challenge for young learners. *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), which begins with an allusion to a folktale, is a story based on the author's own experience of war and discrimination against women in her country. The protagonist in the story serves as a role model for being an advocate and activist for the education of girls in her country.

Despite the potential benefits of utilising these books that portray diverse cultures, there are some limitations in the use of multicultural literature in early learning settings. Studies have shown that many educators have a limited understanding and awareness of diversity and view diversity only in terms of visual and language difference (Berthelsen & Karuppiyah, 2011). Often, the concept of cultural diversity has been perceived by teachers as a construction of the "other" or "otherness" in terms of the experiences of the mainstream in their own culture. According to Schwartz (1995), if multicultural children's literature is about "otherness", the ideological hegemony of the dominant culture will not be doubted and the prevailing power construct will not be interrogated.

There is also the danger of essentialising culture, which refers to the conception of culture and ethnic groups as a set of constant and homogeneous characteristics of individuals who belong to the group. A critical dimension of multicultural literature is the representation for a position of identity formation where there is a struggle for identity construction, particularly with indigenous authors (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Bradford, 2011). Zembylas (2013) interprets Gramsci's counter-hegemony as a political and affective practice with possible transformative implications. A theory of postcolonial children's literature also embodies models of reading and analysis of multicultural children's literature (Bradford, 2007). Children's literature that contains both postcolonial and multicultural perspectives produced by both indigenous and non-indigenous authors and illustrators provides diverse and informed

representations of cultural diversity that make up a vital intervention and counter-hegemonic agency to mainstream, settler and dominant ideologies in society (Bradford, 2011; Panaou, 2008).

Empirical evidence suggests that picturebook narratives can also provide a context for being able to take on different perspectives and viewpoints of a situation and identifying with the “other”. Empathy building through interactive storybooks can therefore challenge children to emotionally and cognitively understand the perspective of protagonists who may be dissimilar from themselves (Decety, 2010; Kucirkova, 2019). As in several picturebooks in the selected sample for this study, there have been characters positioned where they are able to empathise with the “newcomer” or the culturally marginalised character within the story. Such reading material may provide young learners the opportunities to learn about an empathetic response to less privileged others. Such reading can therefore encourage empathy if it nurtures in-group/out-group identification and minimises bias. The identification of the reader with the protagonist or characters who are dissimilar from the readers is the most significant contribution of children's literature and storybooks to cognitive empathy.

Children's literature has a great potential to model and impart powerful lessons to young children. In stories like *Maui—The Sun Catcher* (Tipene, 2016) and *Ruru's Hangi* (Robinson, 2020), local traditional stories and characters that are based on native birds and animals are used to provide a context for children to better appreciate Māori culture as well as the local flora and fauna in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This may give young learners in New Zealand a greater sense of collective cultural identity and understanding. Stories like *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018) and *The Day Saida Arrived* (Gómez Redondo, 2020) impart values and nurture learning dispositions such as resilience, tolerance, respect and the appreciation of cultures of their own and/or of others

For immigrant children, books might one of the few ways that they are able to reconnect with their own cultures and construct their own ethnic identities through characters and settings from their own cultures in a formal education setting in New Zealand. Research suggests that minority children between ages two and seven often perceive conflict between their racial identity and the value of their own race in the context of their social environment (Johnston, 2009; Solano-Campos, 2015). Self-esteem is nurtured through the attachment of value and emotional significance to their own group members with the reading of multicultural literature and positive interactions that contribute to their positive self-image and identities (Nodelman, 1992; Srinivasan, 2014).

The representation of minority characters in children's literature and picturebooks influence readers' perceptions and conceptualization of themselves and others (Johnston, 2009; Srinivasan, 2014). Young learners need to identify themselves with characters in a story and see their struggles as well as their lives celebrated. When minority individuals cannot identify themselves in the stories, they may feel marginalised and devalued in society (Bland, 2016; Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010). Moreover, there has been much misrepresentation and stereotyping of other minority groups in 20th century in literature that have contributed to discrimination and conflicts (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019; Wilson, 2014). On the other hand, books can also send strong messages and signals to children about themselves and others in a more positive way. Thus, the picturebook that portrays and represents multi-ethnic and minority group characters in a non-biased and non-stereotypical way provide preschool children and young learners a way of affirming and embracing their ethnicity and cultural identity (Cole & Valentine, 2000).

Priorities of teachers in early childhood education settings have been in the area of language and literacy and socio-emotional learning (Adam et al., 2019). There is the potential of incorporating these learning priorities with the use of multicultural picturebooks that portray cultures other than the mainstream. It has been acknowledged that ongoing professional learning and development is important as a way of supporting educators to engage in challenging issues that are related to inclusion and diversity as well as to select and implement the use of inclusive and culturally diverse literature in engaging their students and nurturing cultural competencies.

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Appendix: Reference list of multicultural picturebooks

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