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Creating a Culturally Competent Children's Library

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Creating a Culturally Competent Children's Library

Cover Page Footnote

Rachel Burger is a May 2021 honors program graduate with a degree in Human Development and Family Sciences. Donia Timby, the faculty mentor, is an Instructor in the School of Human Environmental Sciences. Dr. Jacquelyn D. Wiersma-Mosley is a Professor in the School of Human Environmental Sciences. Dr. Laura Herold is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the School of Human Environmental Sciences. ¶ Dr. Shelley McNally is the Director of the Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

Creating a Culturally Competent Children’s Library

Meet the Student-Author



Rachel Burger

Ever since I was young, I have had a passion for reading. My parents sat at my bedside while I begged them to read me another story before bedtime. I spent summers going to the library to pick out books that I would spend entire days reading. Books have brought me much comfort and happiness over the years and taught me things I never imagined possible. It brings me joy to have been able to give the opportunity to grow a similar love for reading in young children through the creation of a culturally competent library. Living in a foreign country and having a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish, has made bilingualism and linguistics of significant importance to me. I love having the opportunity to introduce children to foreign languages at an early age. Thanks to my professor, Dr. Jacquelyn Mosley, the topic of cultural competence has become a new interest of mine. I am grateful to be able to spark the interest in other cultures and languages in the children and educators at this child development center.

As a future Certified Child Life Specialist, I hope to apply the knowledge and skills gained through the implementation of my creative project to helping children and families in a hospital setting. I am immensely thankful to my advisor and mentor Donia Timby. Without her this project would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee members Dr. Jacquelyn Mosley, Dr. Laura Herold, and Dr. Shelley McNally, as well as educators Caitlyn Daniels and Lori Harris who assisted with the transformation of the library space. Thanks to their help and hard work, this group of children have access to a safe and comfortable space in which they can explore new cultures and languages.

Research at a Glance

- There is a growing need for well-rounded educations that include cultural competence and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, especially when it comes to young children. One of the best ways to teach cultural competence to children is through the use of books.
- Introducing new cultures and languages to children at an early age will give them a tremendous head start. It will normalize topics such as race/ethnicity, language, and religion, and hopefully help to prevent things like color blindness, bias, or stereotypes.
- A culturally competent and linguistically inclusive library space at a child development center will give children opportunities to explore their own cultures, other cultures around the world, and new foreign languages in a safe and friendly environment.



Rachel reading to a student in the culturally competent library space at the Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

Creating a Culturally Competent Children’s Library

Rachel Burger,^{} Donia Timby,[†] Jacquelyn D. Wiersma-Mosley,[§]
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Abstract

There is an ever-growing need for cultural competence and a well-rounded education, especially for children. In order to promote cultural competence, this creative project focused on enhancing a library space at the University of Arkansas Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center, Fayetteville, Arkansas with resources that address diversity and cultural competence. The goal was to transform the library into an enticing, relaxing, and judgment-free area where children feel comfortable to explore their culture and the cultures of others. New books added to the library were thoroughly reviewed and chosen for the purpose of promoting cultural competence and inclusion, as well as new language introduction. A wide variety of cultures from around the world, as well as over ten languages, were represented in the new reading materials. In addition to new reading materials, new furniture and decor items were also purchased to elevate the space into a comfortable area that welcomes children and invites them to explore. The hope is that in using the new space and reading books that focus on cultural competence, the children (and adult educators) will learn about different cultures.

^{*} Rachel Burger is a May 2021 honors program graduate with a degree in Human Development and Family Sciences.

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Introduction

Just as racism is a learned construct, cultural competence is something that is learned over time and made up of inner reflection and awareness (Young and Guo, 2020). There is a need to focus more on learning about different cultures around the world and how to best interact with people who are different. All people deserve to be treated with respect regardless of where they were born, their culture, their religion, their appearance, their sexual orientation, their ability level, or other intersectional identities (Lalljee et al., 2009).

One of the best mediums to teach cultural competence is through books, especially when it comes to children. Books are a great way to develop language and introduce new topics such as different cultures and other languages to young children. Combining books, new languages, and, most importantly, topics of cultural competence are ways to foster the desire for learning, education, and human connection. Introducing new cultures and languages to children at an early age will give them a tremendous head start. It will normalize topics such as race/ethnicity,

language, and even religion, and hopefully help to prevent things like color blindness, bias, or stereotypes. Through creating a library that focuses on cultural competence and foreign languages, children will be exposed to topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which in turn may help these children grow into more respectful adults who are accepting of other people and other ways of life. The library space will give them opportunities to explore their own cultures, other cultures around the world, and new foreign languages in a safe and friendly environment.

Cultural competence is an ongoing, multidimensional construct made up of knowledge, awareness, and skills that encompass beliefs that people should recognize as well as appreciate other cultural groups and be able to interact effectively with them (Benuto et al., 2018). It is “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, values, and preserves their dignity” (Danso, 2018). The need for cultural competence in professional fields such as child and human services is



Fig. 1. The selection of 145 newly purchased books for the culturally competent children's library at the University of Arkansas Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

becoming quite evident (Danso, 2018), but the need for it in education and literacy is largely unstudied.

There may be a positive relationship between experiences with early literacy and language, and academic outcomes. However, there is still a lack of libraries and literacy programs offered to children below the age of three, especially as it relates to cultural competence. Reading with children at an early age is one of the most crucial activities for development. There is much research that supports the idea that reading to children at an early age expands a child's vocabulary. All data support the efficacy of using reading as a way to promote the development of vocabulary in children (Farrant and Zubrick, 2012). In addition to promoting language development and positively impacting children's academic skills, reading can lead to increased bonding between the adult and child and helps facilitate curiosity and a desire to learn.

Materials and Methods

While the overall aesthetic of the library was important, the main focus was primarily the new culturally competent and linguistically inclusive books. An extensive amount of

research was done to be able to ensure that the materials truly did promote cultural competence and inclusivity. In the initial process of researching potential books, a website titled socialjusticebooks.com was utilized to help with the book selection process. The website is catered towards children of all ages and educators and features carefully selected lists of books that promote social justice issues. Using the recommended lists of books on this website as a guideline, books that appeared to meet the goals of the culturally competent library were further identified. In the end, 145 new books were purchased for the library (See Fig. 1).

An attempt was made to select books that represent a wide variety of cultures, religions, traditions, holidays, lifestyles, languages, and ability levels. The languages represented in the books that were selected included: English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, Swiss-German, Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, Turkish, Farsi, Hindu, Arabic, Hausa, Haitian Creole, American Sign Language, and Anishinaabemowin, which is the language of the Anishinaabe nation—an indigenous group native to the northern United States and parts of Canada (Noodin, 2014). This adds up to a total of 15 languages included in the new reading materials.



Fig. 2. The books that were suspended from the ceiling in the culturally competent children's library at the University of Arkansas Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

Due to the limited amount of child-sized furniture and comfortable reading spaces, new furniture and decor were also necessities. Each piece of furniture was chosen with not only comfort and appearance in mind, but also with the goal of being accessible for all the children regardless of developmental levels and physical capabilities. These furniture selections were made to provide a large selection of seating areas so that each child could choose to sit on a seat or relax on the floor as they read. In addition to the actual furniture, a dollhouse and an activity table were included so that the library was more versatile. A total of 15 wooden dolls were ordered, consisting of 3 different races/ethnicities.

Much thought and planning went into every step of the layout process for the culturally competent library. Every area is safe and accessible for all of the children, with certain areas designed with a specific age group in mind. With infants in mind, a rug, one bookshelf, a bench, and the two pouf ottomans were placed in front of a large mirror. There are also several coiled rope baskets in this area filled with books for easier access and to allow the infants more autonomy by giving them the opportunity to place them in the baskets themselves since that is easier than restocking them on the shelves. In a similar manner, another reading space

was set up in the back corner of the room next to large windows. A pre-existing couch and tent were also placed in this space designed for older toddlers and preschoolers. Like in the infant area, children using this space can decide to lay on the soft rug to read or one of the available seating options. Next to this space is a magazine rack featuring magazines and informational pamphlets. Above the magazine rack hangs a pegboard displaying plant propagations in glass jars.

In order to be even more inclusive of each age group and developmental level, three child-sized tables of varying heights were placed in the aligning corners of the shelves. The purpose of the tables is to provide a space for children to sit and draw/write. Each table includes chairs and materials that are specific to either infants, toddlers, or preschoolers. With the dollhouse in its own secluded spot, the children have the opportunity to use this cozy area to participate in active storytelling. Tucking the dollhouse in a nook encourages quiet as opposed to loud play while in the library, just as placing the activity table to the side of the room does.

Lastly, the most wonderful addition to the library space was the circular, rotating bookshelf. The shelf features all books written in several languages. These books were randomly organized with hopes that a different language would



Fig. 3. The plants that were suspended from the ceiling in the culturally competent children's library at the University of Arkansas Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

be selected each time a book is chosen. All of the board books and smaller sized books are on the bottom level of the bookshelf so that they are more easily accessible to infants. For added visual stimulus, books that had internal damage and were going to be thrown away were hung from the ceiling using clear string, and three plants were hung in the back of the room (shown in Figs. 2, 3, and 4).

Results and Discussion

Overall, the library was designed with the intention of being a fun space for children to enjoy. There is something in the library for every child regardless of their age, developmental level, physical capabilities, or temperaments. The goal of this creative project was to enhance the previous library space into a new, fully formed early childhood

library that is culturally competent and linguistically inclusive. The current project expands on a study that focused on how to introduce intercultural competence into early childhood education programs and how it is currently exhibited (Fanous et al., 2020). Fanous' project conducted intercultural competence training with several early childhood educators and staff members at a childcare center, discovering that training and conversation can foster growth in an educator's cultural competence. However, there is still a need for more research surrounding cultural competence, especially how it relates to young children.

Research has found that developmentally appropriate spaces can help promote growth and development as well as create a more respectful environment (Minzenberg et al., 1999). A dollhouse was chosen for the purpose of active storytelling, which provides children the opportunity



Fig. 4. The view of the finished space from the back of the culturally competent children's library at the University of Arkansas Bumpers College Jean Tyson Child Development Study Center.

for alternative communication (Jorgensen and Strand, 2014). Using toys and materials to participate in active storytelling allows children to act out stories and put their imaginations to use in an interactive way (Jorgensen and Strand, 2014).

One of the overall goals for this creative project was for children to develop an interest in not only reading, but also a genuine interest in learning about the world around them, and most importantly the people around them. According to the phenomenon known as homophily, people are more likely to migrate towards and interact with other people who are similar to themselves (Boucher, 2015). This means that as the children are growing up and later as adults, their social circles will likely be made up of other people who look like them and are of similar backgrounds. Only interacting with people of similar characteristics makes cultural competence less likely. Interacting with people of different races/ethnicities, socioeconomic status, lifestyles, religions, and other differences allows people the opportunity to learn more about them on a personal level.

This culturally competent library exposes these children early on to different cultures, ways of life, and languages. Perhaps, these children will grow up with a greater appreciation for people that are different from them, instead of fearing the unknown, avoiding people that are different from them, and thinking that there are either too many differences or too many similarities between people. The larger goal is that these children will have respect for other people and their cultures and even become advocates for those in need.

Cultural competence can help young children learn to be accepting of others. The earlier that these topics are introduced, the more normalized they are going to be. By reading books such as *Mommy's Khimar*, *Under My Hijab*, and *Crescent Moons and Pointed Minarets* that introduce Islamism and hijabs to a child will teach them that it is okay to have different beliefs and to not be afraid of people who choose to cover their hair and/or faces with a scarf. By reading books such as *Princess Hair* and *Black, White, Just Right* that embraces all hair types, not just "white hair," it may become more acceptable for black people to wear their hair naturally in the workplace and not be deemed unprofessional. The books in different languages will introduce languages to children that they may not have ever had the opportunity to see before, which could possibly foster an interest in other languages. These resources encourage others to learn a second or even a third or fourth language. For the children who come from bilingual/multilingual homes, the books in their home languages may foster a desire to continue learning their home language and hopefully further connect with their families.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the goal of this project was to introduce cultural competence to lead children on a path towards respect and acceptance of others. Each book was carefully chosen to serve the specific purpose of education and normalization. The space was designed with comfortability, appearance, and, most of all, accessibility in mind.

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