

Reading to promote intercultural understanding

By Jenny Peck

Snapshot

Jenny Peck from the Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre (LMERC) explores resources that assist schools in building collections that are inclusive, respectful and relevant. This article has a focus on developing intercultural understanding through reading.

What we see and read shapes the way we see ourselves, other people, and the world, in subtle and powerful ways. The ways people and cultures are represented or whether they are represented at all says a lot about how each are valued. Effects on readers can be positive or negative which is especially significant when it comes to children, whose very development can be affected (Adams, Pugh-Barratt, 2020). This is particularly true for children from communities whose families have experienced discrimination. The health and wellbeing consequences can be carried for generations ([Trent et al, 2019](#)).

The ways people and cultures are represented or whether they are represented at all says a lot about how each are valued.

The violent consequences of systemic discrimination and police brutality on People of Colour, the #Black Lives Matters movement and the exposure of the unequal experiences of marginalised peoples during the COVID-19 pandemic have put a powerful spotlight on systemic racism and inequality. Together with the pandemic's major disruption to all sectors this highlights how critical empathy, cooperation and social cohesiveness is to the community's health as a whole. The recent incidents of brutality towards People of Colour in the U.S and First Nations people in Australia, and protest movements around the world are bringing attention to racism in a way not seen before, bringing a greater appetite for change. What can we and children consume in terms of literature to contribute to that change now and into the future?

Reading stories that illuminate injustices experienced by marginalised peoples can give us a deeper understanding of issues in a way not matched by news reports or by reading related non-fiction works. For example, Tony Birch's *The white girl* is a fictionalised story based on real events in a Victorian country town mid last century. Odette lives in constant fear of the police in her small town carrying out the disastrous government policies of removing Aboriginal children from their families, what is now referred to as the

Reading stories that illuminate injustices experienced by marginalised peoples can give us a deeper understanding of issues in a way not matched by news reports...

Stolen Generations. Through resourcefulness and ingenuity Odette keeps her granddaughter safe but at a great cost. The narrative reveals a range of attitudes or actions of the white people in the town including those in a position of power of enthusiastic compliance to wilful ignorance and sometimes rejection of the racism.

Diverse reading may revolve around important issues or explore aspects of identity, novels such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas or *The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling* by Wai Chim explore the multifaceted nature of identities, racism and family and feature interracial teenage relationships that allow for sensitive and shaded explorations of intercultural relations, subtle and sometimes unconscious racism, misguided intentions and the way privilege plays out in relationships. *The Hate U Give* (also released as a film in 2019) invites the reader to see through the eyes of young African Americans, to witness their struggles and especially the dire consequences of the over policing of African Americans in the U.S. Through fiction in general, but perhaps even more so through reading about cultures different to one's own, a reader can develop greater cultural awareness while also increasing their ability to empathise. Researchers at The

...that 'literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling' (Chiaet, 2013)

New School, New York City have found evidence that 'literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling' (Chiaet, 2013) and evidence emerging from research is bringing new insights into the positive impacts of the reading of fiction on social and emotional intelligence (Kidd & Castano, 2018).

In the article *Children's books must be diverse, or kids will grow up believing white is superior*, authors Helen Adam, Caroline Barratt-Pugh, Libby Jackson-Barrett and Robert Stanly Somerville draw on research looking at the ways our identity and worldviews are shaped by the stories we are exposed to from infancy. The authors argue that from a very early age, a child's sense of self is influenced by the way they see themselves represented. They cite evidence showing that children are aware of familiar and different races from an early age and furthermore can develop a bias towards their own race. This can be 'disrupted' by exposure to a range of faces of different racial appearances even through pictures (Adam et al, 2020). A sense of superiority or inferiority can be shifted if all children are exposed to a wider range of texts that feature nonstereotyped, diverse, truthful and equally heroic protagonists (Adam et al, 2020). It is not just the diversity, characters or settings that are important, it is also their accurate portrayal (Mathur, 2020). To a large degree this accuracy relies on marginalised peoples telling their own stories.

For all readers it is important that a range of narratives are presented. Like any fiction, diverse texts should offer a range of plots and genres including positive, realistic, varied life stories that make 'visible' a wide range of people. From wordless picture books and graphic novels to fantasy and poetry there are now many newly published books with a range of themes that represent diverse Australians. Examples include the new collection of poems/ song lyrics by

Like any fiction, diverse texts should offer a range of plots and genres including positive, realistic, varied life stories that make 'visible' a wide range of people.

Indigenous young people from around Australia *Homeland Calling* by Desert Pea Media, edited by Ellen van Neerven, *Shauna's great expectations* by Kathleen Loughnan, the series of short essays including *Arab, Australian other*, the [Black Inc books series Growing up... from Asian, Aboriginal, and African writers](#). Picture books such as *Starting school* by Jane Godwin, *Family and Respect* by Fay Stewart-Muir and Sue Lawson. Several DET policies including the [Marrung Education Plan](#), provide guidance around ways schools can create an inclusive and welcoming environment that supports Koorie young people to feel culturally safe and supported at school (DET, 2019).

First Australians and culturally diverse communities have called for their voices to be heard and their identities to be represented in the literature used in schools over a very long period. Academics such as Professor Marcia Langton and author and Wiradjuri woman, Dr Anita Heiss are just two of a great many in recent decades. Advocates of inclusive literature have been present in the education, literature and library spaces for many years. The promotion of culturally diverse reading can be traced back to at least the 1980s (O'Sullivan, 1982) (Bradford, 2001). In the local context Judy Blyton, former librarian at the Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre reviewed and promoted culturally diverse children's books and young adult novels to schools for many years, through presentations to teachers, the LMERC newsletter, and the journals *FYI* and *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* (1993-2006).

Over the last decade, the advocacy of many First nations academics and authors including Palyku woman Ambelin Kwaymullina, Professor Marcia Langton, Bruce Pascoe (writer of Tasmanian, Bunurong and Yuin descent), the founders and publishers of Magabala Books and other Australians in the literary landscape such as Randa Abdel Fattah, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Rebecca Lim have brought attention to issues around voice and representation . Elsewhere, Dhonielle Clayton (COO of [We Need Diverse Books](#)) and Tomi Ademeyi amongst others in the U.S have raised the profile of these issues across the wider community. Activism through the #Own voices movement and [#We Need Diverse books](#) movement has maintained a spotlight on the monocultural ecosystem around books (writing, publishing reading) as well as the lack of 'own voices' authors and minority representation in literature. A more nuanced, critical understanding of what is truly representative has grown over the last 4-5 years. It can be a contested space with some arguing that the so-called cancel culture can be taken to extremes (Rosenfield,2019). The resistance to criticism and the evaluation of whose voices are heard however can also be a denial of accountability ([Bragg, 2020](#)). It is an arena of complexity, and priorities can change quite quickly. Change is something librarians are used to embracing and applying however in the regular cycles of collection renewal through continual buying and weeding.

Despite progress in the world of ideas and amongst writers and readers, real advances seem to be difficult to bring about in schools. A recent study evaluated the 360 texts on the Victorian senior English curriculum text lists between 2010 and 2019 with a view to cultural and other inclusion. The study found a lack of literature by Aboriginal authors, in contrast a great many Australian novels are included that feature Indigenous peoples thus reinforcing European viewpoints and narratives of the 'powerful vs powerless, which extends back to the beginning of colonisation' ([Bliss & Bacalja, 2020](#)). Furthermore, few texts reflect our multicultural society.

Librarians and teachers have regularly been at the lead when it comes to introducing resources that open windows to the world and cater for the culture and languages of their communities...

The study found that of all the geographical settings only half as many were set in an Asian country and a quarter from Africa than Anglophone countries ([Bliss & Bacalja, 2020](#)).

Librarians and teachers have regularly been at the lead when it comes to introducing resources that open windows to the world and cater for the culture and languages of their communities, nevertheless greater change is hampered by a range of factors.

Challenges may include the lack of qualified staff, knowledge and confidence, diversity of the library workforce and time for research and money. The fall back option of standing orders, the dearth of related ready to go teacher resources for newer or less known texts and sometimes the lack of choice (few books published or translated from and about many countries and cultures), has meant that often the texts chosen stay the same or easier options are taken.

The most influential factor in the choice of books we buy and promote however may be our own worldview and prejudices that we are unaware of. The results of recent research that found very high levels of unconscious bias amongst Australians. The study found that 75% of Australians hold an implicit bias against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

According to Australian National University researcher Siddharth Shirodkar, the results show that 'most Australian participants on average – regardless of background – hold an implicit bias against Indigenous Australians (Guardian, 2020).

As curators of resources in libraries in whatever setting, many of us have a responsibility to examine our choices and what is behind them. Ambelin Kwaymullina puts it this way,

As curators of resources in libraries in whatever setting, many of us have a responsibility to examine our choices and what is behind them.

the privileging of Whiteness means that 'White' has not historically been viewed as one location amongst many but rather as a kind of default normal; the universal lens through which all other experiences of the world are to be interpreted and judged.'

Kwaymullina goes on to say that ...

that a lack of diversity in kids lit is not a 'diversity problem'. It is a privilege problem, 'in that it is caused by structures, behaviours and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another'. (Kwaymullina, 2016*)

Evaluating our collections and providing diverse resources will look different in every school setting. Diverse resources are equally vital in monocultural and multicultural school settings to counter biases and to support wellbeing, personal development and academic achievement.

Diverse resources are equally vital in monocultural and multicultural school settings to counter biases and to support wellbeing, personal development and academic achievement.

There will be many local factors influencing decision making including student identities, student needs and interests, relevancy to lesson plans with links to the curriculum and the incorporation of Cross Curriculum Priority Areas or the [Intercultural Capability](#). The

Intercultural capability is strongly connected to those areas of learning concerned with people and their societies, relationships and interactions, including the Personal and Social capability knowledge and skills related to empathy, openness, respect and conflict resolution (VCAA, 2020).

Priority rightly should be given to developing extensive collections of literature by First Nations authors to support the Cross-Curriculum Priority Area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures.

The uniqueness of these cultures and the wisdom and knowledge embedded in them are things to be highly valued by all Victorians. The Victorian Curriculum includes ‘the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders histories and cultures, given their particular and enduring importance.

Knowing where to start when evaluating and developing collections for diversity can be daunting. Fortunately, it is now easier than ever. There are now many librarians, teachers, organisations and forums where recommended texts can be found such as the [Victorian Aboriginal Education Association bulletins](#), National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature [Cultural diversity dDatabase](#), [Goodreads-Diversity lists](#), the Stella Prize’s [Read up](#), [Narragunnawali Resource guide: English](#) (Fiction by Indigenous and by Non-Indigenous authors with reconciliation themes) and related LMERC resource lists such as *Culturally diverse literature*, *Fiction with Asian protagonists or settings*, *Aboriginal perspectives literature*, see [LMERC – Reading lists](#). Checklists for evaluating existing collections and selecting new resources are available such as [Assessing and selecting culturally diverse literature for the classroom](#) by Helen Adam and Laurie Harper and the [Narragunnawali, Evaluating resources guide](#). For a whole school audit tool around anti-racism activities see *the Centre for Multicultural Youth – Standing up to racism web portal* – [Collective assessment](#).

Reflections on power and privilege as well as the increased awareness of the systemic inequality, and necessity for community driven change is becoming more widely recognised and acted upon. One of the positive outcomes of the reactions to recent and high-profile manifestations of racism and the elevation of issues through Black Lives Matter protests is the upswing in interest in hearing First Nations voices which reveal truths about Australian history and

Reflections on power and privilege as well as the increased awareness of the systemic inequality, and necessity for community driven change is becoming more widely recognised and acted upon.

Our student's lives will be more the richer for hearing stories that connect them to a deeper, more honest history of Australia...

contemporary society. Our student's lives will be more the richer for hearing stories that connect them to a deeper, more honest history of Australia, that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait histories and cultures and to read First Nations, black and diverse authors from Australia or elsewhere.

References & further reading

Abdel Fattah, R. ed.(2019) Arab, Australian, other: stories on race and identity, PanMacmillan, 9781760785017

Adams, H & Barratt-Pugh, C. (2020) The challenge of monoculturalism: what books are educators sharing with children and what messages do they send? https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13384-019-00375-7?wt_mc=Internal.Event.1.SEM.ArticleAuthorOnlineFirst

Adam H, Barratt- Pugh C, Jackson-Barrett I, and Somerville RS. (2020) Children's books must be diverse, or kids will grow up believing white is superior, <https://theconversation.com/childrens-books-must-be-diverse-or-kids-will-grow-up-believing-white-is-superior-140736>

Australian Government, The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

Adeyemi, T. (2015) Telling a story that matters, viewed 3 March, 2020 <http://www.tomiadeyemi.com/blog/telling-a-story-that-matters>

Birch, T. (2019) *The White girl*, University of Queensland Press, 9780702260384

Bliss L, Bacalja A. (2020) What counts? Inclusion and diversity in the senior English Curriculum, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00384-x>

Bragg, B. (2020) Cancel culture' doesn't stifle debate, but it does challenge the old order, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/10/free-speech-young-people>

Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) Standing up to racism, <https://www.cmy.net.au/schools-standing-up-to-racism/collective-assessment/>

Chiaet, J. (2013) Novel Finding: Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy: The types of books we read may affect how we relate to others, *Scientific American*, Oct 2013, viewed 26 February, 2020 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/novel-finding-reading-literary-fiction-improves-empathy/>

Bradford, C. (1997) *Reading race: aboriginality in Australian Children's literature*, Melbourne University Press

Department of Education and Training (2019) Koorie education: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education-policy, guidance and resources, <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/koorie-education/policy>

Department of Education and Training (2020) Professional practice: Koorie cultural inclusion, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/professionalpracticenote19.pdf>

Guardian (2020) Three-quarters of Australians biased against Indigenous Australians, study finds <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/09/three-quarters-of-australians-biased-against-indigenous-australians-study-finds>

Implicit bias test <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/australia//takeatest.html>

Kidd D, Costano E. (2018) Reading Literary Fiction and Theory of Mind: Three Preregistered Replications and Extensions of Kidd and Castano (2013), http://emanuelecitano.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018KiddCastano_SPPS.pdf

Kwaymullina, A. (2016) Privilege and literature: three myths created by misdiagnosing a lack of Indigenous voices (and other diverse voices) as a 'diversity problem', Guest blog post, Alpha reader: My solo book club, <http://alphareader.blogspot.com/2016/03/privilege-and-literature-three-myths.html>

*Kwaymullina, A. (2016) Guest Post: Ambelin Kwaymullina: Thoughts on Being an Ally of Indigenous Writers, <https://justinelarbalestier.com/blog/2016/11/14/guest-post-ambelin-kwaymullina-thoughts-on-being-an-ally-of-indigenous-writers/>

Kwaymullina, A. (2015) 'We need diverse books because': an indigenous perspective on diversity in young adult and children's literature in Australia, Wheeler Centre, <https://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/we-need-diverse-books-because-an-indigenous-perspective-on-diversity-in-young-adult-and-children-s-literature-in-australia>

McKearney M, Mears S. (2015) Lost for words? How reading can teach children empathy, Guardian, Viewed 26 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/may/13/reading-teach-children-empathy>

Mathur, P. (2020) *[The importance of multicultural young adult fiction: Reflecting our current multicultural zeitgeist](#)*

O'Sullivan, C. (1982) Literature for a multicultural Australia : An annotated bibliography of novels/prose for years 7-10 / compiled by Colleen O'Sullivan. Sydney: Catholic Multicultural Education Programme.

Rosenfield, K. (2019) What Is #OwnVoices Doing to Our Books? <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/04/228847/own-voices-movement-ya-literature-impact>

Shirodkar, S. (2019) Bias against Indigenous Australians: Implicit Association Test results for Australia <https://search.informit.com.au/fullText;dn=150032703197478;res=IELIND>

Thomas, A. (2017) *The Hate u give*, Walker Books, 9781406372151

Trent, M, Dooley, D, Dougé, J. (2019) The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health, Section on adolescent health, Council on community paediatrics and Committee on adolescence, *Pediatrics*, 144 (2) <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1765>

VAEAI, Protocols for Koorie Education in Victorian Primary and Secondary Schools, <http://www.vaeai.org.au/?download=5951>

VanNeeven, E. ed.(2020) Homeland calling: words from a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, Explore Australia, 9781741176926

VCAA, Intercultural capability – resources, VCAA resources- <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/resources/intercultural-capability/Pages/Help-me-find-a-teaching-resource.aspx>

VCAA, Victorian Curriculum F-10, Cross curriculum priorities, viewed 10 March 2020, <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/cross-curriculum-priorities>

Wai, C. (2020) *The Surprising power of a good dumpling*, Allen & Unwin, 9781760631581

Wheeler centre – Dhonielle Clayton, podcast, <https://www.wheelercentre.com/people/dhonielle-clayton>

Evaluating and selecting resources

Assessing and selecting culturally diverse literature for the classroom <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2897&context=ecuworkspost2013>

LMERC: Online catalogue - reading lists and resources lists with abstract, themes, curriculum links and links to relevant teacher guides and background resources - [LMERC Culturally diverse literature list](#)

Narragunnawali, Evaluating resources guide, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/professional-learning/58/evaluating-resources>

National Centre for Australian Children’s literature, Cultural Diversity Database, <https://www.ncacl.org.au/resources/databases/welcome-to-the-ncacl-cultural-diversity-database/>

Read up: books to empower young people, Stella prize, <https://thestellaprize.com.au/readup/>

Reading Australia, <https://readingaustralia.com.au/>

VAEAI, Koorie Education Calendar <http://www.vaeai.org.au/koorie-education-resources/>

Jenny Peck is the manager of the Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre (LMERC), a small specialised Department of Education and Training library for educators across all sectors including early childhood and adult education. The LMERC library specialises in resources to support delivery of the Victorian Curriculum in the areas of English as an Additional Language, Languages, Cross Curriculum Priority areas and Intercultural Capability. In this role she manages a small team of 2 part time staff, assists teachers to find resources – in the library or remotely, writes a quarterly newsletter, develops the collection, produces curated lists of resources and delivers presentations to groups. She has been a librarian since 2007.