Social Justice with Children's Literature

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Social Justice With Children's Literature
Victoria Bradford, Department of Geography Anthropology, Dr. Sarah Lockridge

Background
A significant number of immigrant and refugee children suffer as victims of prejudice and hateful rhetoric. In 2017, anti-immigrant sentiments rose sharply alongside waves of nationalism reinforcing ethnic divisions across America, negatively impacting children of color who were frequently told to, “go back to where you came from,” even if they were born in the United States. My research was driven by the question: Can children's books about immigration lead to positive social change?

Literature Review
Previous research by Aronson et al. (2018) showed reading fiction about cross-group childhood friendship reduced prejudice in majority white children's attitudes about their refugee peers. Taylor & Glen (2020) found similar results in their study in Ireland with Syrian immigrants.

Methods
In addition to a literature review, the research methods used were the following: participant observation in community events based on multicultural immigrant children's literature, as well as interviews with gatekeepers at I'm Your Neighbor Books (IYNB), an elementary school librarian who maintains a Welcoming Library collection, and an art educator involved in projects related to the book collection.

Selected Books from the Welcoming Library
Sponsored by the NEA: Big Read Portland and a collaboration with I'm Your Neighbor Books, The Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine produced a theatrical adaptation of Ariane Hofmann-Manijar's bilingual book Nieve en la Jungla/Snow in the Jungle (2021) (Figure 2). The story is about a young, white, Spanish-speaking polar bear from the Arctic named Nieve/Snow who moves to a new school in the colorful, English-speaking jungle and adapts to the strangeness of her new environment. In the story, Snow's fellow students help her adjust and ensure she belongs.

My Friend Jamal (2008) (Figure 2), written by Anna McQuinn and illustrated by Ben Frey, is part of The Welcoming Library and seemed to be a core story in the collection. The picture book is a story about a white boy, Joseph, and his best friend, Somali American, Jamal. They go to each other’s houses and eat and play together. It represents modern immigration and facilitates communication about differences and similarities.

Findings
An increase in refugee children arriving in the United States is driving innovation in elementary education strategies that focus on the role of children's attitudes and behaviors concerning inclusivity to cultivate warm regard for refugees and immigrants. Multicultural children’s literature, in which commonalities between diverse characters are emphasized, is considered an effective way to expose children to other cultures, thereby building acceptance and creating safe spaces where all people belong. The United States is often perceived as a nation of immigrants, but the story of Ellis Island and assimilation is limited and dated. My research identifies I'm Your Neighbor Books as a social justice organization that uses book collections to change the story.

I'm Your Neighbor Books fulfills its mission “to build a stronger America, one where immigrants are welcomed and where first, second, and third generation Americans truly belong” (Cappy, 2022). Using children's books, they “facilitate deep engagement with the children's books that represent our New Arrival and New American communities” (Cappy, 2022). Its core collection, The Welcoming Library, is a set of thirty picture books set in refugee and immigrant communities since the 1970s. Kirsten Cappy, Cofounder, and Executive Director of I'm Your Neighbor Books, stated that while reading these books, people from “outside those communities gain critical cultural competency, and readers from inside those communities experience a crucial sense of belonging” (K. Cappy, personal communication, October 31, 2022).

Conclusions
We must explicitly teach children contemporary immigration stories and improve cross-cultural understandings so that all children are welcomed and valued. Cross-group stories must feature typical day-to-day activities where children have fun together to effect attitude changes. They need not to depict inequality or oppression. The research states that children need explicit instruction; the librarian I interviewed explained that a reader needs to tell their listeners, “this is a story about how kids from different backgrounds can be friends.” Children’s books about immigration and cross-group friendship are an effective way to create social change. Further work is needed to ensure that multicultural stories reach publication so that children's literature reflects the diverse makeup of our communities.

Key References


Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Lockridge for supporting my research and Kirsten Cappy for her work in promoting cultural understanding through literature and connecting me with people who are working with children and multicultural books.