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Benefits and Uses of Diverse and Bilingual Children's Books: And the Creation of a Classroom Resource

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BENEFITS AND USES OF DIVERSE AND BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS:
AND THE CREATION OF A CLASSROOM RESOURCE
ELIZABETH TOBIN
HONORS PROJECT RATIONALE

Submitted to the Honors College
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Research Questions

In completing my Honors Project, I created several research questions to guide me in my research and creation of a bilingual children's book addressing abandonment:

Question 1- In what ways do children benefit from diverse books?

Question 2- How are sensitive topics handled within the classroom?

Question 3- How are current children's books representing topics of abandonment and/or adoption?

Question 4- How do bilingual books impact young children?

Literature Review

The research I conducted in response to these questions yielded numerous answers. Various texts highlight the benefits of books that recognize diverse experiences, such as gender diversity, socioeconomic status, cultural and religious minorities for young children. Unfortunately, intolerance towards many of these experiences can develop at a very young age, even as early as five years old.¹ Diverse books serve as effective resources to combat intolerance and to teach acceptance.¹ Often intolerance is created by a lack of understanding. Diverse texts serve as windows and mirrors for children to see not only themselves, but also others who may be different from them.² When children can relate to other children who they may think are completely different from themselves, they begin to understand that everyone's life is valuable and everyone's story has meaning. Additionally, when children can relate to the character in the book, they are more motivated to read and explore other diverse books. Without diverse representations, students feel alienated.³ A shortage of diverse books also limits a child's imagination and ability to connect to others from diverse backgrounds.⁴

Diverse texts also provide teachers with a resource to use within the classroom. In classrooms for very young children, read alouds tend to be the prescribed approach to introduce issues of diversity. Read alouds of diverse texts allow young children to approach sensitive topics in a relatable manner.⁵ These texts allow children to grapple with “difficult knowledge”.⁶ This type of knowledge encourages children to see the many things they take for granted in their lives and to make sure to extend those same opportunities and acceptance to others.⁷ Teachers can also use critical literacy and ask children deeper questions about the books they read in class in order to further discuss the topic of diversity.⁸ When dealing with any sensitive topic within the classroom, teachers should always be sure to involve parents and families. Often there are opportunities for teachers to collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse families and use them as resources within the classroom.⁹

A number of diverse children's books deal with the issues of abandonment and adoption. This topic is approached in a variety of ways. There are several widely recognized themes in children's books concerning adoption and abandonment. The first is “the precious child” which focuses on how the adopted child is loved and enjoyed by their adoptive family.¹⁰ This is the theme used in Curtis' book *Tell Me Again about the Night I Was Born*. In this story, the adopted child's parents tell her about the night that she was born to another mommy, but how they were so excited to meet her and have her as a part of their family.¹¹ Another common theme is the adopted or abandoned child's “search for identity”.¹² Both Kasza's *A Mother for Chaco* and Keller's *Horace*, utilize this theme. In *A Mother for Chaco*, Chaco finds himself alone and searches for a mother who looks like him. He doesn't find a mother that looks like him, but he does find Mrs. Bear, his new loving mother.¹³ In *Horace*, the title character has a great family with loving parents, but they do not look like him. He goes searching for a family that looks

more like him, but in the end decides that his family chose him and he chooses them.¹⁴ Many other themes have been identified such as the abandoned child receiving help and then bringing attention to the larger issue of abandonment.¹⁵ Additionally, some books dealing with abandonment follow the main female character as she learns to become her own hero.¹⁶ Current children's books may approach abandonment and adoption in a variety of ways, but they all have characters that young children can benefit from.

Bilingual books also have a number of benefits for young children. Like many diverse books, bilingual books can teach acceptance and understanding through culturally and linguistically responsive texts.¹⁷ For example, *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match*, written by Brown, Palacios, and Dominguez, encourages children that it is okay to be different in how you look or how you speak or even what you wear. Being unique is something to celebrate, not something to be ashamed of. This text is also an accurate representation of code-switching between English and Spanish.¹⁸ Bilingual texts can also teach English, encourage second language acquisition, promote different cultures, and encourage a culture of tolerance and acceptance.¹⁹ Both Harris's *Moon is La Luna* and Kranz's *Only One You: Nadie Como Tu* use different strategies to emphasize specific translations between English and Spanish. *La Luna is the Moon* does so by intermixing both Spanish and English in rhymes²⁰, while *Only One You: Nadie Como Tu* uses picture identifiers to show direct translations.²¹ As shown in a variety of research projects, bilingual texts also improve literacy and language skills.²²

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Activity

In response to the information found in existing literature, I created my own bilingual text dealing with adoption and abandonment written for young children, entitled *A Family for Nadia*. I have studied Spanish for four years and have worked with numerous Spanish/English speaking children in my work with a small orphanage in Guatemala. These experiences have inspired me to create this children's book. I used the search for identity theme to tell the story of a young Guatemalan girl who has lost her parents. The story is told in both English and Spanish with bolded text to emphasize the translation between key words. *A Family for Nadia* tells the story of Nadia's friend being adopted. Through this process, Nadia realizes that even though she does not have an adopted family, many people at the children's home are just like family. Many children within the United States do not understand what is like to live in a different country, to speak a different language, or to not have parents. These experiences may be perceived as strange or even scary, but I wanted to present them in a positive light. The story is told from a young girl's perspective so it is approachable for young readers and even though Nadia's story does not end in adoption, it does end happily.

In addition to my personal connection to my project, I pulled from multiple disciplines to create this children's book. From my education classes, I have learned about the benefits of diverse books as well as the advantages of bilingualism. From my research pulling from the disciplines of literary studies as well as education, I have analyzed various texts to determine common themes and the most effective strategies. In creating the text, itself, I drew upon my artistic knowledge and understanding of illustrations to create an aesthetically pleasing and original book.

In writing the bilingual text of the book, I incorporated creative writing techniques as well as my knowledge of the Spanish language. In addition to writing the entire text in both Spanish and English, I bolded key words in both languages to emphasize the translation. I also included these words in a word list in the back of the book. This allows students unfamiliar in one of the two languages to practice frequently used words. While there are many diverse texts that have been created in the response to the We Need Diverse Books Movement, there are few that include bilingual texts discussing abandonment. This text addresses both.

The texts I found discussing abandonment all end in either adoption or reunification. I wanted a book to let children know that even without being adopted, their story can have a happy ending. In addition to the story, the book includes a note to educators as well as several broad questions designed to help facilitate classroom discussions. These questions pull from the idea of critical literacy and provide opportunities for deeper discussions to be had about the story and the larger issues it raises.

Methodology

Diverse books give children a chance to see themselves in books as well as relate to other children and ideas that may be unfamiliar to them. The issue of diverse books is prevalent in the field of Education. Numerous articles and texts support the implementation of diverse books. I located a number of those sources through EBSCO as well as SUMMONS (ranging from 1997 to 2017). I also found a number of articles and journal excerpts answering each of my research questions. To see how children's books represent adoption and abandonment I located primary sources as well as sources that analyzed primary sources. Once these sources were identified, I then considered the authors' backgrounds and the target audience to determine each source's

reliability. I also compared the source to the other information I had gathered and determined whether the source could be applicable and relevant to my project.

In locating children's books, I focused on texts discussing adoption or abandonment as well as bilingual books using both English and Spanish. I did not put a publication restriction on finding primary sources because children's literature has not changed drastically over time and does not rely on the most current and up-to-date information as research does. These children's books served as resources for developing my own text, a bilingual children's book addressing the issues of abandonment and adoption. The children's books were also helpful to evaluate the articles found to determine their validity and accuracy.

Using these combined sources and new knowledge, I determined the most effective techniques and utilized them in my own bilingual text broaching the topic of abandonment. In approaching abandonment and adoption, I used the Search for Identity theme to relate the story of Nadia, a young Guatemalan girl. During the story, she begins to understand what it means to be a part of a family. These primary sources were very valuable in directing the crafting of my own book. They allowed me to analyze plotlines, illustrations, use of language, etc. Additionally, they reinforced the themes and connections identified in many of the articles. I also used a variety of resources to help in the writing process, such as texts that determine the effects of illustrations and how they also portray meaning.

Results

Throughout my experience in the College of Education, the importance of books has been stressed again and again. Diverse books have also been dutifully promoted and encouraged. In several classes, we have discussed using children's books as an effective way to deal with issues

of diversity. The research I conducted and pieces of scholarship I located supplied similar results. They emphasize diverse books serving as mirrors and windows for readers to not only understand themselves better, but to also glimpse into the lives of others, who may be quite different. I have also studied the benefits of bilingualism and found benefits for both English-speaking and -learning children reading bilingual texts.

The piece of literature I created can be used in a variety of settings. Included in the back of the text are questions for educators to use alongside the reading of the book. I left these questions very broad to help start conversations about adoption and the idea of family itself. It can also be used to help children attempting to learn English. Because the book I created combines bilingual text and abandonment, it is unique and different from current children's books on the topic. Many current texts concerning abandonment result in adoption and integration into a new family. My text shows that adoption is not the only positive ending. As a bilingual text, it is also beneficial for English speaking students to learn another language and improve their literacy skills. In addition, this text encourages children to become more tolerant and accepting members of society by allowing the reader to connect and relate with a character or a language different from themselves. Creating texts and characters that children can relate to and learn from allows them to understand people's differences instead of judging them.