



## Mirrors, Models and Mother Tongues: Why cultural relevance matters

The world faces a global literacy challenge. There are people in all communities, of all ages and abilities, who do not learn to read at the same rate as others for a variety of social and economic reasons. However, it is children in low-income countries who are disproportionately overrepresented by low literacy rates compared to their counterparts in middle- and high-income countries. Although this challenge has been exacerbated to extraordinary levels due to the impacts of COVID-19, it was already a space of gross inequity. The average students in a low-income country perform at a level 95% lower than students in high-income countries.<sup>1</sup> In high-income countries, too, there are troubling gaps for historically marginalised groups; for example, the literacy rates and education gap among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compared to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Studies attest to the fact that resource limitations are a barrier to learning in low-income and remote communities.<sup>3</sup> Response initiatives therefore often prioritise getting large quantities of reading material into the hands of those in need. However, volume of reading materials alone will not effectively address the challenge; the books reaching the hands of children must also speak to their experience of the world.

One of Library For All's primary measures of the quality of its collections is cultural relevance to the children reading the library. This respects the academic and sociocultural benefits of resonance in literacy materials; that is, the value of learning to read in a language that makes sense and seeing oneself in stories. This Working Paper surveys current thinking across academic and NGO research activities in support of LFA's approach to maintaining a diverse and culturally relevant library in response to program community needs.

### The importance of seeing yourself in stories

Literacy advocate Rudine Sims Bishop initiated discussion of 'window books' and 'mirror books' in a seminal 1990 study.<sup>4</sup> She championed the need to boost cultural representation in the US children's publishing environment, which was overwhelmingly dominated by white main characters despite diversity in the population. The original conversation has been adapted and reinterpreted over the years, but the base theory is effective in substantiating the LFA content curation and acquisition model, which puts a strong emphasis on mirror books as crucial to an optimal, holistic library collection.

Bishop's theory posits that when any of us selects the content we consume, from books to binge-worthy television, we seek out a balance of material: stories that we can relate to, and which closely resonate

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<sup>1</sup> "World Bank Report Warns of 'Learning Crisis,'" SDG Knowledge Hub, 2017, <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/world-bank-report-warns-of-learning-crisis>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Goss, "Closing the Gap in Indigenous Literacy and Numeracy? Not Remotely – or in Cities.," *The Conversation*, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/closing-the-gap-in-indigenous-literacy-and-numeracy-not-remotely-or-in-cities-88704>.

<sup>3</sup> "PILNA 2018 - A Snapshot of the Pacific Region's Proficiency in Literacy and Numeracy." (NEQMAP, 2018), <https://neqmap.bangkok.unesco.org/pilna-2018-a-snapshot-of-the-pacific-regions-proficiency-in-literacy-and-numeracy/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (1990).

with our lived experiences (mirrors); and stories that invite escapism or discovery of new worlds (windows). Emerging readers, and especially children, learn best with exposure to a combination of these materials while they develop their sense of self and explore concepts beyond their familiar boundaries.

In under-resourced environments such as low-income countries, a paucity of local publishing traditionally leads to an oversupply of 'windows'. Window books arrive via donations from other markets, or via books and educational tools created for global use. While it may be true that 'having some books is better than having no books', there are significant repercussions for a child who only ever gets to look out the window. Sims Bishop writes, 'When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are valued in the society of which they are a part.'<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, mirror books featuring a broad range of characters in many different jobs and social situations can empower young people to dream about their future selves, to agitate for change, or to embrace a healthy respect for their place in the world. There is merit to the adage 'You can't be what you can't see,' and children's books have a unique role modelling opportunity. "When we see people like ourselves in fiction, we get a glimpse of who we might become, and we feel validated," says theorist BJ Epstein.<sup>6</sup>

As we sharpen our collective focus on diversity education, it is clear that a lack of mirrors is not limited to low-income communities. A 2017 Australian study of early learning settings found that less than 5% of books available to young readers contained culturally diverse main characters.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, where non-dominant cultures were portrayed, they were commonly misrepresented through stereotypical images.

The pattern is reproduced in many publishing markets. The Cooperative Children's Book Center has documented US publishing practices since 1994.<sup>8</sup> Their 2019 statistics register just 12% of children's books showing Black/African characters or stories with such characters in central roles. From New Zealand, prominent Maori author Patricia Grace says of her early reading experiences, "The children I read about lived in other countries, lands of snow and robins. Sometimes they lived in large houses and had nurses and maids to look after them. They did not belong in extended families, did not speak as I spoke. No one was brown or black unless there was something wrong with them or they held a lowly position in society."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sims Bishop.

<sup>6</sup> BJ Epstein, "Why Children's Books That Teach Diversity Are More Important than Ever.," *The Conversation*, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-childrens-books-that-teach-diversity-are-more-important-than-ever-72146>.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Adam, Caroline Barratt-Pugh, and Yvonne Haig, "Book Collections in Long Day Care: Do They Reflect Racial Diversity?," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 42, no. 2 (June 2017): 88–96, <https://doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.42.2.11>.

<sup>8</sup> "Cooperative Children's Book Center," CCBC Diversity Statistics, n.d., <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/>.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Grace, "I Never Found Myself in a Book: Patricia Grace on the Importance of Maori Literature.," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/01/i-never-found-myself-in-a-book-patricia-grace-on-the-importance-of-maori-literature?>

This homogeneity in children's publishing is harmful to the worldviews of all children, whether they feel devalued by invisibility, or miss out on opportunities to learn respect and appreciation of others. Books should empower, include, and validate the way children see themselves and others, particularly at early, impressionable life stages.<sup>10</sup> What's more, if there remains a lack of diversity in the children's books of high-income publishing contexts, that deficit is passed on via book donation programs, along with potentially outdated cultural stereotypes that might be prevalent in older donated titles. Library For All holds cultural relevance, and amplification of community voices as key facets of its book acquisition approach. Even as these Library For All books become handed down themselves as donated titles in the future, they will reflect stories of diversity rather than outdated stereotypes or alienating cultural narratives.

A library made up only of windows has concerning implications for a young reader's self-esteem and sense of belonging but extends to their literacy acquisition. Reading is not a passive act. Rather, when people read, they draw on their previous experiences with situations, events, actions and beliefs in order to link decoded letters and sounds with meanings.<sup>11</sup> It makes sense, then, that learning to read using books that contain familiar words and images will be easier than learning to read while also trying to learn the meaning of wholly unfamiliar words. This has been described as a difficult 'double task' of struggling to decode unknown cultural events, norms or images while also decoding language.<sup>12</sup> When children access familiar concepts in books, they are more likely to enjoy reading and find meaning there, therefore being more likely to persist with learning to read.<sup>13</sup>

LFA strategically balances locally produced and internationally sourced content under the broad categories of windows and mirrors to ensure all children have an opportunity to feel seen while they learn to read. With books written and illustrated by community members, or developed in close consultation with cultural advisors, we provide the crucial 'mirrors' that help young readers believe that books are not just something written for others, but also specifically for them and their peers. This has a flow-on impact for the mentoring of future writers and readers, as the community's culture of literacy scales.

## The importance of accessing stories in a recognised language

With a mission to make knowledge available to all, equally, Library For All supports the use of mother tongue languages in learning and communication. A 'mother tongue' or 'first language' is the language a child has grown up speaking in their home and community. It may be very different from the official national language, or language of education instruction, in their region.

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Adam et al., "Children's Books Must Be Diverse, or Kids Will Grow up Believing White Is Superior.," *The Conversation*, July 9, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/childrens-books-must-be-diverse-or-kids-will-grow-up-believing-white-is-superior-140736>.

<sup>11</sup> Roslyn Petelin, *How Writing Works: A Field Guide to Effective Writing*, 2020, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781003116042>.

<sup>12</sup> Denise Agosto, "Building a Multicultural School Library: Issues and Challenges," *Teacher Librarian* 34, no. 3 (2007): 27–31.

<sup>13</sup> Athol Williams, "It Is Important for Children to See Themselves in Books.," n.d., <https://nalibali.org/it-is-important-for-children-to-see-themselves-in-books>.

Sharing and celebrating a language is vital to one's cultural identity,<sup>14</sup> yet over 40% of young learners access education in a language they do not speak at home.<sup>15</sup> There are pressures in many countries for linguistic homogeneity. This might be driven by a desire to colonise or marginalise a language community; it can also be implemented to reduce conflict in contested territories.<sup>16</sup> Establishment of a national language of instruction may also be motivated by a desire to maximise employment opportunities for the population in places where a dominant language is used in most industries, or where movement to a regional centre (such as a capital city) is expected for advancement. Economic pressures also drive linguistic uniformity since the costs of developing educational resources in the many potential languages spoken across a region can be preclusive.

Library For All implements a consultation process at the commencement of its involvement in a country or regional program to determine the best use of resources for literacy development. In some cases, the Ministry of Education or a similar consultative body may suggest that the most benefit will be gained from publishing in a majority language, or language of instruction, as it will complement what children are learning in school. Many international education programs must strike a balance find a tension between respecting local languages and driving up literacy attainment in partnership with governing bodies.

Increasingly, however, we are seeing education authorities approve a progressive learning system that moves from mother tongue languages in the early years through to a majority language for older learners — referred to as a 'late-exit bilingual' model.<sup>17</sup> This allows learners to understand the concept of a written language and develop cognitive skills in word decoding before being asked to radically expand their repertoire with a second language<sup>18</sup>. 'A second language is learned best when a first language is learned well,' according to the World Bank.<sup>19</sup> The Solomon Islands and Kiribati are two LFA program areas implementing this approach.

Underpinning these questions around which languages to prioritise in a literacy program is the question of how speaking and reading interact. Access to materials in the mother tongue has been shown to have a positive impact on early reading development.<sup>20</sup> When the language of instruction differs from a child's first language, they start school arrive on the first day of school with thousands of oral vocabulary words in their toolkit, but are unable to use these to build out their writing skills.<sup>21</sup> Multiple studies reveal that when there is a gap between home and school languages, there is an

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<sup>14</sup> "Best Practices for Developing Supplementary Reading Material." (USAID, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?," Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Penelope Bender et al., "In Their Own Language : Education for All.," Education Notes (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/10331>.

<sup>17</sup> Bender et al.

<sup>18</sup> Rajathurai Nishanthi, "Understanding of the Importance of Mother Tongue Learning," International Journal of Trends in Scientific Research and Development 5, no. 1 (2020): 77–80.

<sup>19</sup> Bender et al., "In Their Own Language : Education for All."

<sup>20</sup> "Best Practices for Developing Supplementary Reading Material."

<sup>21</sup> Amber Gove and Peter Cvelich, "Early Reading: Igniting Education for All. A Report by the Early Grade Learning Community of Practice. Revised Edition." (Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute., 2011),

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/48139850\\_Early\\_Reading\\_Igniting\\_Education\\_for\\_All\\_A\\_report\\_by\\_the\\_Early\\_Grade\\_Learning\\_Community\\_of\\_Practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/48139850_Early_Reading_Igniting_Education_for_All_A_report_by_the_Early_Grade_Learning_Community_of_Practice).

adverse impact on test results.<sup>22</sup> However, creating a complete resource set for a school in a language with minimal speakers is costly and logistically challenging, which is why many funders may default to a majority language for resource production.

Library For All's initial collection for the Solomon Islands is written in English, in line with the primary national language of instruction. The educational goal in this region, however, is a bilingual late-exit approach, which means a gap exists in early literacy materials across the more than 80 mother tongue languages spoken throughout the nation. By leveraging existing in-country resources, LFA is piloting production of a subset of 50 books in the Arosi language, created in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development.

Mother tongue, or 'first language', instruction also results in reduced dropout rates and repetition of school years, with associated sociocultural benefits and funding efficiencies.<sup>23</sup> This is because young children engage more enthusiastically with reading and learning in a familiar language. Engagement is harder to achieve if books are provided in a language that is not only foreign to young readers, but also to their parents and teachers. First language instruction makes it more feasible for parents and carers to support young learners — and ameliorate their own literacy — if they are speaking and reading a common language in the home. It also strengthens links between the school community and the home environment, encouraging good parent/teacher communication and shared involvement in the education process.<sup>24</sup>

Bilingual texts — or 'dual language texts' — are a useful publishing option in resource-constrained environments as they offer the potential for a majority language to sit alongside a mother tongue language within one resource package. They can assist teachers in these environments, who may also face language challenges, to transition learners from a home language towards a language of instruction. Importantly, diversity and multilingualism can be normalised by offering a healthy supply of dual-language resources.<sup>25</sup> Many of these positive benefits, however, are maximised for learners who already have foundational reading skills, with some research suggesting that bilingual books can be as confusing as non-mother-tongue texts for those at the earliest stages of reading acquisition.<sup>26</sup> For the most part, success with bilingual books seems ultimately dependent on factors such as teacher training and being regularly read to in both languages. These additional factors cannot be guaranteed in low-income and remote communities. (LFA Working Paper 4/21 will deal explicitly with issues of multi-language publishing and translation).

Like many of the ways we categorise books in a library, the line between a window and a mirror can be subjective. Every individual reader brings a unique lived experience to their interaction with a book. But children who already face a scarcity of reading matter or educational resources can have their learning

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<sup>22</sup> "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?"

<sup>23</sup> Bender et al., "In Their Own Language : Education for All."

<sup>24</sup> Bender et al.

<sup>25</sup> Rahat Naqvi et al., "Dual-Language Books as an Emergent-Literacy Resource: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 13, no. 4 (December 2013): 501–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798412442886>.

<sup>26</sup> Melody S. Berens, Ioulia Kovelman, and Laura-Ann Petitto, "Should Bilingual Children Learn Reading in Two Languages at the Same Time or in Sequence?," *Bilingual Research Journal* 36, no. 1 (January 2013): 35–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2013.779618>.

further impeded by being offered only the 'windows' that come from donated and/or internationally produced materials. Library For All believes that every child deserves to see themselves, their language, and their culture represented in the stories they read.

## About the Working Paper Series

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## About the Author



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Dr Cain Gray is an authority on cross-cultural library collection management. She brings specialist knowledge of translation and adaptation methodologies, and culturally specific publishing agendas, to her curatorial oversight of LFA's publishing operations.

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child can learn, does learn  
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