



## How to pick your books

When igniting and then nurturing love for stories and mindfulness concerning inclusion and equality, we need to be careful when picking the books we start with and then continue the process. The currently manifested social divisiveness and tension and proneness to easily ignited conflicts, brings us to the idea that whatever social balances we thought we had achieved are too easily destroyed. This should lead us into thinking that probably those social balances and portrayed tolerance did not have stable grounds and deep roots.

Work with the youngest should therefore be carefully wrapped around installing a deep and true understanding of what inclusion and equality mean and what we need to do / how we need to behave if we want those to infiltrate our societies.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is bringing about loss of life and racial divides, disability hate crime, sexual orientation bullying, exclusion and what not. It seems that the reasons for division are ever growing in numbers and intensity and the reasons for inclusion are being pushed in the corner, unable to fight back, because fighting back has never been among their strengths.

What we at WWS are called to do is to infiltrate the love and acceptance for the other together with the love for stories and books.

The book selection process is at the same time very simple and quite complex.

We are drawn to books that inform us, intrigue us, move us, and that stay in our minds long after we finish the last page. Beyond the immediate attraction characteristics though, such as aesthetically captivating covers, catchy stories and good reviews, we also need to look for: whether our selection covers numerous genres, whether the books we have picked can deepen children learning and inspire a room full of readers, writers, and creators, whether the our selection includes a more diverse representation of society, e.g. characters from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds authored and illustrated by culturally and linguistically diverse authors, whether the books we have selected cover topics, related to inclusion and equality and whether they represent possibilities for getting readers at different literacy levels interested.

Here below we will list several key areas that we find important to consider when deciding whether to include a book on the reading list of your group or not.

### Text selection to engage all readers

As we are all well aware, each classroom is quite varied with children from a wide range of cultural, social, academic, and emotional experiences and backgrounds. The same goes for a mixed group of children, involved in a story-weaving workshop. This means that the texts we include need to be similarly varied so that each group member can find reading material that motivates, inspires and intrigues. We need to consider whether the book tells a compelling story; includes a character with whom the children can identify and learn from or whether the book helps children to better understand the numerous dimensions of the world.

### Authentic Representation

What is meant by authentic representation in children's literature is that if we want children to perceive books as tools and resources for their personal, intellectual, and social growth they need to be encounter characters, who look, act or speak like them.



Issues of diversity relating to race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, etc. are real matters for students and we need to be able to address those via the books we use in our workshops. A story-weaving workshop is an extracurricular activity, which does not necessarily contribute to the curriculum. Therefore there is freedom there for the facilitators to do some extra efforts in helping readers find their place in the world, expand their views and grow as accepting and mindful society members, aware of the paradox that reading more brings about the sensation of knowing less. Therefore we should be able to suggest reading experiences for children that help them recognize and value diverse perspectives.

Only after this has been taken care of, may we think of considering **curriculum connections**. If we wish to assist the schools and the teachers we work with in their curriculum responsibilities, we can consider using books that are a part of that curriculum or could contribute to it. We may consider using a bilingual approach, thus introducing foreign authors in their original language and our national language, thus assisting the language teachers at the school. We can be of help to the literature teachers, to history teachers and others, which would inevitably put us in a good position before the school administration and staff.

### Socio-emotional connections

The stories we select should strengthen a reader's capacity to empathize with others, i.e. understand what the others are thinking and feeling. With slightly older children – 12 and up – most successful are books with a main character, who could be our neighbor or friend. Thus the child can connect emotionally often from the first few pages. Important are also books that stick our noses into our own assumptions and undermine stereotypes. It is at moments of strong emotions when we learn something about understanding people different from ourselves. Alan Rabinowitz's book "A boy and a jaguar" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-p0Un\\_1TOo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-p0Un_1TOo)) is a magnificent example of how this works with its protagonist overcoming a life struggle with a stutter to become an advocate for endangered animals. Another must read is "Last stop on Market Street" by Matt de la Peña, which helps us to more mindfully notice beauty in unexpected places in our everyday worlds ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK6CWvW\\_5-s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK6CWvW_5-s)). We believe that fiction and other genres can teach us things about ourselves, about others and the world in general. We also believe that books serve as bridges leading to achieving socio-emotional understandings.

Some further advice about how to pick our books may include:

- Choose books about people from other cultures, languages, and ethnicities
- Choose books about children who are bicultural
- Choose books about immigrant and refugee experiences
- Choose books that positively show various lifestyles (adoptive parents, foster families, LGBT families, single parent households, multigenerational families, grandparents raising grandchildren, etc.)
- Choose books that portray children with disabilities positively
- Choose books that show female characters in positive, active roles that break gender stereotypes
- Choose books that show male characters that break gender role stereotypes
- Choose books that feature people of color in positive roles

Also, check closely that:

- There are no offensive images, e.g., stereotypes, cultures, represented as costume/object
- Diverse characters are accurately illustrated
- You are comfortable with sharing the book message with the children and the families in your group
- The book message promotes respect
- There are no problematic words (typical, normal, ordinary, etc.)
- There are no offensive, negative terms

There might be other elements to consider, so as we have mentioned in other sections of this material, all your contributions will be taken with gratitude and incorporated into an improved version of this tool.