

# Children's Literature as A Tool for Cultural Education

Seylbekova Dिल्фуза Muratbekovna

Learning Centre as An English Teacher/Supporter, Uzbekistan

**Received:** 15 June 2025; **Accepted:** 21 July 2025; **Published:** 31 August 2025

**Abstract:** Children's literature has emerged as a powerful medium for cultural education, enabling young readers to explore issues of identity, diversity, and belonging in accessible and engaging ways. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Bruner, Vygotsky, Rosenblatt, and Byram, this article examines how children's books function as cultural tools that foster empathy, moral imagination, and intercultural competence. Through concrete examples such as *The Name Jar* (Choi), *Mirror* (Baker), *Grandfather's Journey* (Say), and Nasreddin Hodja tales, the analysis shows that literature can transform classrooms into dialogic spaces where children encounter multiple perspectives, question stereotypes, and connect stories to their lived experiences. A pedagogical framework is proposed that aligns texts with specific cultural aims, while emphasizing assessment methods that value reflection and growth rather than factual recall. The article concludes that children's literature, when critically and inclusively mediated, offers not only a mirror of the self but also a window into other worlds and a doorway to cultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** Children's literature; cultural education; intercultural competence; empathy; dialogic pedagogy; folktales; identity; migration narratives.

**Introduction:** Children's literature has long been recognized as more than mere entertainment; it functions as an essential educational tool through which children learn to perceive the world, construct identities, and engage with cultural diversity. As Jerome Bruner argues, narratives are fundamental to human cognition because they organize our experience of reality [2], while Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory reminds us that learning is always mediated by cultural tools such as stories [12]. Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory highlights that literature is not a fixed set of meanings but a dynamic transaction between reader and text, which means that cultural understanding grows when children interact with stories rather than passively consume them [9]. Scholars like Jack Zipes and Perry Nodelman further emphasize that children's books are never neutral: they embody ideological assumptions and cultural values, shaping young readers' sense of belonging and difference [6; 14]. This suggests that children's literature, when carefully selected and thoughtfully mediated, becomes a fertile space for cultural education, where young learners can cultivate empathy, moral imagination, and intercultural awareness.

The power of children's literature lies in its ability to render abstract cultural concepts concrete through narrative. Instead of teaching "migration" as a static term, a story like Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey* transforms it into an emotional journey of belonging and estrangement. In a similar way, Jeannie Baker's *Mirror* juxtaposes daily life in Morocco and Australia without didactic explanation, compelling readers to discover similarities and differences visually. Such texts not only present cultural realities but also invite children to compare, contrast, and question, making cultural knowledge more meaningful. Importantly, folktales such as the Nasreddin Hodja stories or African trickster tales like Anansi serve as another bridge, showing how universal themes—cleverness, justice, hospitality—take on culturally specific expressions. By engaging with these texts, children rehearse ethical choices and begin to understand that values are both shared and particular, which supports the development of moral imagination as emphasized by Martha Nussbaum [8].

This pedagogical potential, however, can only be realized when literature is integrated into classrooms through dialogic practices. Instead of treating books as isolated "cultural samples," teachers must create

contexts for children to bring their own experiences into conversation with the stories. For example, reading Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar* alongside children's personal name stories transforms the text into a collective exploration of identity and belonging, while pairing Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* with art activities that imagine migration journeys helps students link

narrative to their own family histories.

To organize such practices systematically, children's literature can be aligned with different cultural aims, ensuring that empathy, identity, daily life, values, and representation are all addressed in meaningful ways.

| Cultural Aim            | Representative Texts                                                   | Core Activity                                               | Cultural Understanding                        | Assessment Idea                            |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Empathy for newcomers   | <i>The Name Jar</i> (Choi), <i>My Name is Sangoel</i> (Williams/Naidu) | Share personal name stories and create pronunciation guides | Identity as respect; inclusion through naming | Audio reflections on respectful address    |
| Comparing daily life    | <i>Mirror</i> (Baker)                                                  | Dual-column notes during shared reading                     | Similar needs, different practices            | Short comparative essay                    |
| Understanding migration | <i>Grandfather's Journey</i> (Say), <i>The Arrival</i> (Tan)           | "Suitcase" project: what would you take if you moved?       | Hybrid notions of home                        | Reflective letters with textual references |
| Exploring values        | <i>Nasreddin Hodja</i> tales; <i>Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters</i>      | Compare motifs across cultures                              | Cultural norms and moral lessons              | Poster analysis of values represented      |

The significance of this table lies not only in its classification but in the way it highlights the integration of literature with inquiry-based learning. Each row shows how a specific text can guide children from surface-level curiosity toward deeper reflection, while the assessment methods ensure that growth in cultural awareness is visible. Moreover, the activities are designed to be dialogic, giving space for students' voices, experiences, and home traditions to enter the classroom alongside the stories.

However, teachers must also be cautious. Literature can easily slip into tokenism if one book is allowed to represent an entire culture, or into stereotyping if stories are stripped of their complexity. To counter this, multiple perspectives should always be presented, and texts should be contextualized with author's notes, maps, or oral histories. Translation is another crucial dimension: when reading *Nasreddin Hodja* tales in

English, for instance, students can discuss how humor depends on cultural context and what may be lost or gained in translation. Such conversations prevent a "tourist approach" to culture and instead cultivate a habit of critical engagement, where students learn not only about other cultures but also about the assumptions within their own.

Assessment, too, must reflect the slow, dialogic nature of cultural learning. Rather than relying on factual quizzes about "customs," teachers can use portfolios of reflections, creative projects, and peer discussions. For example, children might keep journals of "mirror and window" moments—when a book reflected their own life or opened a window into another's. They might also record oral reflections about empathy or perspective-taking, which can be revisited later to track growth. Such assessment practices emphasize that cultural understanding is not about memorizing facts but about developing interpretive habits, empathy, and

openness.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, children's literature as a tool for cultural education should not be reduced to a series of isolated "multicultural days" but envisioned as a continuous thread in the curriculum. When stories are carefully chosen, read dialogically, and connected to children's lived experiences, they provide fertile ground for cultural exploration. By drawing on the insights of scholars such as Bruner, Vygotsky, Rosenblatt, and Byram, educators can see literature not as a neutral object but as a cultural practice that mediates identity, belonging, and ethical imagination. In this sense, children's books are not only mirrors reflecting the familiar but also windows opening onto the unfamiliar, and doors inviting students to step into dialogue. The classroom that embraces this view transforms reading from a solitary act into a shared journey of cultural discovery, where empathy and critical thinking develop hand in hand.

### References

1. Baker, J. (2010). *Mirror*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
2. Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning: Four lectures on mind and culture* (Vol. 3). Harvard University Press.
3. Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
4. Choi, Y. (2003). *The name jar*. Dragonfly Books.
5. Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
6. Nodelman, P. (2008). *The hidden adult: Defining children's literature*. JHU Press.
7. Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for learning*. John Benjamins Publishing.
8. Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.
9. Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. SIU Press.
10. Say, A. (2008). *Grandfather's journey*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
11. Tan, S. (2006). *The Arrival*. South Melbourne, Victoria: Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia.
12. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
13. Wooten, D. A., Liang, L. A., & Cullinan, B. E. (Eds.). (2018). *Children's literature in the reading program: Engaging young readers in the 21st century*. Guilford Publications.
14. Zipes, J. (2013). *Relentless progress: The reconfiguration of children's literature, fairy tales, and storytelling*. Routledge.