



K-3 Literacy and Wellness Grant: All Are Welcome Here
By, Ananya Holland
March 24, 2021

For centuries, stories have provided windows into our souls, illuminating who we are individually and collectively. They are a reflection of not only who we are but also who we aspire to be. Children's literature, bold, gentle, magical, and hopeful, has always been a portal to our better selves. The books we place in the hands of our children are not only there to entertain and educate, but they provide them with a compass as they find their way about the world.

Today, our world is filled with different voices that reflect many nationalities, cultures, ethnicities and identities. Ms. Heather Rocco, K - 12 Supervisor of English Language Arts for the School District of the Chathams, has a mission - that every elementary student, who is just getting her or his start in the world of language and stories, sees herself or himself in the books they read.

After reading research studies on ways to engage readers, Ms. Rocco began working to expand the book choices in all language arts classrooms. "When students feel their classrooms are safe, comfortable learning communities, they are better able to tackle the challenging tasks of becoming readers and writers." Ms. Rocco applied for a grant entitled "All Are Welcome Here: Creating Inclusive Literary Classrooms with Books." Her intent was two-fold: to provide teachers in grades K-3 with "rich texts that support our students' literacy" while at the same time having books in the classroom "that reflect the diverse community in which we live."

Motivated by this vision, Ms. Rocco attended a webinar with a publisher and began her process of list building. The Nerdy Book Club blog provides extensive lists of recommended books. She curated a list of books that were simultaneously diverse books, for their subject matter, authors and illustrators, and meaningful texts, which are wonderful read alouds that "promote conversations around topics such as author's craft, reading strategies, and themes."

The books are deceptively simple lyrical odes to self-acceptance, inclusion, and embracing differences. They offer a diverse prism of human life, from the macro level of our collective humanity down to the micro level of what makes us unique as individuals.

The books posit that every child, no matter the variety in their color, background, or gender expression, has a place in the world - books with titles such as *All Are Welcome* by



Alexandra Penfold, *Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig, and *When Grandpa Gives You a Toolbox* by Jamie L.B. Deenihan.

Other books, in the spirit of a classic such as *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes, illuminate the alienation children experience when they are ostracized for their differences. Books such as *Always Anjali* by Sheetal Sheth, *Where Are You From?* by Yamile Saied, *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, and *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* by Joanna Ho reveal the strength and affirmation that comes from acceptance and inclusion.

Some books, such as *Islandborn* by Junot Díaz and *Last Stop on Market Street* and *Carmela Full of Wishes*, both by Matt de la Peña, are love letters to the immigrant experience and lands left behind, "before you could start remembering."

Books in the vein of *Little Blue and Little Yellow* by Leo Lionni, which celebrate biracial families and inclusion of non traditional families, are also aplenty in this carefully cultivated list - *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match* by Monica Brown, *Family is a Family is a Family* by Sara O'Leary, and *Mixed: A Colorful Story* by Arree Chung.

All of these books selected by Ms. Rocco share with students the powerful concepts of acceptance and love, that all are welcome here, that there is in fact enough room under the *Big Umbrella*, another book by Amy June Bates which is also on the list.

Ms. Rocco, along with her team of District ELA leaders, Ms. Jackie Berger, Ms. Leigh Rockoff, and Ms. Jessica Vega, have spent time reading the books awarded by this Chatham Education Foundation grant and created a resource that will help demonstrate for K-3 teachers how to incorporate these stunning picture books into daily curriculum lessons. JoEllen McCarthy, author of *Layers of Learning: Using Read Alouds to Connect Literacy and Caring Conversations*, will also serve as a consultant to the school district and support teachers as they utilize these picture books during reading and writing lessons.

These books will not only serve as potent literacy, reading and writing tools, but as a powerful entry point where everyone feels more comfortable embracing differences. The Chatham Education Foundation is honored to be a part of this vision and fund this grant. Ms. Rocco believes providing the classrooms with these books would have been impossible without the Chatham Education Foundation grant due to the expense related to acquiring big, beautiful picture books. To buy an amount large enough to fill the shelves of every K-3 classroom in the



district is a significant cost. Chatham Education Foundation extends its heartfelt appreciation and congratulations to Ms. Rocco and her team, and is proud to fund this initiative.