

Original Paper

Diversity in Children's Literature

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Abstract

Children's literature is profoundly influential in the lives of students and is widespread throughout schools, libraries, and homes. However, the field of children's literature lacks diversity across several domains, particularly race, gender, and ability. Educators must be knowledgeable on how to use diverse children's literature as a tool to teach about diversity, as they strive to foster inclusive classroom environments. Teachers must also design their classroom libraries with intense care so as to provide a wide-ranging selection of books to meet the needs of children's interests and reading levels. Books are a powerful tool for development, so teachers must make conscious decisions about the materials they provide to young readers. All children deserve exposure to a wide range of books, which include characters who are both similar and different from themselves. Educators have a responsibility to expose students to diversity through a well-written selection of multifaceted children's literature.

Keywords

children's literature, diversity, teacher knowledge, professional responsibility

1. Introduction

The American population today is extremely diverse, which is naturally reflected in classrooms across the country. However, extensive research has shown that children's literature does not echo the vast array of students who make up the American youth population. Children should see the rich diversity of their lives and the lives of those around them in the books they read every day. However, with the overall lack of diversity in children's literature, the responsibility falls on teachers to make conscious decisions about appropriate books for the classroom. Professionals must educate themselves on the issue by reading the research and hunting for quality literature rich in diversity. Teachers have an obligation to their students to provide good quality children's books that reflect the diverse conditions of the world today. All

children deserve exposure to a wide range of books which include characters who are both similar and different from themselves. Educators have a responsibility to expose students to diversity through a well-written selection of multifaceted children's literature.

Literature is responsible for reflecting society, but in some ways it is also responsible for shaping it. Students are surrounded by literature in American classrooms, but unfortunately the majority of this literature lacks diversity. Children are affected by the books they read; therefore, a restricted representation of characters limits students' ability to see themselves and others in books. These restricted representations could include but are not limited to books featuring only white characters, books depicting gender in stereotypical roles, or books showing characters with disabilities in an inaccurate way. All of these, along with the omission of diverse characters altogether, send subliminal messages to children about what is acceptable and what is "the norm". Children must be exposed to diverse literature, as this exposure is beneficial to their self-image and social adjustment into society, which is inherently diverse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influential Awards for Children's Literature

Children's books are widespread throughout classrooms and libraries. However, certain books are regarded at a higher level because of specific literary awards. There are several book awards that recognize excellence in children's literature, but the two most well-known are the Newbery Medal award and the Caldecott Medal award. The Newbery Medal is awarded on an annual basis to the book which is the "most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" (para. 1) from the preceding year (Association for Library Service to Children, 2017). Each year, the American Library Association awards one book with the medal, while several other books may receive honor medals. The selection of books is based on the actual text, though the committee considers all forms of writing, such as fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. The selection committee for this award judges the book based on literary quality and presentation quality for young children, rather than popularity. While the criteria for this award is incredibly detailed, there is no mention about diversity and consideration of inclusive themes throughout these books. Even though some of the awarded books are excellent examples of diverse literature for children, diversity is not specifically emphasized in the selection process. The Caldecott Medal is another prestigious award for contributions to children's literature. This medal is also distributed annually by the American Library Association and given to the "most distinguished American picture book for children" (para. 1) from the preceding year (Association for Library Service to Children, 2017). One book receives the medal annually and several others are named as honor books. These books are judged on their pictorial quality for children, as the award is for excellence in illustrations rather than the popularity of the published book. Like the Newbery Medal, the Caldecott Medal selection does not state any criteria about diversity or inclusive characters and settings. This is noteworthy, as illustrations have a significant impact on children.

Illustrations hold specific importance in children's books. Children are often mesmerized by the pictures in the books they either read or have read to them. Worland (2008) notes these books have increased influence on children because they deliver their message twice—once with words and once with illustrations. Research has proven children's literature generally omits or poorly represents children of different ethnicities, female characters, and children with disabilities. A negative, or nonexistent, portrayal of a child's own race, gender, or disability may go unnoticed by adults; however, the child does not know it is negative or inaccurate and therefore takes it at face value. Considering the substantial diversity of the American school system, there is a large population of children who read books and cannot see themselves illustrated on the pages. Added to this problem is the fact that young children often read or listen to the same stories over and over again, where they consistently receive the same wrong message each time (Worland, 2008). Interestingly enough, the Newbery and Caldecott award criteria do not include attention to representing diverse populations (Martinez et al., 2016). Newbery and Caldecott winners are mass-produced and widely distributed to libraries, books stores, and schools. Because these books are so widespread, children are often being exposed to highly praised books with pictures where the characters look or act nothing like themselves. More attention must be brought to diversity in Newbery award winning books and especially Caldecott winning books because of the significance the storylines, characters, and illustrations have on the students reading the books.

There are several awards which recognize children's books that specifically emphasize diversity. The Association for Library Service to Children (2017) lists a plethora of awards that either they distribute or are affiliated with the organization that distributes the award. These awards celebrate diversity of all types, from ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and overall universal inclusion. Some of these awards include the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, which celebrate books emphasizing African American culture, and the Schneider Family Book Award, which focuses on books that portray the disability experience. Educators should look to these awards when looking for high-quality diverse literature, rather than accepting the Newbery and Caldecott winners as appropriate literature without using a critical eye to examine these award winners through a diverse lens.

2.2 Teacher Knowledge and Professional Responsibility

Extensive research has proven that children's literature lacks diversity in several areas and continues to exclude various American populations. However, this problem will not be resolved until people, both individually and collectively, take it upon themselves to make a change in the industry. Teachers are at the front line of this problem, as they provide literature in classrooms to students every single day. Other professionals, such as administrators and librarians, also hold accountability. Anyone who wishes to see this pattern of exclusion change must take conscious action toward this problem. Educators, however, must especially take it upon themselves to make mindful decisions about the literary options to which they expose children. While many educators want to see this problem improve, there is a general lack of awareness in the field which causes this issue to remain subconsciously deep-rooted.

In order for educators to properly demonstrate inclusivity in the classroom, they must first understand it for themselves. Several studies have shown that teachers lack knowledge about diversity, specifically related to children's books, as they are often not trained thoroughly enough in these philosophies in their teacher education programs. One study, conducted by Brinson (2012), asked elementary teachers to identify two children's books from five different ethnic groups. The majority of the sixty-one participants could only identify two books from the Anglo-American category and lacked book knowledge in all other cultural areas. Another study asked elementary teachers to identify their favorite books to read aloud, and "...only 21% of the books named contained female protagonists" (Patt & McBride, n.d. p. 4). Education programs at colleges and universities in the United States are not preparing their students to work with diverse children, as teachers are not trained to be culturally responsive through the use of children's literature. Therefore, teacher candidates are entering the field without the ability to acknowledge their own biases and consciously think about the diverse group of children they educate (Baker & McDermott, 2000). Moreover, there is a need for professional development in the field which is not being addressed. Both pre-service and in-service teachers lack multicultural knowledge and are in need of diversity training, which is unfortunately not happening as often as it should (Brinson, 2012). A study conducted by Iwai (2013) assessed teacher candidates' perception of multicultural literature and found that teacher candidates had a significant shortage of knowledge about what multicultural literature encompasses and its importance in the classroom setting. This finding was partially rooted in a lack of exposure to multicultural literature in primary, secondary, and higher education. The candidates could see the importance, but they did not necessarily understand its usage and were not significantly familiar with the books themselves. However, once the teacher candidates were explicitly taught about multicultural literature, they had a deeper understanding of the topic itself and a more positive inclination to use it in their future classrooms. Educating teachers and teacher candidates about diverse literature of all kinds is the key to increasing knowledge in the field. Baratz (2015) found that teachers do not make a regular effort to use diverse literature as a tool. There is a disheartening lack of motivation among educators to independently search for books and consistently use them in the classroom. However, these educators also identified a lack of professional training in this specialized area which did not prepare them adequately to use these bibliotherapeutic techniques in the classroom. This problem can be remedied at the schooling level, with undergraduate and graduate educational programs including courses and workshops on diversity as part of their programs. Teacher candidates should be exposed to bibliotherapy as a tool, because "...as teachers become more familiar and comfortable with it, they will be better able to use it in a precise and efficient manner in the classroom" (Baratz, p. 60). Elementary education teacher candidates, especially, should be given direct instruction on selecting appropriate literature, as children's books are such an important part of any elementary classroom. Altering programs and curriculum can be one solution to remedying teacher knowledge, "...by training teachers to use non-biased language and to choose non-biased books and classroom materials" (Patt & McBride, n.d., p. 14). Teachers must remember to look beyond their personal experiences and imagine different

perspectives, taking initiative to understand cultural backgrounds of students and families alike (Grant & Goddard, 2009). Providing teachers with a better understanding of diverse children's literature brings the field one step closer to complete and total inclusivity.

There are several strategies that educators can use to select appropriate children's literature. Many of these strategies involve simply reading children's literature with a critical eye. While exploring various books, educators evaluate characters for appropriate language, distinctive personalities, achievements, and occupations irrespective of race, gender, ability, etc. (Singh, 1998). The Anti-Defamation League (2017) also provides a comprehensive checklist for assessing children's literature. The checklist examines various elements of children's books, such as the story, characters, themes, settings, and illustrations. While it is impossible for all books to meet every single standard, this criteria is an excellent way to assess the literature used in the classroom and find room for improvement. Baker and McDermott (2000) list several strategies to enforce diverse children's literature in the classroom. Some of these strategies are specifically for the teacher, such as book lists and diversity grids. Several organizations have comprehensive book lists that teachers can use as a resource to find diverse literature for their classroom. Educators should also begin to build their own book lists for reference. Diversity grids are an exemplary tool for teachers, as they can track the books they come across for each diverse criterion they meet. There are also activities that teachers can do with students to encourage inclusion, such as literacy biographies and literature circles. Children tell their own story through literacy biographies, including special books that have influenced them as well as special information about their background that informs their teacher's instruction. Literature circles are also helpful, where teachers pick specific books to read and discuss in small groups. These circles can be incredibly beneficial when educating students about a specific diverse population. These activities encourage discussion, which is an important element of teaching diversity. Students must be able to ask questions and express curiosity in order to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their peers. Teachers must take these opportunities to build upon text and encourage discussion to further create an inclusive environment (Wilkins et al., 2016). Using these tools and strategies in the classroom helps to reinforce the message that no one lifestyle is better than another; they are simply different.

2.3 Types of Books for the Classroom

Teachers must take specific responsibility when using diverse books in the classroom. While it is crucial to naturally include diverse books in the everyday classroom setting, it is not enough to let them sit on the shelves of the classroom library. They must be used in curriculum and discussed during instruction. Most importantly, teachers must process the messages of these books with their students. Especially for the elementary years, students need guidance from teachers to understand the more nuanced messages of children's books. Books about race, gender, and ability may be beyond comprehension at a one-dimensional level for these young students. When teachers use diverse books in the classroom, numerous opportunities are created to have progressive discussions with students. Books may indirectly feature diversity while purposefully teaching a different lesson. Books can also teach diversity by

sending a specific message about a certain group of people through the plot. Regardless of the type of message emitted, teachers have an obligation to relay positive messages about diversity to students. While natural exposure to these books is important, it is absolutely essential that teachers purposefully use diverse books to teach specific lessons and send specific messages about the acceptance of others, regardless of similarities or differences. There are three main categories of children's books as related to diversity. These categories include books that celebrate specific groups, books with naturally diverse characters and books centered on differences. All of these books can be beneficial to the classroom environment if used correctly. The appropriate use of these books is dependent on the teacher's knowledge.

The first category, books celebrating specific groups, is relatively straightforward. There are many children's books that are designed to teach about particular cultures or celebrate certain religions. These books are often written and illustrated by people from that particular group. These books can be used effectively in two main ways: to teach lessons specifically about the group being discussed and to teach other important story features with diverse characters naturally immersed into the plot. Both of these techniques are beneficial for teaching diversity, both directly and indirectly. The second category, books with naturally diverse characters, is very important to include in the classroom consistently. Every teacher's classroom library should have a plethora of books with naturally diverse characters, where the storyline of the book has nothing to do with the character's race, gender, ability, etc. Immersing these books into an educational setting at all age levels is crucial because they promote acceptance and normalize differences. In primary years, children start to notice differences in people and develop opinions about these differences; therefore, it is crucial for teachers to incorporate diverse children's literature into classroom reading selections (Wilkins et al., 2016). This category can be used for other lessons in reading and writing, while still sending an indirect message of inclusion and acceptance. The third category, books centered on differences, must be used very carefully. Teachers must be well-trained on how to use these books to teach about diversity while not negatively emphasizing the fact that the characters are meant to be "different". Sometimes these books portray negative attitudes about the population discussed, both consciously and unconsciously. Pires (2011) mentions these books "...do not have to be excluded, but they should raise issues concerning the portrayed perspective and the teacher should be able to create situations...to 'put students in the other one's shoes'" (p. 253). These books can be beneficial to the classroom environment but teachers must process the information with students, so as to guide their learning toward acceptance. Wopperer (2011) noted that it is simply not enough to read books that portray people who are "different", but that discussion and reflection must be incorporated to influence understanding and acceptance. This category of books is very difficult to use in the classroom, and can be detrimental if not carefully done with a well-written lesson plan and a well-trained educator.

2.4 Resources for Educators

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) is a library organization derived from the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The CCBC was first established in 1963 and is

funded through the University. The library examines books, conducts research, and studies trends across children's literature (CCBC, 2017). This book center collects thousands of books for children and young adults each year. CCBC's (2017) vision statement is indicative of their philosophy, that "all children and young adults deserve excellent literature which reflects their own experience and encourages them to imagine experiences beyond their own...such literature fosters a fundamental understanding of themselves and one another..." (para. 1). One of the center's goals is to call awareness of relevant issues and encourage discussion surrounding these issues, such as the lack of diversity across the field. The CCBC collects books each year and analyzes them for diverse characteristics, with a specific focus on racial diversity. The center's statistics have shocked professionals and brought awareness to a largely neglected issue. The CCBC's website has dozens of book lists for teachers, including "50 Bilingual and Spanish/English Integrated Books" and "50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know" (CCBC, 2017). The CCBC is a great resource for educators for two reasons: they collect a wide range of exemplary literature and they continually call attention to an important topic.

We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) is another great resource for educators. WNDB is a grassroots organization that strives to expose all children to books featuring diverse characters and settings. The group advocates for positive change in the publishing industry in order to provide well-written, diverse literature for all young people. The group envisions a time where all children can see mirrors of themselves on the pages they read. WNDB has a broad definition of diversity. This definition includes but is not limited to: people of color, Natives, gender diverse populations, LGBTQIA+, people of all disabilities, religious groups, and ethnic/cultural minorities. WNDB publishes an annual report about progress in the field of children's literature, including a section entitled "How to Help" which outlines opportunities for educators to participate in the movement. The group's website also offers several resources for teachers, including numerous lists of diverse books organized by type of diversity as well as select books awards that acknowledge exemplary diverse literature (We Need Diverse Books, 2017). The organization works incredibly hard to push the publishing industry to expand its boundaries in terms of diversity for children's literature.

The Amelia Bloomer Project (ABP) is a group out of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table's (SRRT) Feminist Taskforce. The organization creates annual lists of the best feminist literature for all young readers. ABP is named in honor of the 19th century feminist and suffragist, Amelia Bloomer, who publically advocated for women's rights. Their annual book lists show case well-written and well-illustrated books with strong feminist characteristics that send positive messages to young girls (ALA, 2017). The group outlines distinct criteria to select appropriate books for their lists. Selected books must contain significant feminist content, must demonstrate excellence in writing, must be written in an appealing format, and must be age appropriate for young children. The website provides resources for educators including brochures, posters, and book lists of excellent feminist literature for the past fifteen years (Amelia Bloomer Project, 2017). The group continues to provide educators with opportunities to expose students to these book titles. The Amelia Bloomer Project

specifically focuses on promoting literature for young women that presents females in a positive and strengthening light.

Barefoot Books is an organization created with the intention of providing all children with books that mirror their personal realities. The organization was created by two mothers in the United Kingdom. Barefoot Books (2017) prides itself on displaying books that show reflections of the reader's world and open windows to other perspectives. The overarching goal of Barefoot Books is to raise children as the next generation of globally aware citizens who are accepting of differences. The group has created a mobile application, expanded their YouTube channel, and published hundreds of books since its birth. Their website features thousands of books that can be ordered for classrooms and libraries. The books are diverse across several domains, and some of the website's subtitles include "Discover a book for all children" and "Learn how others live". Other resources among the website include lesson plans for teachers and ideas for school events that encourage school-wide diversity. Barefoot Books also has a book club that celebrates books with significant diverse qualities, which educators can join for their classrooms and families can join for their homes. Barefoot Books' motto is simple but clear: "Share stories. Connect families. Inspire children". Barefoot Books is an excellent source for teachers to learn about diversity and exemplify inclusivity in the classroom.

Social Justice Books (SJB) is a non-profit organization derived from Teaching for Change. Teaching for Change was founded in 1989 and strives to show case diverse children's literature that promotes social justice. The organization's branch, Social Justice Books, was created to identify the best children's literature across multicultural boundaries and provide tools for educators to better incorporate these books across curricula. SJB, with its founding morals and driving motivations, resembles a modern version of the Council of Interracial Books. The group has specific criteria for book selection, which considers the following factors: representation, story line, quality of writing, authors and illustrators, issues of power and activism, and use of community settings. Their website holds booklists, books reviews, articles, and other resources for teachers and caregivers to use. They offer more than 50 lists of recommended literature, which are constantly updated by the organization. SJB also participates in the See What We See (SWWS) Coalition, which involves multidisciplinary professionals across the field who review and discuss children's literature at a critical level. They aim to create awareness of the diversity gaps across the publishing industry, including the omission and misrepresentations of marginalized groups (Social Justice Books, 2017). Teaching for Change and Social Justice Books are excellent resources for educators to consider when trying to better educate themselves on current issues and include more diverse literature in the classroom.

2.5 The Publishing Industry's Role

The publishing industry ultimately makes the final decisions about which books get printed and which do not. Like any other business, they are financially motivated to print whatever will sell best and whatever the bookstores will buy for their shelves. Major publishers often express dedicated intentions about their enthusiastic commitment to displaying more diversity on the pages of children's books. However,

evidence clearly shows that these mission statements are not translating into real life (Myers, 2014). Wholesale buyers can have a significant impact on what gets published as well as what jacket art looks like. However, this vicious cycle quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: How can diverse books sell if they are not put in book stores (Horning, 2014)? Myers (2014) argued that the market is the key to seeing desperately needed change. He attested that adults must advocate for the children who do not yet know the importance of being exposed to diversity. Specifically, he identified publishers as responsible for providing a more expansive view of the world for children through the books they read. Myers (2014) noted that "...books remain blind to the everyday reality of thousands of children..." (p. 2) much too often in today's bookstores, libraries, and classrooms. Consumers must take it upon themselves to influence the market and elicit change.

Professionals in the field, such as librarians and authors, have noted the significant impact that consumers have on the market. Similar to any other industry, whatever sells will continue to be produced. Horning (2017) argued that it all cycles back to buying books. However, the market must see consistent demand before any change will occur. This reality is very sad but very true. Again, it is a business that will continue to produce money-making objects. All people interested in a change must commit to making conscious decisions about what books they purchase. Welch (2016) emphasized that "...each purchase has some impact along the underlying dimension, even if that impact is negligible. If one purchases an all-white children's book when one could have purchased a racially diverse children's book, there is an impact in the children's literature market" (p. 382). While an individual book purchase is not as significant as a bulk purchase (such as books clubs and bookstores), there is still an impact. Understanding that all neglectful purchases collectively influence the market is the beginning to seeing real change.

Welch (2016) went one step further, by insisting that consumers have a moral obligation to purchase books that include diverse characters and settings, with a specific focus on racial diversity. She argued that purchasing books which do not display diversity cultivates racial biases and stereotypes and is therefore inherently wrong. She also argued that refraining from purchasing books or purchasing only those with non-human characters is also wrong because opting out of the market only avoids the harm being done rather than eliminating it. This argument is severe but can be justified considering the harsh conditions under which diversity is currently constrained in the publishing industry.

The question becomes: Where does the responsibility lie? While the publishers are the ones ultimately calling the shots, consumers have the ability to change the market based on what they buy. Buying diverse books is a political act, where patrons "vote with their dollars" in order to make an authentic impact that will last over time. Part of the discussion is understanding the collective harm that non-diverse books have on society. As Welch (2016) noted, "The pervasive whiteness of children's literature is a collective problem that produces a collective harm" (p. 367). There must be a consistent and continuous effort to change the market by making conscious decisions about book purchases. Myers (1986) noted that "if the market is created, the books will come" (p. 3). The general public is left with the

responsibility to demand more diverse books in order to see results in the industry. As Myers (2014) said, “When kids today face the realities of our world...they all do so without a proper map” (p. 2). Publishers, librarians, authors, illustrators, teachers, and parents must take it upon themselves to provide a proper map by increasing the number of diverse books published. It is a shared responsibility that must be taken seriously if change is to take place on bookshelves across the country.

3. Conclusion

Diversity can be looked at through many different lenses. Race, gender, and ability are three types of diversity that classroom teachers interact with daily. Teachers must make a conscious effort to understand these students and provide them with appropriate resources. Children’s books are a great tool for educators, as they can explore different worlds in an intriguing and interactive way. Unfortunately, there is a pronounced absence of diverse literature for children. Teachers must acknowledge this issue and consciously try to be part of the solution. Classroom libraries should be carefully designed to include a variety of books, where every student can find one to relate to. All children deserve to see mirrors of themselves and windows of others in the books they read.

Altering biases requires a conscious effort; it does not happen naturally. With the skewed reality of children’s literature, it is not possible for an appropriate collection of diverse books to appear in a classroom setting without effort. Educators must go out of their way to seek out diverse books, which represent all students in the classroom as well as other, less familiar populations. Teachers and librarians must make smart and informed decisions to create anti-biased libraries; they must strive to provide children with books whose pages reflect unique and intriguing characters and settings. Literature is a potent force in the lives of children, with the books they read heavily impacting their view of the world around them. Professional responsibility lies with educators to ensure that this impact yields positive results. If students are naturally exposed to diversity and actively engaged in classroom activities about inclusion, children will receive a positive message of understanding, normalcy, and acceptance. Providing diverse literature for young students is one of key steps toward building a more accepting society with the young generations in classrooms today.

3.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should delve into the more intricate areas of diversity in children’s literature. The topic is incredibly broad and encompasses numerous subcategories. Further exploration of the topic should look to the smaller, more complex areas of the topic rather than an analysis of the overall deficit of diversity. Research should specifically investigate teacher knowledge throughout the field, including the widespread lack of awareness across as well as the need for more professional development specifically tailored to this issue. There is a dearth of cognizance among professionals in education, and this exact shortage should be explored and remedied. Bringing awareness directly to the attention of educators currently in the field will elicit the most change. Future research should also include a comparison between children’s books for different age groups. There may be a significant point to be made about the

diversity in picture books compared to diversity in chapter books. A comprehensive study of a broad range of books would be necessary to accurately draw conclusions about a gap in diverse books for various age groups. An examination of the publishing industry should also be considered for future studies. The publishing industry is an autocrat, deciding what books are printed and what authors or illustrators are published. This dominance should be investigated, specifically inquiring about the driving force behind publishing decisions and the resistance against putting diverse literature on bookshelves. Future research on this topic should explore various nuances regarding diverse children's literature in the hopes of eliciting change.

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