

The Prevalence and Importance of Ethnic Diversity in Children's Literature

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Abstract

Despite the complicated past of ethnic censorship, ethnic diversity has a prominent role in children's literature published in the United States because diversity is accurately representative of the culture in which today's young readers live. Children's literature has advanced in terms of ethnic diversity in recent decades, but obstacles that prevent the stories of various minority groups from being told continue to exist. In order for all children to feel properly included in the literary world, children must be given the opportunity to see both people who are different from them as well as people who bear similarities to themselves represented in the literature present in their homes, schools, and libraries.

Keywords: children's literature, ethnic diversity, diverse, ethnicity, inclusion

The Prevalence and Importance of Ethnic Diversity in Children's Literature

Introduction

All children should have the privilege of seeing characters who resemble themselves represented in the literature they are exposed to every day; however, for children of color, this concept typically has not always been a reality. While ethnic diversity in children's literature is more commonplace now than ever before, children's literature in the United States has undergone a rocky past where entire ethnicities would be wiped from and then reappear in children's literature in flux with the tension of that period's race relations. Despite the many advancements made in the last several generations, literature marketed towards young readers continues to encounter obstacles in the realm of diversity. By being made aware of these obstacles, parents and educators can find practical solutions to ensure that all children, regardless of ethnic identity, experience a world of literature that is as diverse as they are.

Reading Achievement Gaps across Different Demographics

The reading achievement scores of minority populations are an issue that could be remedied by the inclusion of more ethnically diverse children's literature. Reading achievement measured for children in the United States displayed startling results that speak to the gap that unfortunately separates America's children across ethnic lines. Research by the United States Department of Education determined that 50-54% of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian elementary school students fall below the basic level of reading proficiency for their grade level, which contrasts starkly with the 22-23% of white and Asian American children who fall at the same basic level at the

same grade levels (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). Not surprisingly, a child's reading achievements are heavily influenced by the interest he or she has for reading; if children are able to make connections and become engaged with what they are reading, they will read more often, becoming more proficient readers as a result (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). The great disparity in achievement among different demographics in the United States is an issue that needs to be remedied, and putting more multi-ethnic literature into the hands of young readers could have a positive impact on children's reading scores, especially for children of color.

Diverse Literature for Diverse Readers

Although ethnically diverse literature can be beneficial for all readers, books featuring ethnic minorities give minority readers representation that they typically do not experience with the majority of books in their homes, classrooms, and libraries. Hughes-Hassell et al. (2009) analyzed the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database, a resource utilized by "many schools across the country as the basis for literacy instruction and the development of classroom book collections, as well as to supplement school library collections," (p. 10) with the intention of determining how diverse the literature selections of this well-known collection were. This study determined that while white main or secondary characters were present in 83.5% of books, only 25.8% of the books featured at least one main or secondary character of color. If this well-known book database is at all representative of the types of books present in the typical American schoolchild's classroom or library, the books being offered to young students are not as diverse as the children who are reading them. In order to encourage children to read, the

books offered to them should be books that pique their interests. Unsurprisingly, if children are interested in a particular topic, they will likely read more about that topic. This desire to read about concepts that interest them also extends to the relatability of literature, meaning children are more likely to read literature that they feel is relatable to them. According to research, “[c]hildren tend to prefer and are more likely to engage with literature that reflects their personal experiences” (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009, p. 4). If children are able to see people represented in the books who look like, speak like, and live like themselves, they become more likely to read those books, according to the implications of this research study.

When children are able to relate to the literature they read, they can build the textual connections that educators so often stress. In order for children to become skilled readers, they must make these connections with the text to themselves, other texts, and the world around them. Unfortunately, since ethnically diverse characters are not as commonplace in children's literatures as white characters are (as shown by the aforementioned Fountas and Pinnell 2006 statistics), white children are more likely to see themselves represented in the literature around them than children of color. Because students learn how to think critically by making these textual connections, all children should see characters they can relate to in the books they read at home and at school.

The Prevalence of Ethnic Diversity in Children's Literature

Ethnic diversity in children's literature has become more prevalent, especially since the late 1930s, as society has moved towards a culture of inclusivity and equality. Two well-known examples of diverse picture books include the milestone *The Snowy*

Day by Ezra Jack Keats (published in 1963) and the more recent 2000 Newberry Medal and Coretta Scott King award-winner *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (Horning, 2015). For some children, finding characters that look different from themselves opens doors to see the world through new eyes, and for other children, seeing their own ethnicities represented in characters they admire enables them to make personal connections with the stories they read. The children's book industry has begun catering to a diverse audience of young readers by including protagonists and illustrations that more accurately represent the typical American child's world.

The Past

Progress has undoubtedly occurred in the realm of bringing more ethnic diversity into the sphere of children's literature with each generation, but the past gives a helpful ruler for current trends to be measured against. Although multi-ethnic children's literature includes representation for characters of all ethnicities, many research studies about diversity focus specifically on African American representation in children's literature because they are the ethnic minority group most often represented. Despite America being known as *the melting pot* and the American population being made up of people from a number of different ethnicities, the majority of children's books had been marketed towards a white audience because of the persistence of a "common stereotype... that people of color do not buy books" and thus contained characters who reflected that consumer misconception (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009, p. 13). A study published in the *American Sociological Review* focused on the appearance of African American characters within children's picture books, specifically noting how the trends

for representation during the mid- to late-twentieth century were related to fluctuating social tensions between whites and African Americans in American society during the same time period. This research found that of the children's books that were part of the sample (from Caldecott medal winners, *Children's Catalog* books, and *Little Golden Books* series) published from 1937-1993, only 14.8% of books portrayed at least one African American character, and only 1.8% of books portrayed only African American characters (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). Both of these statistics show that not only were African American characters rarely made the main character demographic of books during this period, but also they were rarely included at all. The vast majority of these books centered around white characters and occasionally featured an African American character, but a disproportionately small percentage of books centered around just African American characters. Although white, school-aged children during this time would have had few issues finding main characters within their favorite books who looked like them, African American children would have likely only had access to books in which the people who resembled them were background characters. The levels of ethnic diversity in these books inaccurately represented the American population as being mostly homogenous, instead of being a more realistic representation of the average American child's world.

Controversial Literature

Another important distinction to be made is that many books that were once regarded as classics in the past would today be regarded as inherently racist because although these books do feature ethnically diverse characters, these characters were

included and stereotyped for comedic effect. Although many of these books, such as *Little House on the Prairie*, *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, and *The Story of Doctor Doolittle* may have been staples in children's libraries 60 years ago, they would no longer be without controversy in today's society because of the ways these books negatively discuss Native American, Asian, and African people groups, respectively.

Much of this literature was not overtly racist but rather was written with suggestively racist tones. For example, in *The Story of Dr. Doolittle*, one of the only African American characters in the book claims he is unhappy because the color of his skin is keeping his fair-skinned female love interest from loving him back. He explains that he is willing to richly reward Dr. Doolittle "if [the doctor] will turn [him] white" because "nothing else will satisfy [him]" than to be white (Morgan, 2011, p. 366). Since children use reading to create personal connections with the text and the world around them, this suggestion that white skin is preferable could be detrimental to a child's self-image and opinion of their ethnic identity. Reading this book might convey the message that since this character was unsatisfied with his skin color and preferred white skin, then a child who happens to not be white should also be unhappy with the color of their skin.

Another example of a children's book written with racist undertones is *Tikki Tikki Tembo* by Arlene Mosel. This book claims that ancient Chinese parents customarily gave incredibly long names to their firstborn sons, and as such, one particular boy was named "Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo" (Mosel, 2007, p. 2). After the boy falls into a well, his younger brother (who has a short name) tries to explain to his mother and to an elderly man what has happened. Because his brother's name is

incredibly long and difficult to pronounce, the boy is unable to enlist the help of the adults, and his brother is not rescued until much later. As a result, Tikki tikki tembo-no sa rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo becomes ill, and Chinese parents decide to begin naming all of their children short names from that day forward. This book stereotypes Chinese names as being “funny [and] unpronounceable”, which is detrimental not only to Chinese students’ opinions of their names but also to other students’ opinions of their Chinese peers’ names (Yamate, 1997, p. 99). Especially because children’s names and cultures are such integral parts of their personal identities, the books children read should celebrate, not mock, these deeply individual aspects of their identities.

In addition to subtle racism, many classic books displayed outright racism through the negative discussion of people of other ethnicities. One of the more well-known examples of this can be found in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* where she quotes a family friend as saying, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” (Wilder, 1935, p. 211). Though this character’s perspective of Native Americans would have been heavily influenced by the negative sentiments many settlers had for the Native Americans at the time, the statement is still racist. This overt racism in *Little House on the Prairie* does not necessarily mean, however, that this book is of no value to today’s readers. Instead, reading this book today could promote important dialogue with children and educators about ethnicity and equality. Though diverse ethnic representation in children’s literature is important, diversity should never be pursued simply for diversity’s sake (or at the cost of negatively portraying one ethnicity against another); rather, it should seek to provide authentic, impartial representation. Although these issues of

insensitivity may not have been notable to generations past, they are important today and should provide opportunities for discussions about race with children.

Milestone Literature

The recognition of books that have served as milestones in the realm of diverse children's literature has gradually brought about much of the ethnic diversity in children's literature today. Kathleen T. Horning, director of The Cooperative Children's Book Center, explains that because "success breeds imitation," publishers are compelled to develop more books that feature characters of color when similar books find success in the literary world (Horning, 2015, p. 1). Being awarded a coveted Newbery Medal or Caldecott Medal gives books incredible recognition and greatly boosts their sales, as a result. Though business profits certainly play a role in which books publishers choose to produce, the recognition of select ethnically diverse children's books has had a positive impact on the diversity of children's literature as a whole.

Perhaps one of the most well-known milestone pieces of literature is Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day*, which follows a young African American boy in New York City. Though children's books containing African American main characters had been present in the industry for nearly 20 years, *The Snowy Day* was the first of its kind to earn the Caldecott Medal in 1963 (Horning, 2016). Despite Keats not being a person of color himself, *The Snowy Day* was heralded for the way it accurately portrays a young African American boy exploring his snow-covered urban neighborhood and living with his mother in their apartment. The success of Keats's book spread, and as a result, more children's books portraying other ethnicities began to flourish as well. Authors and

illustrators of other ethnicities also began to earn more recognition in the children's book industry, with the first African American, Asian American, and Latino illustrators winning Caldecott Medals in 1976, 1990, and 1995, respectively (Horning, 2015).

Although authentic, ethnically diverse literature can be written by white authors, as in the case of Keats, all authors' and illustrators' works reflect a piece of their personal identity, and authors and illustrators of color are thus able to impart personal experiences tied to their ethnicities into the pieces they create.

The Present

Diversity developments in the world of children's literature are evident in statistics about characters' ethnicities, especially when those values are compared to data from the past. A 2009 research project by the American Association of School Librarians studied the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Book List database, a catalogue used by many classroom teachers and children's librarians as a resource for finding literature to match varied levels of reading difficulty. This study specifically evaluated the races of the characters from the sample size selected from the Fountas and Pinnell database and found that 26% of the main and secondary characters in the books were people of color (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). Though this number may seem somewhat low, this statistic shows a drastic improvement from the aforementioned 1937-1993 statistic. Furthermore, this data demonstrates that not only are ethnically diverse children being featured in a higher percentage of children's books, but these children are being placed in the position of main and secondary characters instead of characters who do not contribute to the plot and are present only in the background of the books' illustrations.

In addition to being given more prominent roles in children's books today, ethnically diverse characters are being represented more authentically than they have been in the past. A study researching the accuracy of Asian American characters in picture books published from 1945 to 1976 discovered that of the 24 picture books from that time period, 22 of the books were "racist" and "elitist" in the ways they portrayed Asian Americans (Mo & Shen, 1997, p. 85). Stereotypes about minorities were rampant throughout the books and undeniably contributed to the racist tone of many of these books. However, when a follow-up of the study was done in 1994 to again evaluate the authenticity of Asian American representation in children's books, the results showed improvement, with over 90% of the selected titles portraying Asian Americans in a way that was not only positive but also free of stereotype (Mo & Shen, 1997). The research did not explicitly state what was deemed stereotypical in the remaining 10% of the literature, but the vast majority of books discussed Asian Americans in a manner that was both accurate and unbiased. Although this study may not be particularly recent, comparing this study to the research project from 1976 illustrates the swift progress authors and publishers have made towards authentic, ethnically diverse children's literature and is hopefully indicative of the progress ethnically diverse children's literature will continue to make in years to come.

The Importance of Ethnically Diverse Children's Literature

Exploring Diversity

In order for children to have a healthy understanding of identity and race, they must have positive encounters with diversity in their everyday lives. According to

research, children's personal beliefs about diversity are typically established by the time children reach the 4th grade and are unlikely to change; because of this, parents and educators should encourage children to experience and discuss ethnicity from an early age (Kemple & Lopez, 2009). A practical way that this can be done is by ensuring that a child's literary environment features characters that share physical similarities with the child as much as it features characters who do not.

Physical diversity through ethnicity. By introducing literature that contains characters from a variety of ethnicities, teachers and parents can expose children to the physical variation of skin colors, hair types, and facial features that exist in the human race. One example of literature that discusses skin tone diversity well is *Black Is Brown Is Tan* by Arnold Adoff, which follows an interracial couple and their two biracial children. Making diverse literature, such as this book, a regular part of a child's environment also encourages discussion of the role ethnicity plays in physical differences. By acknowledging "that physical differences do exist, and they are fine and natural," adults can encourage children to engage in a "color-filled celebration" about the variations of their physical attributes (Kemple & Lopez, 2009, p. 25). *What I Like about Me* by Allia Zobel-Nolan colorfully teaches children to celebrate the physical differences that make everyone unique. This celebration is especially beneficial because cultivating conversations about physical attributes enables children to establish a thorough understanding of ethnicity and personal identity instead of exercising a color-blind approach, which neglects to discuss physical differences.

Cultural diversity through ethnicity. In addition to learning about physical diversity, children can also learn about cultural diversity by reading literature that represents cultures and customs that differ from their own. Cultural differences, such as why someone celebrates Hanukkah instead of Christmas or vice versa, can cause culture to become a confusing concept for some children. However, by learning about how their culture compares to and contrasts against the cultures experienced by others, children can begin to develop a better understanding of how ethnicity affects people's beliefs and customs (Kemple & Lopez, 2009). Introducing books that discuss a variety of cultures is an effective way to make various cultures more visible to children and begin conversations about diversity. Exposure to cultural diversity enables children to discover the different ways people live, see the world through the eyes of others, and recognize that identity extends beyond being merely skin-deep.

Discussing Important Ethnic Topics

Ethnically diverse literature has a prominent role in the lives of children because the reading of diverse literature creates opportunities for the discussion of and formation of ideas about personal identity and racism. These topics will likely never cease to be influential in the lives of all children, and encouraging readers to think critically about these issues beginning in childhood will enable them to grow into adults who are aware of important ethnic topics and sensitive to the opinions of others.

Personal identity. Developing a positive sense of identity is important in the life of every child and should be encouraged at a young age. One way that this can be done is through creating a literary environment that celebrates all children and especially

represents children of color. Although white children may find a character who looks like them in many books, children of color typically have to look farther to find a superhero, princess, or book character who shares physical characteristics. By intentionally offering books that feature characters of a variety of ethnicities, parents and educators can give children of color the opportunity to see people of their own ethnicity (as well as of different ethnicities) represented in their literary world. While all children can benefit from seeing a variety of ethnicities represented in the books they read, "exposure to multicultural children's literature has been shown to bolster the self-esteem and cultural identity of children of color" (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010, p. 212). Especially for children of color, who may not see children sharing physical similarities represented often in literature or popular culture as often as white children, seeing a variety of physical attributes celebrated contributes to the belief that everyone is important and valuable. A child's perceptions about whether his skin color, hair type, and other physical qualities are desirable heavily influence what a child believes about his self-worth and identity (Kemple & Lopez, 2009). Because of the relationship between a child's perception of his physical characteristics and his view of himself, parents and educators should encourage children to view these differences in a positive light by not only featuring diverse literature but also by praising physical differences in ethnically diverse literature.

Racism and prejudice. Although discrimination on the basis of race has been illegal for several generations, the topic of racism should continue to remain an important point of discussion with today's young learners. According to research, children as young

as four years old “have the propensity to develop very negative views” concerning what is known in pedagogy as the *Three D's* (difference, diversity, and human dignity) and some have already “developed negative attitudes and prejudices towards particular groups” (Hawkins, 2014, p. 723). Though these attitudes are oftentimes influenced by the social climate a child is surrounded by, literature that positively displays the Three D's can be used as a tool to spark discussion about important topics such as racism and prejudice and promote a philosophy of inclusivity.

Ethnically diverse literature can be used to combat these negative attitudes by encouraging critical thinking and incorporating new perspectives into a child's view of race. For young children, learning to view issues from multiple points of view is not only an important critical thinking skill, but it is also an important aspect of understanding the perspectives of others around them. Researchers studied the value of reading multicultural literature to kindergarteners and the effect these readings had on the students' discussions and opinions of racism. The results determined that reading “multicultural literature with race themes” to children had a positive effect on the development of their ability to see issues from different points of view because students were encouraged to employ critical thinking skills and consider how others are impacted by racial discrimination (Kim, Wee, & Lee, 2016, p. 416). Although not every student may experience discrimination in their lifetime, students can be encouraged to sympathize with others, discuss important ethnic topics such as racism, and think critically about how social issues influence the world around them by reading diverse literature.

Teaching Social Justice and Social Responsibility

Another important reason why ethnically diverse literature should be a regular part of every child's life is its role in teaching social justice and responsibility. Children typically have established feelings towards diversity by the age of nine, so when parents and educators teach concepts of social justice, such as treating all people as equals, they can help children establish healthy views of diversity and prevent biases from forming (Wham, Barnhart, & Cook, 1996). By being exposed to diverse children's literature, both examples that display what constitutes discrimination and books that depict equality, children can be taught to "understand and become sensitive to the 'bigger picture' of human suffering" and learn how to become considerate citizens of global society that upholds the value of all people (Hawkins, 2014, p. 735). One picture book that exemplifies this is *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, which follows a young girl named Grace who is initially told by her classmates that she cannot audition for the role of Peter Pan in a ballet. Despite her classmates' comments that Grace cannot play Peter because "he isn't black", Grace listens to the encouragement of her supportive grandmother, realizes she is capable of achieving anything she dreams of, and ultimately earns the role of Peter Pan (Hoffmann, 1991, p. 14). Exposing children to existing social issues through the reading of ethnically diverse literature such as *Amazing Grace* teaches children to challenge persistent attitudes that undermine the rights of others.

Obstacles/Issues with Diverse Literature

Despite the advancements that have been made in the past several generations in terms of making more ethnically diverse literature available, there are still many

obstacles that affect the literature for today's young readers. These obstacles include issues with inauthentic portrayals and stereotypes perpetuated in literature, as well as the unfortunate reality that many ethnic minority groups remain underrepresented. However, being made aware of these issues is the first step in ensuring that these problems are remedied within children's literature in the near future.

Inauthentic Portrayals

One of the issues that arises with ethnically diverse literature is inauthentic representation. Oftentimes, this problem with authenticity is not purposeful but rather occurs because the author failed to properly research a specific people group before writing about them. Especially when writing literature that is supposed to be representative of a specific culture, authors must do their due diligence to ensure that their writing aligns authentically with the culture of that group of people and is free from any outsider's misconceptions, or they risk perpetuating misinformation to impressionable audiences about entire groups of people.

Children of any ethnic group experience a disservice when they are exposed to books that present inaccuracies as truth. Inauthentic literature is harmful to young children because "when [they] are exposed to misinformation about themselves or people who are different from themselves, images are internalized, and assumptions are formed that may go unchallenged for years" (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010, p. 214). One such example of misinformation can be found in the picture book *The River Dragon* by Darcy Pattison, in which an ancient Chinese family is depicted eating fortune cookies, which is factually inaccurate because fortune cookies are an American-made food that has been

wrongly associated with Chinese culture (Cai, 2002). Unfortunately, it seems that fiction is spread more easily than fact, which can have detrimental effects on the lives of children who are being negatively influenced by long-lasting stereotypes about their culture and the cultures of their peers that are perpetuated by inauthentic children's literature.

While people disagree about whether culturally authentic literature can be written by both insiders and outsiders of a particular culture, most can agree that an author must have proper knowledge of a people group before making any effort to represent said people group. If an author wants to write literature about a culture he or she was born into, grew up in, and has significant experience with, then most would agree that he or she is well-equipped to write literature that would properly represent that culture. Authors who desire to write about a culture outside of their own can do so. However, they must be committed to researching the culture prior to writing in order to avoid perpetuating any stereotype. Especially when writing literature for a younger, impressionable audience, authors (no matter whether they belong to the particular people group about which they are writing or not) must be committed to avoiding inaccuracies in their writing by "mak[ing] the effort to enter the world of that culture... through experience or genuine research of the other culture" (Bista, 2012, p. 323). Because portraying a culture inauthentically is not only damaging to those who are unfamiliar with the culture but also offensive to those who are members of the culture, all authors must make sure that they approach writing about any people group with attentiveness to detail and devotion to proper representation.

Overlooked Ethnic Minorities

While groups that make up a larger percentage of an ethnic demographic may see themselves represented often in multi-cultural literature, other groups may not see themselves represented at all. For example, though both Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans fall under the umbrella term of “Asian American” in literature, they are not necessarily equally represented within the literature. A study researching the representation of minority ethnic groups in basal literature within the Texas public school system determined that characters representing Filipino Americans, Asian Indians, and Korean Americans were not included in any fifth grade literature, despite these groups representing three of the six major Asian ethnic groups measured by the United States Census (Tang, 2013). Though it would be quite unrealistic to expect all ethnic groups to be represented, Tang argues that it is also unrealistic to “justify omitting groups that have a historical and numerical presence” and that better efforts should be made to ensure that the smaller minority ethnic groups are not neglected in diverse representation (2013, p. 142). Representing certain ethnic groups and neglecting to include others unfortunately sends the message, especially to those belonging to the underrepresented group, that they are overlooked despite the importance of their influence in history.

Another study evaluating the representation of Alaskan natives in children's picture books found a disconnect between the population of the various Alaskan native ethnic groups and the proportion at which the groups were represented in literature. According to the research, although two of the main groups of Alaskan natives, the Athabascan and Tlingit tribes, have similarly sized populations, characters of the

Athabascan tribe appeared in picture books twice as often as Tlingit people (Epps, 1997). Although all Asian people groups may share the same ethnicity, their cultures are nuanced and regionally varied. As such, authentic representation in children's literature is important, not only in avoiding stereotypes and misinformation but also in representing people groups in accurate proportion to how they exist in the population.

The Trends of Representation and Race Relations

Another obstacle that has existed in the past with ethnically diverse children's literature in the United States is the inverse relation between negative race relations and representation of minorities in children's books. A study published in the *American Sociological Review* focused specifically on this trend as it relates to the representation of African Americans in children's literature (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997). Though this study researched the effects of racial tensions on the appearance of African American characters in 20th century children's books, believing these same trends could happen today or in the near future would not necessarily be an unrealistic thought.

The study determined that American children's book publishers changed their in-print selections at times during United States history when race relations between African Americans and whites were tense. According to the researchers, not only did depictions of white Americans interacting with African Americans in children's books decrease during times of high social tension, but depictions of African American characters "virtually disappeared from children's books" altogether (Pescosolido et al., 1997, p. 460). Instead of using books as a way to increase representation during tense time periods and spark conversation about racial issues, publishers avoided the issue altogether by

neglecting to publish books with African American characters. While some may dismiss this as a legitimate issue because these publishing censorship and fluctuations in African American representation happened decades ago, the possibility of this occurring today with a similar minority group would not necessarily be inconsistent with the past.

Although this study focused on trends in the past, the results were clear that representation of African Americans in children's literature was dependent on the fluctuation of racial tensions during that time. When racial relations were calm, publishers produced more children's books with African American characters, but the inverse was also true, as if "indicating indecision or unwillingness to portray racial contact in new (and at the time, radical) ways" on the part of the publishers (Pescosolido et al., 1997, p. 460). If this trend were to continue, it would not be unreasonable to hypothesize that other minority people groups (such as refugee or immigrant children) could potentially see their representation pushed out of children's literature in the future if publishers became afraid to represent people groups who were controversially involved in current events.

Diverse Authors and Illustrators

More authors and illustrators who are representative of the people groups they are bringing to life in their books should be sought out by publishing houses. As discussed earlier, because ethnic authenticity is such an important and sensitive component of diverse literature, giving voice to authors and illustrators who are most committed to maintaining the authenticity of a specific people group should be a priority. While authors and illustrators can certainly create books about people groups who fall outside of

their personal ethnic group, literature written by people of color, about people of color should be encouraged because of the personal experiences of the authors.

Ethnic demographics of the United States continue to change, and minority populations are only expected to increase in the coming decades. According to demographics projections from U.S. Census, Latino populations (which were projected to make up 12.2% of the population in 2002) will account for 26.6% of the United States population (Pellegrini, 2000). However, despite the growing minority populations, the Cooperative Children's Book Center, which is responsible for evaluating the amount of books written "by and about people of color," has determined that the "number of multicultural titles published each year has remained static" (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010, p. 216). Though it would be expected that the number of children's books written by diverse authors being published should be increasing to reflect the growing demographic, the number of children's book authors and illustrators of color has stagnated, meaning that ethnically diverse children's books are not being written by people who actually come from those ethnic groups.

One study published by the American Association of School Librarians sought to determine the ethnic background of a specific group of children's books. This study chose to analyze the Scholastic Publishing Company's list of in-print transitional books, which bridge the gap between board books and independent reading books and are typically read to children from the ages of preschool to first grade. According to the results of this study, only 2.2% of the works from this transitional group were written by authors who were not white, even though this selection included a range of ethnically

diverse books, including “biographies about African Americans or American Indians [none of which] were written by people of color” (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009, p. 10). Although this small percentage of non-white authors may be explained a number of ways (authors of color perhaps write more picture books than transitional books, authors of color perhaps do not use more mainstream publishing companies such as Scholastic, etc.), this statistic should be concerning as it seems to show that books about people of color are not being written by authors with which they may share similar cultural and personal experiences. Authors from any background can write authentic literature, but literature written from a first-hand perspective should be especially valued because of the author's personal experience.

Creating Multi-Ethnic Classroom Libraries

Creating a multi-ethnic reading library is important because a homogenous library would not be accurately representative of the environment that surrounds today's children. Having a diverse literary world for children encourages children to create important connections with literature, and though parents should be primary contributors to a child's reading environment, teachers also play an influential role in ensuring that children see people of all ethnicities represented in the books they read.

Encouraging Reading

One of the largest reasons parents and educators should seek to create a multi-ethnic reading library for their children and students is because it builds and encourages a community of young readers. One study sought to determine the effect of exposure to multi-cultural literature on what the study defined as culturally, linguistically,

economically, and ethnically diverse (or CLEED) students (Ogletree, 2012). According to the results of this study, CLEED students were not only more likely to read but also more likely to understand books that were “culturally relevant” to the student (Ogletree, 2012, p. 123). Thus, if parents and teachers want to increase their child’s motivation to read, they should provide the child with texts that share cultural similarities with that child. Even though students should read texts that cover a wide variety of perspectives, they should also be afforded the opportunity to read texts about children who look, live, and act like them whenever possible.

However, increased motivation is not the only benefit for CLEED students to read culturally diverse texts. Especially for students who may be facing difficult situations at home, research has determined that “the level of a student’s reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background” (Ogletree, 2012, p. 122). For minority students, who unfortunately often grow up in households prone to poverty, becoming skilled readers can enable them to overcome obstacles to education they face that are often exacerbated by their socioeconomic situations. By supporting children with ethnically diverse literature, teachers and parents can help their students become more skilled readers who are better engaged in the literature available to them.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers play an essential role in a child’s interactions with literature because teachers often decide what types of books children will read and what books will be included in a classroom library. Though the answer for diversifying classroom libraries

might simply be for teachers to bring ethnically diverse books into their classrooms, the actual answer is far more complicated than that. Because there are many factors that play into why teachers choose to include the books in their classrooms that they do, these factors must be analyzed before discussing the best way to make classroom libraries more ethnically diverse.

Perhaps the biggest reason that teachers do not include more multi-cultural titles in their libraries is because they simply do not know how. Because approximately 85% of teachers are white, they often do not know how to approach the topic of race, and “even when teachers read or teach a piece of literature that directly engages with racial issues, they often avoid race as a topic of conversation” (Mosley & Rogers, 2011, p. 307). Though they may be bringing diverse literature in the classroom, teachers have not been equipped with the proper tools to discuss race within literature and avoid the topic completely, likely for fear of saying something offensive. Obviously, avoiding the topic entirely is not the answer, and teachers should instead be better equipped to become facilitators of racial discussions within their classrooms both through personal research and school-sponsored training.

Teachers, then, have the opportunity to expose their students to ethnically diverse literature not only to teach their students to see issues from the perspectives of others who are different from them but also to offer their minority students the opportunity to see their cultures represented in classroom literature. If teachers purposefully incorporate multicultural literature into their classrooms, coupled with proper discussions about history and racial issues, teachers are more likely to “become more open to diversity” and

serve as “cultural mediators” in their students’ lives (Ogletree, 2012, p. 125). This enables teachers to create a healthy classroom dynamic where students are not left feeling neglected or excluded.

In addition to making each student feel included in the literature that is read in the classroom, incorporating ethnically diverse books also enables teachers to become facilitators for discussion among all groups of their students. If teachers feel equipped and supported by their administration to bring diverse literature and topics into their classroom environment, they are better able to “intersect the ‘mainstream’ and ‘marginalized’ cultures for their students” (Ogletree, 2012, p. 125). Teachers then, have the opportunity to become mediators in their classroom conversations and can encourage all of their students to partake in discussions about these important racial topics with their peers. By becoming well-informed about topics of race and how to use multi-ethnic literature to incorporate these topics into the classroom, teachers can contribute to a class atmosphere that discusses racial topics in healthy, illuminating ways.

Conclusion

Though there are undoubtedly many obstacles surrounding the concept of ethnic diversity in children’s literature, there are also many opportunities for improvement. Given the complicated past of ethnically diverse children’s literature, the future appears bright for authors and illustrators who strive to tell the stories of people of color. The dedication of teachers and parents to create a literary world that includes children of all ethnicities displays positive intentions that, if followed through on, will ensure that all

children are given the opportunity to see characters who look like themselves represented in their favorite storybooks.

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