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Housing Diversity in Children’s Literature

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Abstract

Previous studies have examined diversity in children’s literature: Gender diversity, racial diversity, religious diversity, and diversity in family composition. This project examines an often overlooked diversity issue in children’s literature: Housing diversity. In the stories they read and the accompanying images, children need to see a variety of housing environments and need to see the settings and the people portrayed in a positive manner.

Renting an apartment is an increasingly popular housing option for many families. However, many children’s books glamorize living in a traditional house. Using a rubric designed by the course instructor, students in a university immersive learning course evaluated the “housing message” in a convenience sample of children’s books.

Students then partnered with local preschools, elementary schools, after-school programs, and community libraries to examine their book collections. With support from apartment industry leaders, students purchased and donated copies of the most apartment-friendly books to fill the gap in the book collections in these locations.

Introduction

Immersive learning is the hallmark of a Ball State University education, in which interdisciplinary teams of students work together to address a community issue. This presentation focuses on an immersive learning project in the upper-division course *Housing and Society*, involving students from academic backgrounds in residential property management and education who worked together to elevate the awareness and appreciation of apartments and apartment residents in the greater Muncie, Indiana, area.

The bias against renters has been growing ever since homeowners crossed into the majority in the 1950s. And where has it gotten us? We have a mortgage/financial crisis, clogged highways, abandoned houses, tax-strapped cities, and working families now homeless and in need of affordable rental housing.

Aho (2009) further states that communities need apartments to reduce urban sprawl and provide flexibility so that workers can move closer to jobs instead of being tied down by home ownership. However, there has been a social stigma toward apartments, and renters are not afforded the same social status as homeowners.

Course Content

The *Housing and Society* course is described as . . .

Exploration of the relationship between housing norms and public policy, mass media, fine/applied art, literature, entertainment, education, and/or personal relationships, from an individual and societal perspective; emphasis on how these factors reflect and influence housing beliefs, decisions, and aspirations.

For hundreds of years, the American dream has described our country’s love affair with ownership of a site-built, single-family, detached house. Ownership of a site-built, single-family, detached house is a housing norm—the filter through which all housing options are measured as being either acceptable or not acceptable to its occupants and to society as a whole. Housing norms are transmitted in a variety of ways, even through children’s literature.

The course was designed in response to the 2008 housing crisis. An article focusing on the housing crisis links many problems in the United States today to society’s overwhelming desire to be homeowners. In *8 Reasons We Need Renters*, real estate writer Karen Aho (2009, p. 1) states:

Project Objectives

The course project adopted in the spring of 2015 was “Housing Diversity in Children’s Literature.”

Children are very impressionable and often use the stories they read to make sense of the world around them. Today’s children will be the developers, designers, builders, financiers, managers, policymakers, and consumers of tomorrow’s housing. This project was seen as an opportunity to provide children with exposure to more stories that show renting and multifamily housing as equal to single-family home ownership.

- Work with area schools, preschools, after-school programs, and/or community libraries to assess their collection of housing-related books; and
- Provide copies of apartment-friendly books at these locations to fill any gaps in their collections.

Objectives of the project included:

- Develop a comprehensive list of children’s books with a housing focus in the text and/or images;
- Evaluate these books to determine which ones have a positive focus on apartments;

Project Implementation

Students in the class amassed a collection of 50 children’s books from personal collections, thrift stores, online sources, and the university library, and they evaluated the housing message in these books. A rubric designed by the course instructor and vetted previously through a symposium of other housing professors was used to evaluate the books (see rubric below).

Word Pairs for Evaluating the “Housing Message” in Children’s Literature

(Any reuse or adaptation of this rubric should credit Carla Earhart, PhD, CFCS, Professor, Residential Property Management, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, Ball State University, Muncie, IN.)

How is the **HOUSING ENVIRONMENT** (whether a house or an apartment) depicted in the narrative and the images? Consider the interior/exterior of the building, the surrounding neighborhood, etc.

<u>NEGATIVE</u>	<u>UNSURE/NEUTRAL</u>	<u>POSITIVE</u>
• Plain _____		Colorful
• Dark _____		Bright
• Dirty _____		Clean
• Cluttered _____		Organized
• Small/Crowded _____		Large/Spacious
• Repairs Needed _____		Structurally Sound
• Unsafe _____		Safe
• Boring _____		Exciting
• No Outside Space _____		Outside Space
• Noisy/Unpleasant Sounds _____		Quiet/Pleasant Sounds
• Smelly/Unpleasant Odors _____		No Odors/Pleasant Odors

- Appears to be Low Cost _____ Appears to be Expensive

If any people are described in the story or shown in the images, how are they portrayed? Consider residents, building owners, building staff, friends, neighbors, etc.

<u>NEGATIVE</u>	<u>UNSURE/NEUTRAL</u>	<u>POSITIVE</u>
• Dirty _____		Clean
• Ugly _____		Attractive
• Sad _____		Happy
• Unfriendly _____		Friendly
• Uneducated _____		Educated
• Poor _____		Wealthy
• Needy _____		Self-Sufficient
• Unhelpful _____		Helpful
• Loud _____		Quiet
• Clumsy _____		Graceful
• Lazy _____		Productive
• Boring _____		Exciting
• Unhealthy _____		Healthy

Only 15 of the 50 books were determined to be apartment-friendly, including these favorites of the class:

- *Blackout* (written and illustrated by John Rocco)
- *My Building* (written by Robin Isabel Ahrens, illustrated by Ilja Bereznickas)
- *Riverside Kids* series (written by Johanna Hurwitz, illustrated by Debbie Tilley)
- *The ABC Book of American Homes* (written by Michael Shoulders, illustrated by Sarah Brannen)
- *The City Kid and the Suburb Kid* (written by Deb Pilutti, illustrated by Linda Bleck)
- *The House of Joyful Living* (written by Roni Schotter, illustrated by Terry Widener)

- *The Imaginary Garden* (written by Andrew Larsen, illustrated by Irene Luxbacher)
- *Zapato Power* series (written by Jacqueline Jules, illustrated by Miguel Benitez)

Students were especially excited to have found the *Riverside Kids* series and the *Zapato Power* series, which resulted in telephone interviews with each of the authors.

For the remainder of the project, a group of student leaders served as project assistants, while interdisciplinary teams of students worked with a total of six outreach locations in the greater Muncie, Indiana, area:

- Appletree Childcare
- Grissom Elementary School
- Huffer Memorial Children’s Center
- Kennedy Public Library

- Muncie Boys & Girls Club
- Yorktown Community Library

Assessment of the book collections at these outreach locations were deemed to be lacking in apartment-friendly literature. As a result, these student teams selected apartment-friendly books to donate to these locations. Many of the groups also read the apartment-friendly books to the children in these locations.

Conclusion

Students hosted a public showcase to share project results with the community. The event included refreshments, information about the positive aspects of apartments, displays of apartment-

friendly children's books, and a summary of the interviews with children's book authors Johanna Hurwitz and Jacqueline Jules. Students discussed the project with attendees, which included librarians, teachers, city officials, other university students, and project sponsors.

In evaluating the project, the students, the instructor, and the outreach locations all had a positive experience with the activities. The only downside reported was the need for more time and more funding to provide even more apartment-friendly books to more locations.

Credit is extended to the Ball State University Residential Property Management Advisory Board for their sponsorship of the book donations and the showcase event.

Reference

Aho, K. (2009). 8 reasons we need renters. *MSN Real Estate*. Retrieved May 11, 2010, from <https://hpcentralsouth.wordpress.com/2009/06/12/msn-real-estate-8-reasons-we-need-renters/>

For More Information

Apartments and renting: www.WeAreApartments.org

Interview with children's book author Johanna Hurwitz: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYR_ruGROAA

Previous presentations on this topic:

- Earhart, C., McBee, B., Bottom, B., & Cipolla, A. (2015, October). Incorporating apartment-friendly children's books into an upper-division housing course. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Housing Education and Research Association, Springfield, IL.
- Earhart, C., Morris, K., & Shidler, D. (2014, October). Housing diversity in children's literature. Symposium at the annual conference of the Housing Education and Research Association, Kansas City, MO.
- *Redefining the Dream* Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/redefiningthedream