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Missing Multiculturalism: Finding Diverse Picture Books for a Library Collection

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Abstract

Despite growing awareness there are still too few children’s picture books that feature culturally diverse children. This includes picture books with African-American, Hispanic, Asian or biracial children and families. Library patrons often come to the reference desk asking whether or not there are picture books that feature children who aren’t white. This question is often asked shyly from parents or educators who have children that ask if there are any books with characters with kids that look similar to their own selves.

Over the years, many librarians have grown aware of this issue and have attempted to create a more diverse collection; a good librarian will even have a few go-to authors who feature culturally diverse characters in their books. However, the availability of these books is still much less than the availability of books with only white children in them. Not to mention the plot in many of the books are about more serious topics and many times feature a plot that includes issues about skin color.

This conflict deepens when it comes to obtaining and weeding books in the library’s collection. This is when other questions arise such as should a book with a bad review be ordered simply because it features a biracial family? Or should a book that hasn’t been checked out remain in the collection because it features culturally diverse characters?

Intro

“I have a strange question for you.” A mother asked coming up to the librarians at the reference desk in the children’s department of the library.

The librarian sits there with her fingers poised at the keyboard ready to answer this mother’s question.

“Are there any books with kids who are biracial? My son is Asian and Hispanic and he wonders if he will ever see himself in a book or if he will only see white kids? The only books I can find with different color kids in them are about being different.”

It turns out this question is not-so-strange. In fact, it has become a very common question among patrons and often in libraries common questions can’t be answered become common issues. This is an issue in which library collections and publishers should have worked harder to not fall behind.

“Even if you don’t have books in the library, if you have any titles of kids that look like my son, I’ll go buy them.” This mother asked the question with desperation in her voice. She did not want books with characters that were animals or abstract creatures that are supposed to be relatable for everyone. Her son was six-years-old and it was very important for her to find a book she could read to him with diverse characters in it. She was afraid if she didn’t find this for her son he would deem books and writing as something only for white children.

This may seem like an extreme thought for a people in a population who cannot relate to it, but Jewel Parker Rhodes stated it best in her closing keynote at the Children’s Institute 3 on Diversity and Character Driven Stories: “I do believe not seeing myself in books, not reading books by people of color, that I almost missed my calling to be a writer. A frightening thought. I was a junior at Carnegie Mellon when I saw, on the library’s new fiction shelf, Gayl Jones’s Corregidora. Black women wrote books? It was a revelation.” If children do not see characters or authors that look like them, they may be able to relate to them on an emotional level, but if they never look like any of the children they see in books children will lack a full connection. There is an undeniable white narrative throughout literature where characters are assumed to be white and this all starts with the images seen in the early books of children.

Picture books and board books are some of the first interactions with books that kids have. Whether a parent, educator or librarian reads them to a child or a toddler picks up a book on their own for the first time a diverse visual of literature at an early age is important for the sake of equality. If all children are represented on the page, possibilities in life are opened up for them to a child or a toddler picks up a book on their own for the first time a diverse visual of literature at an early age is important for the sake of equality. If all children are represented on the page, possibilities in life are opened up for them to a child or a toddler picks up a book.

The public library usually has the biggest collection of books that a young child comes into contact with, which would make it the prime location for children and parents to learn about books of all kinds and cultures. The core purpose of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) is “Creating a better future for children through libraries,” and the association’s core values include: “Collaboration, excellence, inclusiveness, innovation, integrity and respect, leadership and responsiveness.” The very fact that “inclusiveness” is within the core values to create a better future for children means all children should not only be included in the library’s programs, but also in the library’s collection.

Furthermore, the core values of librarianship on the American Library Association’s Website include, but are not limited to: “Democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning and social responsibility.” Therefore, creating a diverse collection is very important for children in the library. Being unable to respond to this growingly common reference question would not live up to this American association’s purpose.

It’s not that culturally diverse books are completely unavailable. Many librarians are prepared with recommendations of books that have diverse characters inside, but finding these books within the library collection is not always an easy task. Typing keyword search terms into a library’s online public access catalog (OPAC) such as “diverse,” “cultural,” “multi-cultural,” or “biracial,” will list a handful of books in richer libraries if the person searching is lucky and utilizing a 15, universal database to find titles of books isn’t much different.

Using the database Novelist K-8 searching for books published in the last five years for kids ages 0-8 with culturally diverse characters will only come up with 168 results compared to the 15,439 book results when taking away the culturally diverse character option. These books include, but are not limited to: Mixed Me by Tye Diggs, Whose Toes are Those by Jabari Asim, Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Pena, Nino Wrestles the World by Yuyi Morales, Han-da’s Surprise by Eileen Browne, and My Sister is an Alien by Rachel Bright. There are other picture books that appear in the searches that are about being different and being diverse such as Happy in Our Own Skin by Fran Manushkin and The Skin you Live In by Michael Tyler. These books teach the much needed lesson that while people may be different from each other all are valuable. This proves that books with diverse characters can be found, but the fact that many books need to have this topic matter before featuring children of different races is a default of the children’s book industry.

Children’s Librarians have trouble finding these books because not many of them are published. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) while the number of books about non-white children is growing, only 14% of the 3,000 to 3,500 books CCBC reviewed in 2014 were about or written by people of different races. This is less than half of the over 37% of the United States population that represents people who aren’t white. The fact that the number of books representing a population in our society doesn’t come close to matching the number of people in that population is disturbing. These books can’t make it to the library shelves and can’t be recommended to patrons when they don’t exist or aren’t being published.

Unfortunately, culturally diverse books existing are not the only quality that is needed for librarians to order them. Many library collections...


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Reversals of Fortune: The New Normal of Collection Development

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Introduction

The “great squeeze” of increasing costs and decreasing funding put our library into a series of budget crises which resulted in severe restrictions of library purchasing. Resistance, anger and frustration from faculty upon learning of the cuts was fueled partly by a lack of awareness of issues and techniques from both sides. Faced with rising faculty push-back, the university president guaranteed a significant allocation of discretionary funding for collections purposes, but only for three years. This has presented the Collection Development Department staff with a dilemma — how to spend a relatively robust but temporary budget, while planning for an unknown future. Through demand-driven acquisition (DDA), in-depth collection assessment, targeted enhancements, Open Access resources, and rigorous evaluation and tracking of current and possible resources we seek to meet the needs of our faculty and students. continued on page 28