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Missing Multiculturalism: Finding Diverse Picture Books for a Library Collection

by **Angela Scott Warsinske** (Youth Services Librarian, Rochester Hills Public Library, 500 Olde Towne Road, Rochester, MI 48307; Phone: 248-650-7144) <angela.warsinske@rhpl.org>

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 that 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 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 to all children and everyone will have seen it that way from the beginning.

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**, *Handa'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 collec-

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tion development policies state that librarians need to be able to justify the purchase of books they buy for the library collection. This way in the event that it is challenged by a library patron who feels the book is damaging for the public to read, a librarian can justify that he or she did not purchase a book based on their own biases or with an agenda in mind. Librarians can prove this through book reviews that also recommend the book as a good read. Therefore, it's hard to justify purchasing books that are culturally diverse, but not reviewed well.

These books must be new and recent, not only for modern children to get an accurate picture of the world, but culturally diverse or not after a certain amount of time some library books can become damaged from overuse and are hard to reorder when they become out of print. Also, due to shelf space books are weeded from the library's collection if they are not popular enough to be checked out frequently. This is usually done based on the book's circulation statistics and usually has very little to do with the book's content. If more books with diverse characters are diverse the less of a chance there will be that they will get weeded.

Diversity in the United States is growing. It is predicted that in the next 50 years the minority populations in the United States will surpass the white population by almost 10%. It can only be justified that there is a proper representation of the minority population in literature, especially in children's first interaction with books in their public library's picture book collection. A librarian should not have to struggle or work hard to find the books that this mother's son has asked for.

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against the grain people profile

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BORN AND LIVED: I was born in Canton, MI and since then have lived in various places in southeast Michigan including Ypsilanti and Wixom.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I am a member of the American Library Association, Public Library Association and the Association for Library Services to Children. I started working in libraries after earning my undergraduate degree. While earning my Masters in Library and Information Science I worked as a circulation clerk at the Canton Public Library and as an information resources assistant at the University of Michigan's Art, Architecture and Engineering Library. I currently work as a full-time youth services librarian at the Rochester Hills Public library. Before becoming full-time I worked part-time as the only youth services librarian at the Inkster Public Library and substituted as a librarian at the Baldwin Library and West Bloomfield Public Library.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Everything on a Waffle* by Polly Horvath, and *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: The industry is one that is ever changing and adjusting to people's needs and is therefore hard to predict. Today's patterns suggest libraries becoming a place for all demographics including those that are not common library users, circulating items beyond books and a more in depth use of technology. 🌱

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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 techni-

calities 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.

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