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How Common Is Common?

An Analysis of the Recommended Text Exemplars

ELIZABETH BURNS, SUE KIMMEL, AND KASEY L. GARRISON

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“Since students often identify with the protagonist, this helps make the texts more relatable.”

ABSTRACT

Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) aims to develop students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language. The standards also emphasize students' need “to understand other perspectives and cultures” (p. 7). Appendix B of the document includes lists of exemplar texts (stories, read-aloud stories, poetry, and information texts) to help educators choose texts that meet the recommended qualities of complexity, quality, and range. This study examines the Appendix B stories and read-aloud stories at the K–5 levels for diversity in regard to publication year, genre, setting, and protagonist characteristics, including gender and racial and ethnic diversity. Inclusion of diverse texts enables the development of critical literacy skills so that students can consider multiple points of view and other's' differences.

HOW COMMON IS COMMON? AN ANALYSIS OF THE RECOMMENDED TEXT EXEMPLARS

The primary goal of *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010) is to develop students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language. Such students “come to understand other perspectives and cultures” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010, p.7). As teacher librarians, we strive to provide authentic learning opportunities to develop this disposition in our students through multicultural literature in our library collections. Among the “common beliefs” in the standards for the twenty-first-century learner is this statement: “In this increasingly global world of information, students must be taught to seek diverse perspectives, gather and use information ethically, and use social tools responsibly and safely” (AASL, 2007). Given this imperative to teach diverse perspectives, we wondered how the Common Core aligned with our common beliefs—just how common is common?

We are inundated with articles about the Common Core exhorting us to get on board and lead implementation in schools and collaborate with teachers (e.g., Creighton, 2013; Fontichiaro, 2012; Hill, 2012; Jaeger, 2012; Nesi, 2012). A feature of the Common Core that has received much attention is the emphasis on making informational texts 50 per-

cent of what students read by grade four, increasing to 70 percent by high school (Greene, 2012). This balance was apparently based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests (Greene, 2012). Springen (2012) questioned the lack of a research basis for this fiction/nonfiction balance. Librarians have been particularly interested in the perceived shift toward more nonfiction (Morris, 2013), especially the suggestion that they highlight databases as a source of informational texts (Fontichiaro, 2012; Harris, 2012; Hill, 2012). Gewertz (2013) questioned the shift away from fiction, as some suggest this shift is not meant to dilute the use of literature in language arts instruction but rather to promote the teaching of reading through disciplinary literacy (Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Particular interest has focused on the book lists provided by Appendix B of the *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, which includes lists of exemplar texts (stories, read-aloud stories, poetry, and information texts) to aid in achieving the standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). The texts were chosen based on these three criteria:

1. Complexity: “qualitative and quantitative indices of inherent text difficulty balanced with educators' professional judgment” (p. 2)

2. Quality: “recognized value,” “classic or historically significant as well as con-

temporary works of comparable literary merit, cultural significance, and rich content” (p. 2)

3. Range: after considering complexity and quality, a broad range within those texts

Since its publication, Appendix B has received numerous critiques. Jacobs-Israel (2012) checked the list for lexile levels, availability, and copyright date and found that most of the titles are out of print. She worried “that publishers were climbing into their attics and warehouses blowing off inches of dust from out-of-print copyright dates and seeing dollar signs” (p. 16). Jacobs-Israel (2012) also criticized the list for having few curriculum connections and no annotations to guide educators. Hiebert (2012) also noted the failure of the list to provide true exemplars that might guide librarians and teachers in their assessment of text complexity. Though the intended purpose of the exemplars was to help educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range to use in their own instructional settings, some schools and libraries use Appendix B as their reading lists rather than guideposts (Springen, 2012).

While there has been considerable discussion of the Common Core emphasis on informational texts (Aronson & Bartle, 2012; Harris, 2012; Hill, 2012; Fontichiaro, 2012, Gewertz, 2013), there has been little discussion of the fiction “exemplars” in Appendix B. One publisher, Lee & Low, which emphasizes multicultural literature, has critiqued Appendix B on its blog as “a pretty white list,” referring to the racial representation (DeForge, 2013). Similarly, Cunningham (2013), on the same blog, called for the “moral imperative” of the lists to enable all kids to see themselves in the book selections. Reese (2012) specifically criticized the portrayal of Native Americans in the selection, and Boyd (2012) also lamented the lack of cultural and linguistic diversity.

These authors suggested the text exemplars in Appendix B lack sufficient diversity to support the ability to understand and interact with multiple cultures through literature. Will students see themselves, their peers, and their communities in these

books? Will they find contemporary and realistic stories featuring gender and ethnic diversity? We took a critical look at these questions in an examination of the fiction recommended in Appendix B.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

Though the appendixes were adopted along with the standards, there is an absence of research on the fiction titles in Appendix B. The purpose of this study was to analyze these titles for diversity. The broad research question asked how the forty-eight stories and read-aloud stories from the K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 lists reflect the diversity of reading interests and perspectives of a national and global population. This research analyzed characteristics of these exemplar texts on the recommended lists for diversity. World Cat records and the Children’s Literature Database were consulted to record each text’s publication year, genre, setting, protagonist characteristics, defining characteristics related to culture and diversity, and major awards.

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed mixed results. At first glance, the list contains many titles that would be familiar to most educators because they are popular in the media and common to classroom and school libraries. This familiarity can also be attributed to the fact that most titles are somewhat dated, and those that are newer tend to be

major award winners. The average original publication date of the books is 1970, with a 146-year-range, starting with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, originally published in 1863, to Grace Lin’s *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, published in 2009. We checked the bibliographic information found in the World Cat records and the Children’s Literature Database against Appendix B and noted that these publication dates are not always the first publication of a book, which could be misleading in discussions of the currency of the list.

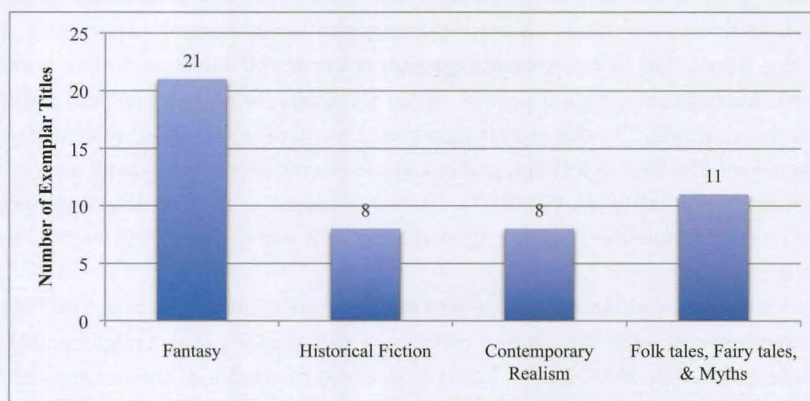
GENRES

There is little variety in the genres of the books included, as seen in Figure 1. Most titles are categorized as fantasy (21), often because the main characters are personified animals. It is notable that some of the older books were originally written as contemporary realism titles; however, the books are now classified as historical fiction. Using a definition of historical fiction as having settings prior to 1980, the dated publication age of several of the exemplar texts recategorizes their genre. For example, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett was first published in 1909 and set during the turn of the twentieth century. Readers in 1920 considered this title contemporary fiction, but students today would see it as historical fiction.

SETTINGS

Both time and place were noted for each

Figure 1. Genres in the Stories & Read-Aloud Stories for Grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 (N=48)



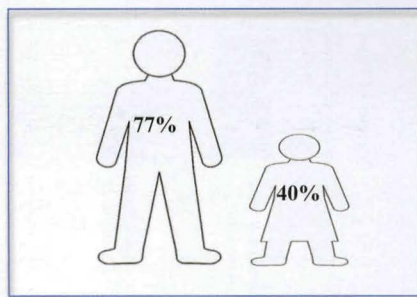
title. Many times are undefined, while others provide a broad range, from ancient Greece in Mary Pope Osborne's *The One-Eyed Giant* (2002) to the post-Depression era in *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999) and a twentieth-century city fire station in *The Fire Cat* (Averill, 1960). The place of the books is also largely unnamed (24 titles). They could be any desert, farm, town, or forest, keeping in mind that those places are English-speaking communities. Defined settings are most often in the western hemisphere, with twelve titles (25 percent) set in North America. Of these, the United States is represented with Wisconsin, Texas, New York, Michigan, and Kansas. Mexico is the setting for two of those twelve titles. As shown in Figure 2, there are only six books set on other continents, and none in South America, Australia, or Antarctica. The three Asian books are set in China and India, while the European settings are England and Greece. Some books straddle multiple settings, like *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1909), which begins in India and then moves to England.

PROTAGONISTS

The main protagonists are a very homogeneous group in terms of gender, age, and racial/ethnic background. As shown in Figure 3, significantly more titles have male protagonists than females.

We also noted the age of the main protagonists in the exemplar texts. For some books, a character's age is not explicitly

Figure 3. Gender of the Protagonists (N=48)



stated. In those cases, we made an estimate based on our experience with the books and information from World Cat or the Children's Literature Database. We noted six different age groups, as shown in Table 1, which we divided by the list level because a kindergartener needs a much different book than a fifth grader. The exemplar lists reflect more careful consideration of character age. The younger grades (K-1) demonstrate a broader range of ages. The 2-3 and 4-5 grade lists are more representative of the age range of the students.

As we were also interested in the cul-

tural diversity of Appendix B, the racial and ethnic background of the protagonists is shown in Figure 4. Seventeen of the books feature personified animals as the protagonist, and these are not included in the analysis. As with the settings, the race and ethnicity of the human protagonists are greatly homogenous, with nineteen titles having European or European American characters. Those books that represent ethnic and racial diversity span the lists for all three reading levels, K-1, 2-3, and 4-5. Therefore, while there are twelve titles with a minority character as the protagonist, these stories will be read over the span of six years.

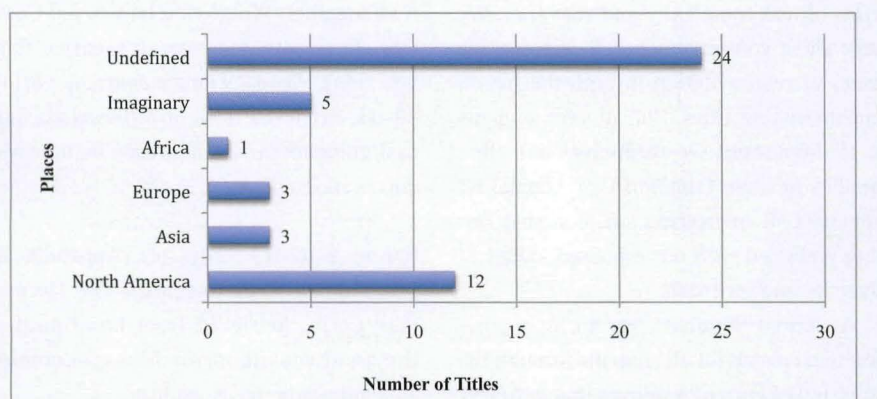
AWARDS

The number of award titles on the list is also notable. There are seventeen titles that are major award winners or honors recipients from the American Library Association (ALA). Nine of those books won the John Newbery Award, and five books

Table 1. Ages of the Protagonist by Appendix B List Level

Age Groups	Grades K-1	Grades 2-3	Grades 4-5	Totals
Under 8 years-old	6	3	1	10
8-12 years-old	4	10	4	18
Teenagers	1	1	5	7
Adults	5	7	0	12
Elderly	1	1	0	2
All ages	3	0	0	3

Figure 2. Place Settings of the Stories & Read-Aloud Stories for Grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 (N=48)



hold Randolph Caldecott Award honors. Two books aimed at younger readers have Theodore Geisel Award honors for emerging literacy. One title each represented the Coretta Scott King (CSK) and Pura Belpré Awards for African American and Latino/a authors and illustrators, respectively. The CSK winner, *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), is also a Newbery Award honor and is the only title featured on the recommended lists twice, once for the grades 2-3 read-aloud stories and once for the grades 4-5 stories. No other books repeat; however, the author Cynthia Rylant has multiple books on the list.

DISCUSSION

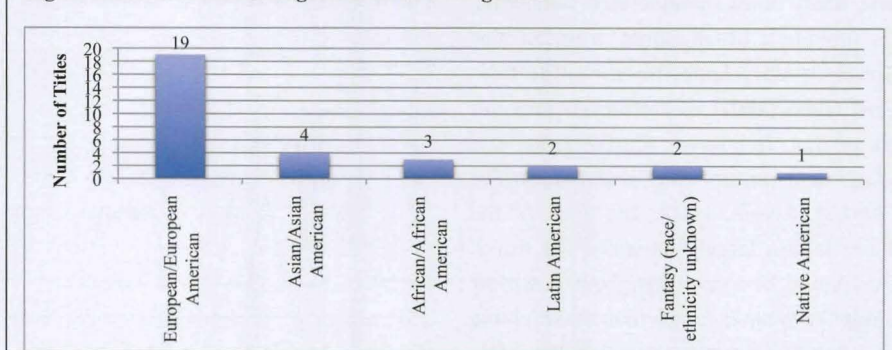
Given our overall findings from this analysis, a composite title from the Appendix B exemplar list would be a fantasy title published around 1970 featuring a Caucasian male protagonist. Is this list representative of the diversity we see in our schools and classrooms? Is it the kind of list we would use for collection development as teacher librarians?

The average copyright date of the list (1970) does not support the collection development ideals of most school libraries. It would be difficult for many contemporary students to identify with the subject matter and dated material. While the classics are important to any collection, to support a national curriculum like the Common Core, a more contemporary and culturally inclusive list must be created and used. Students read and enjoy fiction from a variety of genres. Including more intentional historical fiction texts or works set in a contemporary time and place will help to develop the critical understanding and appreciation of cultures and perspectives that make up a diverse global population like that of the United States.

The lack of diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender of the protagonists creates a largely homogenous set of characters throughout the stories. Additionally, the inclusion of surface or token diversity it is not enough to ensure a lack of bias or otherwise well-rounded portrayals of difference. For example, Dorris (1993) cites references to Native Americans in one title on the list, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) by Laura Ingalls Wilder; this text has been criticized for its negative portrayals of the Native American characters that play a more minor role in the story. Reese (2012) has also critiqued the depiction of Native Americans in the titles selected for this exemplar list.

One positive finding was the age range of the protagonists. The book lists seem to more closely align the main character's age to the student's age as the students become more independent readers. Since students often identify with the protagonist, this helps make the texts more relatable. Girls, however, will find themselves less often in these exemplar texts.

Figure 4. Racial/Ethnic Background of the Protagonists



Though the exemplar list was not intended as a recommended reading list for schools adopting the Common Core State Standards, these titles are featured on major publishing sites identifying them as Common Core texts (Springen, 2012) and even on Amazon.com records for the books. A concern is that teachers may interpret Appendix B as a “national reading list” (Springen, 2012) and publishers will promote them as such (Jacobs-Israel, 2012; Sutton, 2012). Some bloggers have called for librarians to promote other resources and create new lists (Bartle, 2012; DeForge, 2013). Hiebert (2012) has drawn attention to the need for guidance and true exemplars to assist educators in selecting texts with appropriate complexity and reading levels for various grade levels.

Twenty-first-century learners deserve diverse literature reflective of the globally connected world in which they are growing up. As educators work to implement the Common Core standards in schools and libraries across the country, we expect further critics to voice their concerns. As Gewertz (2013) stated, as the assessments roll out, we can expect teachers and schools to teach to those tests. Critics will likely continue to address the shortcomings of Appendix B in terms of text complexity and relevance. We hope these conversations will also include issues of representation in both the fiction and nonfiction titles. Will diverse students in all fifty states see themselves and their families in these Common Core standards? Appendix B represents an outdated list poorly aligned with our espoused values of diversity and inclusion.

As school librarians, we are in a position to advocate for all students through the provision of current resources that represent

the interests and cultures of students. Common Core provides a unique opportunity for school librarians to share their expert knowledge of resources and match resources to the needs and interests of learners. We have an important role in the implementation of the Common Core standards, and providing alternatives to Appendix B is certainly one place to start. School librarians have expertise in selection, including skills in identifying texts and applying criteria that includes appeal, currency, relevance, and appropriateness of titles for diverse learners. We see the big picture of the whole child, our diverse schools and communities, and the wealth of available high-quality, current resources. As we collaborate with teachers, we can be sure that “common” includes everyone in our selection of exemplary materials for teaching and learning.

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SAMPLE OF THE CCSS APPENDIX B EXEMPLAR TEXTS

Note: The complete list of the Appendix B exemplar texts can be found at <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>.

Averill, E. (1960). *The fire cat*. New York: HarperCollins.

Baum, F. L. (1900/2000). *The wonderful wizard of Oz*. New York: HarperCollins.

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Previously a selector for the Elementary School Library Collection, she has extensive experience reviewing children's literature and has served on the ALSC Caldecott, Newbery, and Notable Books for Children committees. Her research interests include multiple literacies and the sociocultural impacts of children's literature. She can be contacted at skimmel@odu.edu.

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Jaeger, P. (2012). A match well made. *School Library Journal*, 58(11), 20.

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