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Accessibility of Diverse Literature for Children in Libraries: A Literature Review

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Accessibility of Diverse Literature for Children in Libraries: A Literature Review

Abstract

This literature review addresses the issues surrounding accessibility of culturally diverse children's literature in libraries, including the importance of making diverse literature accessible, the availability of such titles on the market, library collection development of diverse books, and selection criteria among children. These issues, in sum, determine how many books are available to children, how they are made available, and if children will even choose to read them. The review shows that the data is unclear on many points regarding the benefits of diverse literature, though intuitive claims of the positive influence of such titles are not discounted. It also finds low representation of diversity in publishing and library collections. Finally, studies of how children select reading materials are presented, showing that there is not a straightforward correlation between having books available and children choosing them. Areas of further research are recommended to give librarians more insight into how to better optimize collection resources to best benefit all young readers.

Keywords

Children's Literature, Libraries, Diversity, Multiculturalism, Collection Development

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About Author

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The issue of cultural diversity has long been on the radar of librarians specializing in service to children. Since the earliest focus on the availability of quality literature depicting minority cultures, librarians have understood the importance of reaching all children with a message of diversity and inclusion. While there are myriad ways librarians can promote diversity within the library, including programs, events, and services, offering children a diverse collection of books remains an essential component of shaping the choices of young readers.

The meaning of cultural diversity has come to encompass “all the shared characteristics that define how a person lives, thinks, and creates meaning” (Naidoo, 2014). These characteristics go beyond what has traditionally been considered culture, such as foods, festivals, and customs, and instead have become a complex mix of factors determined by person’s daily experiences, social factors, and regional or national influences (Nieto, 1999 as cited in Naidoo, 2014). Cultural diversity is not limited to race or ethnicity; it also includes sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language fluency, and much more.

In recent years, there has been much discussion surrounding the issues of increasing the diversity of representation as well as the quality of diverse representation within children’s literature. These discussions focus primarily on the beginning of a book’s life cycle, where the decisions of authors and publishers play a major role. This literature review was originally intended to look at the other end of the life cycle, at how readers make decisions and whether young readers are choosing the diverse titles that are available. After all, it benefits no one to have shelves of books representing diversity if no one checks them out or reads them. However, there was almost no primary research available on the subject of how children select reading materials, let alone how race and identity play a role in these selections. Consequently, the review was expanded to include bigger questions related to the accessibility of diverse literature in libraries at each step of the reading chain, from the publication of diverse titles to collection development and circulation. It also addresses the more fundamental issue of why accessibility matters, though there was also scant recent literature addressing this. In sum, this literature review addresses the following questions:

- What does the research tell us is the importance of having access to culturally diverse materials?
- Of the statistically low number of books featuring cultural minorities that are considered of excellent quality, how many of these titles do libraries actually purchase for their collections?
- Do children choose culturally diverse books to read? What factors influence which books circulate?

Each one of these questions will be addressed by presenting pertinent studies and data that shed light on the subject. They can be considered separately, but taken together, the literature forms a larger picture of the importance of diversity, the state of book availability and accessibility, and the challenges that lie therein.

The Importance of Diverse Literature

It is widely agreed within the library profession, and among children's librarians in particular, that books representing diversity are important. This conclusion feels right; it is intuitively satisfying. But the question remains – what makes diversity so great?

The article, "Books Like Me: Engaging the Community in the Intentional Selection of Culturally Relevant Children's Literature," looked at how involving community leaders in the selection of African American themed literature for local child care centers and schools changed the way people thought about books and about themselves (Zygmunt, Clark, Tancock, Mucherah, & Clausen, 2015). In this study, teacher candidates selected 61 books that portrayed African American culture and invited Black community leaders to a two-hour event where they perused the books and voted on their favorites. Using grant monies, full sets of the 21 books with the most votes were purchased for local child care centers, schools, and churches. The researchers conducted interviews with the event participants a week after the event, and the teacher candidates involved wrote about their impressions of the event in a journal.

The feedback from the participants and teacher candidates was overwhelmingly positive. The teacher candidates described coming to a deeper awareness of racism, segregation, and prejudice. They felt both more connected to the African American community as well as more inspired to work with the children in the community. Community participants also expressed how much they enjoyed the event, how it made them reflect on their own experiences and journeys, and how important history and culture were to pass on to children (Zygmunt et al., 2015). This affirms the commonly held belief that when books are "mirrors" in which people see themselves, they have strong positive associations. However, while it is clear from this study that books representing African American culture can have a profound impact on teachers, caregivers, and community adults, the study did not look at the impact these books had on the children themselves. A follow-up study with the recipients of the book sets would have been an informative way to gain an understanding of how a quality selection of books reflecting a child's own race and culture can affect them. After all, they are the target audience of this literature.

Smith and Lewis (1985) studied how children are affected by race represented in stories. They looked at whether the race of a book's main character affected recall in Black children who listened to stories. In the experiment, 120 Black children between six and seven years old each listened to two stories on cassette tape. One third of the children listened to two stories with Black main characters, one third listened to two stories with White main characters, and one third listened to two stories with non-human main characters. They then answered a survey that tested their recall of the stories.

As the researchers expected, recall was greater for children who listened to stories with Black protagonists—but only for the boys. Among girls, the difference was negligible. This, the authors pointed out, could have been related to the genders of the main characters in the stories, most of whom were boys. Unfortunately, because this factor could have influenced the results, the study's conclusion is not

as clear as it could have been. While it is still possible to conclude from this study that boys' recall is affected by the race of the main characters, it is not that simple. The gender of the main character, as well as other factors such as the reader's age and background knowledge, may also play a significant role in recall.

In 1992, a teaching student at Michigan State University's College of Education looked directly at how reading multicultural books affected children. The study was conducted over the course of a school year in the third-grade class taught by the author. Kuperus (1992) used literature pertaining to three social studies units on Japan, China, and Native Americans to introduce culture, history, and discussion. Using surveys, interviews, observations, journal writing, and class discussions throughout the year, Kuperus was able to document changes in the children's attitudes and thinking about unfamiliar people and cultures.

Kuperus (1992) found that the children's attitudes were influenced positively; after reading the literature and learning about other cultures, they expressed more understanding, empathy, and global awareness compared to the beginning of the school year. This confirms the belief that reading books about unfamiliar people benefits everyone, and that books are a "window" into the lives of others. While the conclusions of this study are consistent with what educators intuitively believe, it must be considered carefully, since it was not peer-reviewed. It also prominently relied upon the observations and analysis of a single researcher and a single class of 23 children. This paper sheds light on how children are affected by literature, but its conclusions cannot be considered the most authoritative.

In fact, there is very little decisive information about the effects of diverse literature on young readers. Cheesman and DePry (2010) cite several more studies in the article "Critical Review of Culturally Responsive Literacy" that seem to offer evidence of how diverse literature correlates to academic achievement, but they point out that each study has flaws or makes unsubstantiated conclusions. Speaking specifically of the culturally responsive teaching (CRT) movement in which teachers "use students' culture as a foundation for learning," they state that "more rigorous study is needed to establish this promising practice as a fact" (Cheesman & De Pry, 2010, p. 91).

The evidence gathered from these studies shows that while the influence of diverse literature is anecdotally and intuitively positive, the research itself may not be academically rigorous. Practitioners in librarianship and education, however, seem to take for granted the idea that diverse literature always has a positive benefit both to readers who see themselves mirrored in a diverse book and to those who see characters unlike themselves through the window of literature. This theory holds up in practice, as there are no studies demonstrating a negative impact on readers.

Availability of Diverse Literature

If we assume that there are benefits to diverse literature as both mirrors and windows, then the availability of such books is of utmost concern. The United States Census Bureau declared that as of July 1, 2011, more than half of children under the age of one were racial minorities (United States Census Bureau, 2012). As of 2016, this group of children is ready to enter America's education system, and it is critical that there are books there for them.

Every year, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin compiles data on the number of diverse children's books published in the United States. According to the CCBC, 3,400 children's books were published in 2015. Of these, 14.8% were about racial minorities, including Africans or African Americans, Native Americans, Asians or Asian Americans, and Latinos (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2016). This number represents an increase over previous years, but it is still well below the corresponding percentages within the U.S. population, as reported by the Census.

A 2010 report, "Inside Board Books: Representations of People of Color," looked at all board books published between 2003 and 2008 to determine the extent to which groups of color were represented (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010). The researchers found that 89.9% of the books contained white characters, with 59.6% containing *only* white characters. Only 36.6% contained one or more people of color, while 10.1% contained only people of color (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010, p. 219-220). Given these statistics, those charged with developing children's book collections are facing an uphill battle to find suitable books that represent diverse populations.

In recent years, there have also been inquiries that looked at library collections to assess the level of diverse representation in their books. The broadest and most comprehensive of these is "Diverse Population, Diverse Collection? Youth Collections in the United States" (Williams & Deyoe, 2014). In this study, the researchers first developed their own list of 1,421 books that included the highest quality books from recent years representing racial and ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) characters. The authors then used WorldCat to search for each book on the list, and they compiled all the U.S. holdings data for every format of each title.

Williams and Deyoe (2014) found very specific data on the over 5,000 libraries that included any diverse books in their collections. They found that public libraries held the most, though their holdings still varied widely by region, size, and expenditure levels. Many libraries owned books with racially diverse characters, but none with LGBT characters or those with disabilities. Unfortunately, even among libraries that spent the most, one-third "did not achieve the minimal level for representations of racial/ethnic diversity or representations of disability, while half did not meet the minimal level for representations of LGBT orientation in youth collections" (Williams & Deyoe, 2014, p. 116).

Similarly, a smaller study looked only at LGBT books for youth within school media centers in two states and found that that up to 10% of students in eighth grade self-identify as LGBT (Oltmann, 2015, p. 25). High school media centers in one northeastern state and one southern state were studied to see if any collection patterns emerged. First, Oltmann compiled a list of 110 LGBT books of high quality and then compiled a sample of high schools from each state. Each high school's online catalog was combed to determine how many listed titles were in each collection. Oltmann found no significant differences between schools from the different regions, or most other variables, and an average of 20% of the research list was listed in each school's catalog.

Both Williams and Deyoe's study and Oltmann's study highlight that library collections vary widely when it comes to representing diversity. A high number of libraries have almost no diversity in their collections at all, while others have a significant collection. However, even the most diverse collections do not come close to representing the full spectrum of diversity in America's population.

In "Missing Faces, Beautiful Places: The Lack of Diversity in South Carolina Picture Book Award Nominees," Kurz (2012) took a different approach to assessing collections. After assuming that books nominated for the South Carolina Picture Book Award would be purchased and displayed prominently by librarians, Kurz analyzed the content of the nominated books to assess the quantity and quality of representation of racial minorities. Of the 112 nominated books since the inception of the award, but excluding those with non-human main characters, 61% featured white characters. Of the 22.4% that featured black characters, 12 of the 17 featured Africans, rather than African Americans. Clearly, award selection committees were not choosing books that represented the diversity of the South Carolina population.

The quantitative data on library collections speaks clearly. While the reasons behind the collection choices have not been pursued in any of these studies, they nonetheless illuminate the problem of underrepresentation of diverse cultures in library collections.

How Children Choose

It does not matter how many great, diverse books are on the shelf of the library if children do not read them. For anyone interested in increasing diverse books representation in libraries, getting children to read them must be a consideration.

Two papers looked specifically at race and how children respond to diverse reading choices. In "Readers and Book Characters: Does Race Matter?" researchers studied the reading choices of one class of third-grade students (Holmes, Powell, Holmes, & Witt, 2007). They created a library for the students that offered equal and balanced choices between books with White protagonists and books with Black protagonists. They observed which books children chose during free reading time and how long each child spent with the books they chose. The class included both White children and Black children. Surprisingly, they found no correlation between the race of the child and the books they chose, nor was there correlation with the length of time engaged with each book. The sample size for this study was small, only one class of 32 children, and there was no qualitative data from the children that might explain this result.

In another study, a group of Black children was asked to read five books specifically selected because they portrayed a broad spectrum of illustration styles, from quality realism to offensive stereotypes (McKenzie & Johnstone, 1998). Twenty fifth-grade students responded to surveys before and after reading each book and participated in small groups to discuss what they read. Though they generally agreed on which illustrations they liked most and least, which corresponded to the quality of the illustrations, they were surprisingly divided about both which books they would reread and which they would recommend to others. It seemed that their enjoyment of the books was not necessarily dependent on their reaction to stereotypes in illustrations. McKenzie and Johnstone concluded that

adult intervention might be necessary to guide young readers to recognize hurtful images and stereotyped characters (1998, p. 47). This study was not published in a peer-reviewed publication.

When it comes to influencing which titles circulate, librarians often compile lists of outstanding books, award winners, and staff favorites. Awards such as the Coretta Scott King Award and the Pura Belpré Award also recognize quality diverse books, but these awards and lists may not influence children's selection process. In one study, researchers compared the circulation of books on the American Booksellers Association's monthly bestseller list to books that had won the Newbery Award and Caldecott Award (Ujiié & Krashen, 2006). Circulation and inventory data was collected for these two lists from six library systems in Southern California. During the month of data collection, bestsellers were checked out of all branches an average of 200 times, while award winners were checked out an average of 35 times. This outcome is unsurprising, since by definition, the bestsellers are the most popular books. A better comparison would have been to use the average number of checkouts across all children's titles to see how award winners compare to the average. Still, the results of this study may indicate that award-winning books are not necessarily the books that children are the most interested in checking out.

Two other papers not specifically related to diversity are also worth mentioning, if only to give librarians and educators more insight into how children tend to choose their books. This information can be useful for those seeking to increase circulation of their diverse book collection. In the first, "Girls Choose Fiction; Boys Choose Non-Fiction," the author found precisely this outcome (Hartlage-Striby, 2001). Using a tally mark system in three elementary schools showed that girls chose fiction more often than non-fiction, and boys did choose non-fiction over fiction. However, the students' choices could have been dependent on factors other than gender, such as which books were on display. When asked to provide tally marks, one librarian realized that she had not displayed any non-fiction books for a kindergarten class.

Researchers have also looked at how very young children choose their reading material. For example, researchers found that preschoolers and kindergarteners had strong opinions when it came to choosing their own books (Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, & Mohlman, 1997). Specifically, they tended to choose books they were already familiar with, books with fantasy elements, and books with simple text. Librarians can apply this knowledge when selecting books for a collection or a display.

Conclusion

While it is almost universally agreed upon that diverse children's literature benefits all children, there is surprisingly little rigorous research to back up this intuitive claim. The existing research shows this may be true, but more research is needed to clarify and substantiate the benefits. However, studies do make it clear that there is a wide gap between the number of diverse books published each year and the actual population of minority children, especially among books intended for the youngest readers. In addition, libraries' collections do not reflect the diversity of the population at large, which could be a result of many complex factors, including

availability, lack of awareness, self-censorship, and lack of reviews. More research into this area could pinpoint which factors influence collections so that librarians can at least be aware of them.

Finally, children themselves may or may not be interested in choosing books with protagonists that look like them. It is not clear that simply having diverse books available on a shelf will result in children picking them up. There are many more factors involved with book selection than the race of the main character or the culture that a book represents. It is also unclear whether the low numbers of diverse books that are already available in libraries are circulating. More research into circulation patterns and selection patterns regarding diverse books could help librarians optimize their budgets and marketing plans to fully utilize the resources that they already have.

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