Term Paper - New Best Practices for Diversity in Youth Collections

Deidre Brill

San José State University

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Abstract

This paper examines the long-time issue of lack of diverse representation in children's literature and recommends new best practices for diverse collection development that encompasses methods of community building and bias acknowledgement. The recommendations are spurred from the most recent statistics on lack of diversity in youth literature, including character identifications, author identifications, and those of workers in book publishing and librarianship. This assessment then includes references to foundational work in critical race theory and its links to librarianship and suggests addressing individual bias and enhancing cultural literacy can lead to stronger collection development. Social media is considered as a collections development tool and community outreach/education method rather than its outdated use solely as a marketing tool for libraries.

Keywords: collection development, diversity, bias, critical race theory, cultural literacy, social media, Instagram, self-publishing, librarian

Introduction

A long-time cornerstone of librarianship is to cultivate collections that represent a wide variety of perspectives and experiences. The Library Bill of Rights addresses this very belief, noting "Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation" and "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view…" (ALA Council, 1996). In more recent years, the notion of a diverse collection of materials has taken shape to focus on including more works by and about underrepresented groups. For example, the nonprofit organization We Need Diverse Books defines diverse materials as those by and about groups "including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities" (We Need Diverse Books, 2018).

There is an abundance of research that reveals the importance of children and young adults being exposed to books and media that reflect varying cultures and ways of life. There is also data that indicates that major publishers have been slow to catch up with these notions, still highly favoring white, straight, cisgender authors over others. When mainstream publishers are still working on diversifying their own staff, authors, and story protagonists, how can public (or school) libraries seek out an array of titles that reflect the multiple and varied experiences of their young patrons? From a collection development standpoint, librarians must be proactive and embrace alternative methods of seeking out materials in addition to relying on the traditional sources of reviews and recommendations from large vendors or publishing houses. This paper addresses best practices for public libraries that center on interaction with communities to build diverse

collections, including exploring self-published works of the very patrons we serve as well as crowd-sourcing diverse titles and authors through social media.

Literature Review

The call for greater diversity and representation in children's and young adult literature has been ongoing for close to a century, primarily led by librarians and educators. Oft-cited figures include librarian Charlemae Rollins, who championed African-American representation in children's books in the early 20th century, working particularly to reform existing literature to disengage from harmful stereotypes, and Nancy Larrick, an educator who criticized youth literature's lack of African-American characters decades later in her 1965 article, "The All-White World of Children's Books." This rallying cry for literature to reflect all youth has continued into the 21st century, notably with author Walter Dean Myers's 2014 piece in the *New York Times*, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books." In more recent decades, the call for diversity has expanded to include other marginalized groups in addition to race and ethnicity. In their 2015 Strategic Diversity Manifesto, Mehrah and Davis include the following user traits to address in library diversity and inclusion: race/ethnicity, religion, nation of origin/regional differences, LGBTQ, abilities (learning, social, or physical), educational differences, gender identification, and age -- and that certainly includes any cross connections of individuals who identify with more than one category (p.19).

Statistics from Book Publishing

Representation among authors and characters who identify with any of these groups is still low, especially compared to recent census data on minority groups in the United States. Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), an educational research library, reports data on books they receive annually. Their data centers on racial diversity and has been compiled previously by publisher Lee and Low in a widely distributed infographic (Figure 1). Of 3700 new titles surveyed by the CCBC in 2017, 31% are by and/or about people of color; the remaining 69% center either on white characters or non-human characters such as animals (CCBC, 2018). Within that total, only 7% were written by Native, Latinx, and African-American authors combined. Lee and Low also conducted their own 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey of over 3400 workers in the book publishing industry, expanding their search to include gender, sexual orientation, and disability identifications along with race. They found the publishing industry, those responsible for selecting, promoting, and reviewing books on the market, remains overwhelmingly white, cisgender, and able (Lee, 2015). As Warinske summed up in 2016, "Children's Librarians have trouble finding these [diverse] books because not many of them are published" (p. 25).

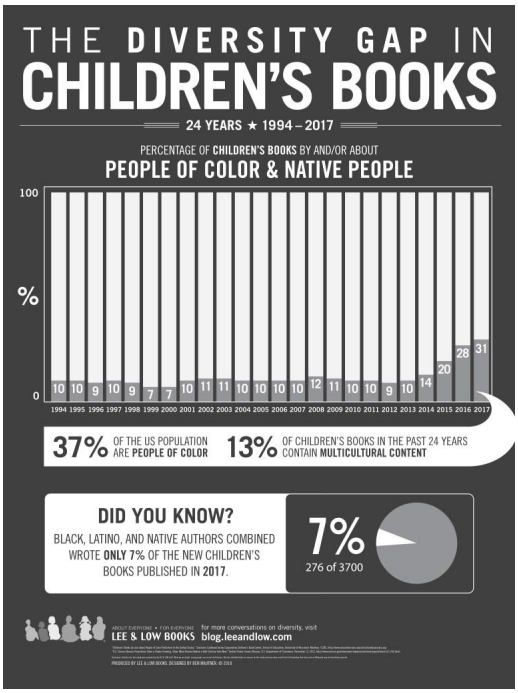

Figure 1: Diversity Gap (Corrie, 2018)

2014 and Understanding Critical Race Theory

The most recent statistics in publishing and staffing are coming from groups who have announced their own vested interest in studying and promoting diversity in youth literature. The slight improvement in the diversity gap since 2014 as shown in Lee and Low's infographic can be traced to the creation of another like-minded group, the aforementioned We Need Diverse Books. This non-profit organization started that same year as an awareness campaign on Twitter, where the eventual founders and other children's authors using the hashtag #weneeddiversebooks in response to a major book convention's author panel made up entirely of white men (Mabbott, 2017, p. 509). The group works with many stakeholders in this issue, such as publishers, authors and illustrators, educators and librarians. They run story contests, a mentorship program for unpublished writers, and even offer grants (donated from fellow children's author and literary activist Walter Dean Myers) for burgeoning authors to continue their work (p. 512). Mabbott's 2017 article examines We Need Diverse Books against critical race theory (also referred to as CRT), the study of society as it relates to race but with the added tenets of intersectionality with other marginalized groups (i.e. according to religion or gender in addition to race), social justice, and open dialog between all disciplines (p. 511). In tracing the incremental progress of inclusion in children's books from the days of Charlemae Rollins to the creation of We Need Diverse Books, Mabbott concludes that librarians should be taught CRT early in their careers to build a greater awareness of the challenges of representation and inclusion many groups face:

> Specifically, LIS programs should prepare future information specialists, whether it is in an academic, corporate, school, or public environment, to serve their patrons in a culturally fluent way. They should prepare their students so that when they go out into their communities, a diverse collection is a naturally occurring phenomenon (p. 519-520).

Current Collection Sourcing

Johnson sums up the collection development role as such: "The librarian's professional obligation is to develop balanced collections that reflect and meet the educational and recreational needs of these diverse user communities and are not biased by the librarian's own culture identity and personal experiences" (p. 137). Many librarians take this role seriously yet still struggle with executing it. In spring of 2018, *School Library Journal* surveyed its readers on the importance of diversity within their collections. Public and school librarians and educators were surveyed alike; out of the 1156 respondents 81% said it was "very important" to source books about diverse protagonists (Ishizuka, 2018). Much like We Need Diverse Books and the Strategic Diversity Manifesto, these librarians agree that the concept of diversity includes topics such as race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, religion, ability, and citizen status. They are also making a recent concentrated effort to purchase more diverse books for their collections, but as the survey's data revealed, "...librarians aren't always finding what they're seeking".

Many articles (both scholarly and in trade publications) have offered up suggestions for how to include diverse characters and authors. In 2016 educator McNair pointed out awards created for books about minority characters, such as the Coretta Scott King Award, and name-checked children's book review publications (e.g. *The Horn Book*) while cautioning librarians to read books to be able to better promote them to children rather than simply placing them on library shelves. The ALA Council tacitly acknowledges the lack of diversity from the large publishers, recommending, "libraries should seek out alternative, small press, independent, and self-published content in a

variety of formats" (2017). Yokota (2015) points out librarians needs to be aware of educator activists who promote diverse content, such as Dr. Debbie Reese's work for Native and First Nations children's literature. With all of these suggestions, how can librarians and youth educators combine them into actionable best practices?

Discussion & Best Practices

Check Your Experiences and Biases

Census data from 2016 compiled by DataUSA shows that 85.6% of librarians are white, which leads us to the same issue with the current data on major publishers -- how can these selectors of books be in charge of diversity in collections if they are consistently coming from similar backgrounds, those that don't necessarily align with the populations they serve? Johnson warns us that in collection development "Unintentional censorship results from failure to select materials representing a pluralistic and diverse society. Librarians can protect against unintentional self-censorship by being conscious of and sensitive to diverse communities and viewpoints" (p. 64). Obviously, we must hire more librarians with varying backgrounds and effectively mentor existing staff. We can also find ways to help library paraprofessionals earn their MLIS or be on a promotional track that includes tasks like working on committees for materials selection. Hiring and training is the primary solution to bringing a wealth of opinions and viewpoints into our library decision-making. It has also unfortunately shown to be a slow-moving process along with that of staffing in the publishing industry. Bias and inclusivity training are crucial investments in any and all libraries to speed this process along, but individuals cannot just wait for their employers to take action. It is first and foremost our job to

champion efforts in inclusion within our staff and volunteers and provide opportunities for everyone to be involved and heard.

Current librarians and educators who are part of marginalized communities have long implored their colleagues to listen to their experiences and concerns. Yokota outlines her own steps for increasing diversity in youth literature, stressing the importance for librarians and educators to "fight unintended insensitivity or bias" and to "recognize what you know and don't know" (p. 21). In Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh's 2018 paper on Inclusive Librarianship, the authors emphasize the importance of librarians recognizing the concept of whiteness, the pervasive and institutional idea that treats being white as a cultural norm. Because librarianship as a career has been so dominated by white colleagues, there are many microaggressions and assumptions that negatively impact POC librarians and even keep them from advancing in the profession. To that effect Espinal et. al. proclaim:

> There is a tension between erasure and tokenism that is unresolved here. For example, on search committees POC are often asked to appeal to other POC to apply for the open position...Why is this not the responsibility of...the entire faculty and staff? (p. 153)

They call for library management and for LIS programs to improve education on the negative impact of whiteness and recognition of microaggressions. Librarians and LIS students do need to acknowledge their own biases and make concentrated efforts to reach out to peers and community members to make sure they are not ignoring other important perspectives. Espinal et. al. suggest using "microaffections", encouraging interactions that acknowledge another's contributions or worth, as a means of promoting inclusion of fellow staff members (p. 158).

Social Media as Bias Education and Collections Tool

Regardless of the staff makeup and skill set within a library, each librarian who works in collection development must engage in the work of identifying her or his gaps in cultural understanding. Beyond that the next logical step is for each of us to learn more the areas where we lack knowledge or experience. In the SJL survey, librarian Kim Parker points out:

> There are some incredible librarian activists, and maybe amplifying their voices, putting them at the center of conferences, and getting them to publish best practices with kids who need it the most...will help the movement [to increase representation in youth literature] scale (Ishikuza, 2018).

These are smart suggestions and should be carried out. Yet we also need more consistent interactions and learning in our everyday lives to better integrate bias acknowledgement and diversity awareness into our practices. Social media can provide librarians with the opportunity for regular interactions and new ideas, particularly formats such as Instagram and Twitter that allow for following strangers, companies, and social movements. Social media may be used far more regularly than attending conference talks, and it certainly provides information that is more personal and of-the-moment, just by following a variety of people and checking their feeds.

Young and Rossmann, two librarians at the University of Montana in Bozeman, rightfully state in their 2015 article "The literature of library science has not yet developed a significant body of research around the practice of social media beyond the broadcast-driven, how-to focus on marketing, promotion, and public-relations announcements" (p. 21). Much of library social media and literature on the topic is used for promotion rather than community building. The authors conducted a study in 2012-

2013 of their library's Twitter interactions with followers both before and after making adjustments to their organization's social media strategy, which they changed to focus less on marketing library services and more on interacting with followers and showing topics of interest such as student life, guided by the adage "be interesting, be interested" (p. 29). There is inherent value in using social media as an engagement tool rather than solely as a means of marketing. Libraries and librarians as individuals can use social media as a means of connection with peers (such as showing support with Espinal et. al.'s microaffections), education (to fill in the gaps of our own cultural blind spots), and collections research (finding unknown titles and authors through recommendations).

Social media, particularly image-based Instagram, is a boon for book enthusiasts. Although it is a seldom-mentioned form of social media in LIS research, it is a platform that receives a lot of traction with librarians, educators, and library patrons. It has massive potential to be a useful collections development tool for librarians, a way to discover new titles and authors that may be beneficial to a library. Many librarians and libraries post quality content on diverse collections, but many others outside the profession do the same. It is also incredibly worthwhile to explore the profiles of authors, publishers, teachers, and book bloggers. For example, several online public book clubs have sprouted as a means of helping any interested person read a wider array of literature. Diverse Books Club (n.d.) engages readers with monthly discussions meant to highlight marginalized groups, soliciting suggestions for both adult (fiction and nonfiction) and youth (YA, middle-grade, and picture books) books from the public. Their compiled lists of past submissions can help librarians see not only recently released works, but also lesser-known older books that may have previously escaped notice. In addition to the

diversity of characters, the diversity of authors is important in collection development. In this way, authors bring unique and accurate perspectives to their work and including their works helps our collections to better avoid items that feed into stereotypes. Many works written by such authors may be identified on social media under the tag #ownvoices, coined by author Corinne Duyvis in 2015 as a means to indicate when "the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity" (Duyvis, n.d.).

Small Publishers & Community Writers

When Hughes-Hassell and Cox published their 2010 study on representations of people of color in babies' board books, they concluded that in order to enact change libraries should consider expanding their buying power beyond major publishers supported by book vendors. They recommended that libraries "purchase books from small, independent presses that not only focus on issues of multiculturalism and diversity but are often owned and operated by people of color" (p. 277). Independent publishers such as Saffron Press or Bharat Babies are gaining traction through connections on social media, which librarians can use to discover similar companies and investigate their offerings. Libraries should consider supporting them and others directly in addition to working with large vendors to ensure greater diversity of titles and authors.

Self-published works can also be perused and considered for library collections. Easy-to-use technology has made it possible for many fledgling writers to tell their stories without corporate representation. Granted, the Library of Congress (LOC) does not accept Cataloging in Publication data from self-published works -- as there is such an abundance of self-published titles, LOC instead opts to wait until a self-published work "has submitted for copyright deposit" before considering the title for their collection

(Dawson, 2008, p. 45). Yet other libraries such as Sacramento Public Library have opted to invest in local storytelling, using vendor BiblioBoard, which offers "instant and unlimited access to community-created content, local, self-published books", as a platform to encourage patrons to become authors. Much like local community archives and zine-making, this level of self-publishing can serve as a means for libraries to involve patrons in showcasing their own diverse stories.

Online Sources of Note

This is by no means an exhaustive list of resources on diversity in children's literature or of whiteness and bias in the profession. These are, however, a wonderful starting point for librarians to educate themselves, connect, and to find books and authors to explore. Included is at least one key resource for each best practice identified here.

1. **Bias and Whiteness**: *School Library Journal*'s Diversity & Cultural Literacy Toolkit -- https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=diversity-cultural-literacy-toolkit. Contains links to statistics (some mentioned in this paper) on diversity in publishing and children's literature, a thoughtful roundup of writings and videos on diversity and inclusion concepts for identifying bias, and collection listings and diversity audit suggestions.
2. **Social Media:** On Instagram, look for the hashtags #weneeddiversebooks, #diversebooks, #ownvoices, and #representationmatters. Be respectful of using hashtags that are geared toward marginalized groups; they can be a tool for listening and educating but recognize when it is not appropriate to chime in with an opinion as a member outside that community. Consider following the accounts

of grassroots campaigns committed to diversity such as @weneeddiversebooks, @girlsreadtheworld, or @hereweeread. Explore the feeds of any authors they tag.

3. **Small Publishers and Self Publishing:** CCBC's list of Small Presses Owned/Operated by People of Color and First/Native Nations -- https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pclist.asp. This regularly updated resource provides a comprehensive list of publishers that may not receive attention from major book awards, reviewers, or vendors.

Conclusion

This paper serves as a call to broaden our ideas of sources where we can receive inspiration for our collections and to educate ourselves on identities that are not our own. The practices outlined here involve hard work that can be time consuming, but with effort can be incorporated into our daily routines on the job. The undertaking to create and maintain diverse collections sets strong libraries and librarians apart and better serves their communities. Youth literature is a natural starting point and much of the LIS and publishing research has centered on that demographic. With time, diversity in adult literature should be examined just as rigorously. By connecting with one another in librarianship and paying attention to groups and resources that were once considered to be fringe, we can build the best possible collections for educating and reflecting our communities.

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