

Diversity of Authors & Illustrators in First Grade Core Reading Series

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Introduction

Children's concepts of gender and race are influenced by many factors throughout schooling, including the texts with which they interact. Specifically, picture books, illustrated books for children, play an important role in the development of students' understanding of these culturally constructed functions (e.g., Bender & Leone, 1989; Blom, 1971). Over time, these findings have spurred increased attention to the diversity portrayed in texts children read, not only of characters, but of authors and illustrators as well.

Larrick (1965) surveyed 5,000 trade books published in 1962, 1963, and 1964, and found that only 6.7% (349) contained one or more African-American characters. When African-American characters did appear in the books Larrick surveyed, they often only appeared as faces in a crowd or as characters with skin darkened in a way that was barely recognizable as indicative of a racial difference.

Twenty years later, in 1984, after noticing a drastic underrepresentation of books published by people of color, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) began to document the number of books published by authors of different races (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2014). The CCBC reported that in 2013 approximately 5,000 children's literature books were published and the CCBC reviewed 3,200 of them. Of those 3,200 books only 3% (93 books) had significant African or African-American content. Even more surprising is that only 2% (67 books) were written by Black authors and/or illustrators. This trend continued across books published by all people of color:

- ◆ 34 books contained Native American content, while only 18 of those books were written by Native American authors and/ or illustrators;

- ◆ 61 books had Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American content, while 88 of the books were written or illustrated by people of Asian/ Pacific heritage; and

- ◆ 57 books had significant Latino content, but only 48 books had Latino authors and/ or illustrators.

These statistics do not mean that all of the other books published in 2013 contained White characters because there are many books published every year that do not include characters, and many that include anamorphic characters. However, these statistics do indicate that there is a lack of diverse content in children's books, which is mirrored by the lack of diverse authors and illustrators who are publishing children's books.

Venezky (1990) noted that "the evolution of the modern reading textbook is in part the history of American education and in part the history of American culture," (p. x) but the statistics presented by the CCBC suggest that despite the diversity of perspectives and cultures in the United States, books published for children and teens reflect only a limited perspective of American culture (Horning et al., 2014).

The purposes of this study were to examine the diversity of the authors and illustrators in core reading series and to evaluate the opportunities and limitations of these texts in relation to the goals of multicultural education. We began our research concerned about whose stories are told in core reading series and who gets to tell those stories.

In order to address our concerns, we conducted a text analysis of four popular core reading series to determine the representation of gender and race of the authors and illustrators whose works are present in these series. We recognize that

diversity can be viewed from numerous lenses—race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion—just to name a few. Although diversity entails much more than just race and gender, we have chosen to focus on these two tenets because they are visible from the pictures of authors and illustrators printed along with the stories used in core reading series. This article examines the issues that are the basis of the research and presents the methodology and results of our analysis.

Literature and Multicultural Education

The inclusion of texts by and about diverse groups of people is significant towards creating an environment where multicultural education is valued. According to Banks and Banks (1995), multicultural education is a "field of study and an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups" (p. xi). It applies content from ethnic studies, women's studies, history, and the social and behavioral sciences to pedagogy and curriculum development in educational settings.

Proponents of multicultural education believe that its inclusion in schools' curriculums creates an environment where racial attitudes and academic achievement can be improved (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Multicultural education can therefore be a vital educational tool for fostering acceptance and for exposing students to the diversity that exists in our world. Multicultural education is for all students; it challenges prejudice, encourages awareness, and is designed to make sure that all students receive equal access to educational opportunities.

Literature is one door through which multicultural education might enter into the classroom as it can provide children with powerful images about themselves,

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their families, and their cultures. Bishop (1990) noted that literature can serve as a mirror, a window, or a sliding glass door by offering children opportunities to see worlds that are both real and imagined. She explained that “literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (p. ix).

When children are provided with images of people who look like them, and stories that reflect their culture and race, this exposure contributes to the child’s development of an appreciation of self (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010). However, this issue is complicated by the question of cultural authenticity. When the implicit messages in children’s literature are so potent and potentially powerful, it is necessary to question who is sending these messages and therefore who has “the power to narrate, the power to tell one’s own story, the power to self-determine, the power to self-realize, the power to self-represent, the power to change inequity into equity...” (Ching, 2005, p. 129).

Because of the influence of literature in children’s lives and the primary classroom, literature serves a crucial role in multicultural education (Fox & Short, 2003; McNair, 2008b). In combination with informed teaching, literature can enable children to understand others and to think critically about emotionally charged issues. However, we assert that researchers and teachers need to consider the nature of the literature itself, the text’s cultural authenticity, and how the literature will be used in schools and in readers’ lives.

We think that it is not only important to consider whose stories are being told, but also to consider who gets to tell stories. As mentioned previously, the statistics from the CCBC indicate that many minority children are not seeing their own stories being told in children’s books, and that often, even when their story is told, it is told by an author who is not a member of the culture of which they are writing (Horning et al., 2014).

Though an extensive review of the literature yielded a substantial body of research about the impact of character’s gender, race, and ethnicity on young readers, it yielded very little information about both the presence of and the impact of the diversity or lack of diversity of authors in children’s literature on students. Still, we did find one similar study in which McNair (2008b) charted the number of the authors and illustrators of color in *Firefly* and

Scholastic book clubs for Preschool–1st grade students across the span of one year. She found a drastic overrepresentation of White authors in the book order forms, with some months not including a single author or illustrator of color.

These findings urged us to continue with our research to examine the diversity of authors and illustrators in other facets of the literature curriculum, in our case, the reading series. They also corroborated our concern about what implicit messages children’s literature conveys to students about who has narrative authority in our culture.

Our research is grounded in ideas from social constructionist and critical multicultural perspectives. As such, we recognize that all learning is a social, contextually situated process that occurs when individuals make meaning together in an interpretive community (Fish, 1978). Individuals learn what is expected of them, how to act, and how to maintain social order through shared social activity (Shachar, 2012).

Children’s literature serves to reinforce the socialization process (Blom, 1971). In many literate cultures, storytelling and children’s books are used to transmit cultural values and attitudes (Harlan & Morgan, 2012). When children interact with a text, they may identify with many features of the text including the author and the illustrator. Through these connections, books serve to transmit normative and moral values to readers (Shachar, 2012).

However, children’s literature has not traditionally been authentic in representing the experiences of many gender, ethnic, and racial minority groups. This lack of representation and misrepresentation is more than unfortunate, because it preserves stereotypes about what is “normal” for people of gender, ethnic, and racial minority groups. Locke argues, “[i]t is possible to conceive of literature—not just as a body of esteemed texts, but as a social phenomenon characterized by processes of production, consumption, and distribution” (Locke, 2010, p. 91).

In other words, the literature that students read can be profoundly impacting, and the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of gender, ethnic, and racial minority groups in the authors and illustrators of children’s literature is not only indicative of a much larger social phenomenon of discrimination, but also serves to perpetuate that phenomenon.

It is not just the presence of a diverse range of authors and illustrators in texts that is important, but also the pictures

that represent these individuals. In a study conducted by Justice, Skibbe, Canning, and Lankford (2005) on preschoolers’ eye gaze during read-alouds, the researchers found that the children overwhelmingly focused on illustrations while being read to, even when they “have well-developed emergent literacy knowledge and when the storybooks feature salient print characteristics” (p. 239).

As such, this study suggests that when teachers introduce authors and illustrators to students, students may be more focused on the pictures of the authors and illustrators than they are on the print information that the teacher shares. For this reason, in our research we consider the race and gender of the authors and illustrators who were pictured in the core reading series as having more influence on students’ attitudes and beliefs than the race of those authors and illustrators who were not pictured.

We have chosen to analyze core reading series because, in the primary grades, many students’ main access to literature is through these series that are produced by large educational publishing companies. According to Brenner and Hiebert (2010), the use of core reading programs in primary classrooms has increased substantially since the advent of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. As such, core reading programs have an incredible impact on reading programs in U.S. schools, and their role in the transmission of societal values is significant (Hunter & Chick, 2005).

Although textbooks, or reading series, do not by themselves determine what is taught and learned in and through schools, the pervasive use of textbooks in classrooms grants them the power to steer readers towards certain interpretations and away from others (Bryan, 2012). Core reading programs, therefore, provide access to limited ideas and information, which inform students’ thinking, their actions, and the ways in which they imagine themselves and others.

Method

Materials

To select the texts for this study, we first made a list of familiar reading series publishers. Our strategy was to use our collective teaching experiences to identify curriculum publishers commonly found in elementary classrooms. This resulted in a list of six reading series. We cross-referenced this list with the top grossing core reading series reported by *Publisher’s*

Weekly (2013) list of top publishers. From this analysis, we selected the top four core reading series: SRA 'Open Court Reading' (Adams et al., 2005), McGraw Hill 'Reading Wonders' (August et al., 2014), Pearson 'Reading Street' (Afflerbach et al., 2013), and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 'Reading' (Cooper & Pikulski, 2008). As the focus for this study is to examine the representation of the race and gender of authors and illustrators in the top four core reading series in our country rather than to highlight racial and gender diversity in specific series, we will refer to the series as Series A, B, C, and D throughout the remainder of this article.

We narrowed our focus to first grade reading series in aims of (a) ensuring that the number of texts we analyzed was manageable, and (b) drawing on our notions that early childhood is a particularly impressionable time for students, including how they learn to perceive themselves and others. Therefore, we obtained either an electronic or hard copy of the student edition of the first grade text from each of the four publishers.

Each reading series contained 30 main selection stories—texts teachers would use for the teaching of specific reading skills—as well as additional stories, poems, and texts for instruction and practice. All of the series contained stories representing a wide variety of genres including fables, folktales, poetry, fantasy, realistic fiction, non-fiction, and plays. The majority of the stories in these series were reprinted from other publications; however, several of the non-fiction stories had no author listed and appeared to be original to the reading series.

For the purposes of our analysis, we coded only those stories for which an author or illustrator was listed. Furthermore, aligning with past research (e.g., Hunter & Chick, 2005), we analyzed only the 30 main selection stories because teachers are typically required to use those texts in an adopted curriculum.

Before we describe our coding and analysis of race and gender of the authors and illustrators of the stories in four major first grade core reading series, we acknowledge that we, the authors of this article, bring our biases to this work. In order for our work to be clear and forthright, we describe ourselves as three White-American researchers, two female and one male. Although we strived not to bring our biases into this study, we know that, however subtle, we analyzed and discussed these data through our experiences, ethnicities,

genders, and associations. To this end, we caution the reader when interpreting this information.

Coding

Critical multiculturalist perspectives (Locke, 2010) suggest that a text can be viewed as a social product that is related to the representation and underlying power dynamics of minority and majority groups. As such, we set out to understand how race and gender are represented in first grade reading series. We created a simple coding scheme to analyze the race and gender of the authors and illustrators of the stories used in the four different reading series, outlined in the coding form seen in the Appendix.

We coded the data of the author and illustrator of two stories as a group to increase the reliability and to solidify the coding procedures. We discussed an example where an author or illustrator's race was difficult to identify and came to consensus about how to treat cases like this. The outcome of these discussions was to use Internet searches to support our hunches about the author or illustrator's race or gender, as well as the addition of an "other" code for race.

Two of the series (Series C and D) were coded in their entirety by two of the authors to help ensure validity. The two remaining series (Series A and B) were each independently coded for the author and illustrator's race and gender using the form that we created.

To determine the race and gender of the author and/or illustrator we first looked at the picture and the biography provided in the book. If the author or illustrator was not pictured, we did not consider their data regarding their race or gender in our statistics. We made this decision because of our understanding that the illustrated or pictured part of text is where children focus their gaze first when reading or being read to (Justice et al., 2005). Therefore, if students do not see a picture of the author or illustrator, then neither the gender nor the race of that individual is likely to register with students and impact their perceptions of that race or gender.

To code for gender, we used the categories of female and male. To code for race, we looked at the facial features and skin color of each individual, broadly categorizing them into Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and White people groups. If the author or illustrator was pictured and their race was unclear, we conducted an Internet search to investigate the author

or illustrator's race and tried to imagine how a first grader might view or interpret their race.

While coding, our goal was to make our interpretations consistent with how we imagined a first grader might view or interpret the author or illustrator's race. It is possible that, just as first graders might, we misinterpreted the race of an author or illustrator. However, despite the possibility of a few inaccurate interpretations, most ethnicities, as it appeared to us, were so straightforward that any misinterpretations do not compromise our data as a whole.

Analysis

We counted the frequency of each author category listed on the coding sheet and reported the raw numbers of each category by series. We then computed the raw numbers into percentages. These numbers were used to compare the distribution of authors and illustrators by different races and genders across the four reading series.

Findings

We began our research with the assumption that multicultural education, through access to texts containing diverse characters and written and illustrated by people that represent many races and genders, is a central component of high quality literature instruction. We wanted to understand the reality of this principle, and therefore, examined the diversity of the authors and illustrators present in first grade core reading series. After an extensive review of 120 stories across four reading series, we found that there is a drastic overrepresentation of White authors and illustrators in textbooks for young children.

In presenting our findings, we have been careful not to simply highlight a few problematic instances where the author and/or illustrator's race is consistently White. We have noticed that the trend of an underrepresentation of authors and illustrators of color in reading series for young children is a typical occurrence across the data.

Our data pointed to the salience of this theme, and as such, we will focus the bulk of our analyses around the race of the authors and illustrators of the stories. However, as previously mentioned, we also began our research interested in the representation of the authors' and illustrators' gender. As seen in Table 1, our data showed that in looking at the four series as a whole, there were slightly more female authors

than male, and a fairly even distribution of illustrators.

Nevertheless, we did not feel that the amount of female authors over males was enough to be worthy of concern. We feel that this generally equal representation of both males and females as authors and illustrators is notable and is the start of a multicultural education visible in the authorship of stories for young children.

We would like to see this trend cross over into the inclusion of individuals of various races in these widely used reading series because as Table 1 also shows, the proportion of White versus non-White authors and illustrators is alarming.

As Table 1 indicates, 75% of the authors across the four reading series were White. To break this down further, we analyzed the races of the authors in each individual series. Out of 120 total stories analyzed, there were 85 pictured authors across the series: 14 in Series A, 19 in Series B, 26 in Series C, and 26 in Series D. The data analyzed and depicted in Figure 1 below represents these authors who were pictured in the texts.

As Figure 1 shows, the use of non-White authors in each of the reading series is unfortunately not the common practice. On the most dismal end of the spectrum, Series A pictured exclusively White authors in their first grade series. And while they did include pictures of the least amount of authors overall at 19, we maintain that this is still unacceptable. Series D featured the highest number of non-White authors at just 35%.

In examining the representation of illustrators of various races in each of the four reading series, the numbers in this category were even more startling. Out of the 120 total stories analyzed, this time there were 62 illustrators that were pictured in the texts: 19 in Series A, 7 in Series B, 11 in Series C, and 28 in Series D. The data, as seen in Figure 2, again show that Series A featured only White illustrators, even though the total number of individuals that they pictured (19) was the second-most out of the four different series.

The other three series did picture several illustrators that were not White; however, the proportion is so small that it does not adequately reflect the diverse range of people in the United States. Students from all different racial and ethnic backgrounds are seeing these images and thus, receiving certain messages on a daily basis about who has the power to narrate and illustrate stories. When popular reading series present students with stories that are predominantly told by only one group of people, what message does that send to our students?

Discussion

We began our research curious about (a) the representation of race and gender among authors and illustrators in first grade core reading series, and (b) the implications of this distribution for young children and classroom instruction in elementary schools. As the graphs indicate, the four most widely used reading series in first grade classrooms in our country do not by any stretch of the definition contain stories written and illustrated by a diverse group of people.

Both the authors and illustrators across all four series are overwhelmingly White, with one series even relying solely on White authors and illustrators. While there is scant research on this issue, this finding mirrors that of similar studies using board books (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010) and school-based book clubs (McNair, 2008b) as the unit of analysis. While the representation of gender did prove to be more equal and is a step in the right direction for the use of stories authored by a diverse range of people that more closely mirrors the faces of young children in the U.S., there is still much room for improvement.

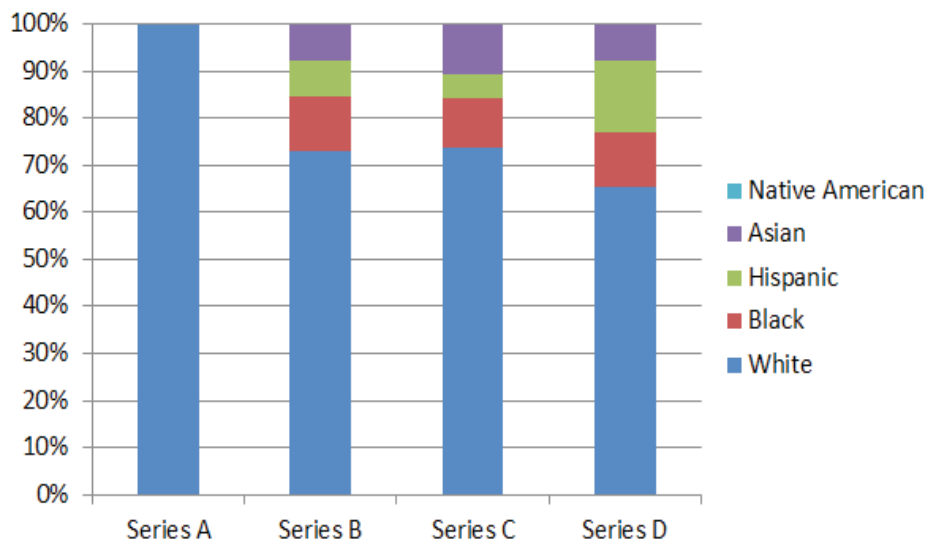
To explore our second research goal—to determine the implications of texts written and illustrated overwhelmingly by White people in our diverse world—we examined it at a variety of levels. It is important to first consider the critical time period in which young children are being exposed to ill-proportioned authorship in these texts.

First grade is a time of rapid development in learning to read. Children are inundated with a large quantity of texts from core reading series and other means. To help them sort, interpret, and understand this information, they rely on their mental schemas which are generally believed to be organizational frameworks for processing knowledge, which change over time as

TABLE 1
Race and Gender of Pictured Authors and Illustrators Across All Series

	Authors	Illustrators
Race		
Asian	7%	5%
Black	9%	6%
Hispanic	8%	5%
Native American	-	2%
White	75%	82%
Gender		
Female	64%	48%
Male	36%	52%

FIGURE 1
Race of Authors by Series



people go through different experiences (cf., Neisser, 1976).

Schemas affect how people interpret knowledge and their place in the world. With this in mind, as students read and have read to them the reading series that are such a prominent part of elementary classrooms, they constantly take in implicit messages from which to construe meaning about race and gender.

Frawley (2008) found that gender schema bias affects children's memories and causes them to misremember information so that what they remember fits in with their existing schema. In Frawley's research, elementary school children were asked to retell two Caldecott Award-winning picture books and answer criterion-specific questions related to gender-consistent or inconsistent events in the stories. The findings revealed that children retell the stories by including wrongful stereotyped interpretations of the main characters.

Relying on schema, students may witness the underrepresentation of authors and illustrators of color in their texts and then work to align this information with existing understandings of race and gender created through past experiences. Through repeated exposure to texts with predominantly White authors and illustrators, students' interpretations about who does and does not write, tell, and publish stories are confirmed.

It is important to consider what messages children are receiving through literature because research on children's perceptions of race and gender stereotypes reveals that children begin internalizing stereotypes

at a very young age (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Shachar, 2012; Shachar & Zach, 2000). Shachar and Zach (2000) revealed that as early as age five, boys and girls describe which occupations are acceptable for males and which are acceptable for females.

Furthermore, according to Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010), by the age of three, children begin to ask questions about variations in skin color and notice physical differences such as hair texture and the shape of facial features. These observations, paired with other societal messages that children take in on a daily basis, cause children to categorize and form attitudes about people of different races and ethnic groups (Tatum, 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

The images and stories to which children are exposed are the foundation for the attitudes and beliefs that they will have throughout their lives. Regarding race in particular, when children are exposed to misinformation or overgeneralizations about their race or that of their classmates, these ideas begin to work themselves into children's schemas and, if left unchallenged, can perpetuate stereotypes for years to come (Tatum, 1997).

Therefore, the significance of core reading series in helping to reinforce socialization processes (Blom, 1971) in young children cannot be overlooked. Children use texts to help them form identities of themselves and others. When "children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books" (Larrick, 1965, p. 63), this can, over time, negatively affect their perceptions of

themselves or their perceptions of those who are different from them.

Because children begin to internalize images and information and form assumptions about people who are different from them at a very early age, confronting the underlying messages that first graders receive from their core reading series about who can be an author or an illustrator is important work.

We also examine the issue of the drastic underrepresentation of authors and illustrators of color in aims of considering its implications within a broader social and political context. Through the reading process, students are "engaged in textual acts which are part of a wider set of discursive practices that actively produce and sustain patterns of dominance and subordination in the wider society and offer members of society prescribed ways of being particular sorts of people" (Locke, 2010, p. 90).

As core reading programs likely have a large role in this process, we argue that representations of race and gender in the texts is worthy of analysis. It is through engagement with literature that children receive messages about what cultural practices, literate activities, and social roles are possible, acceptable and valuable within a community. Therefore, if texts play a central role in transmitting normative values (Shachar, 2012), thus perpetuating hegemonic principles and practices, it is worthwhile to ask: exactly who gets to tell and depict these stories?

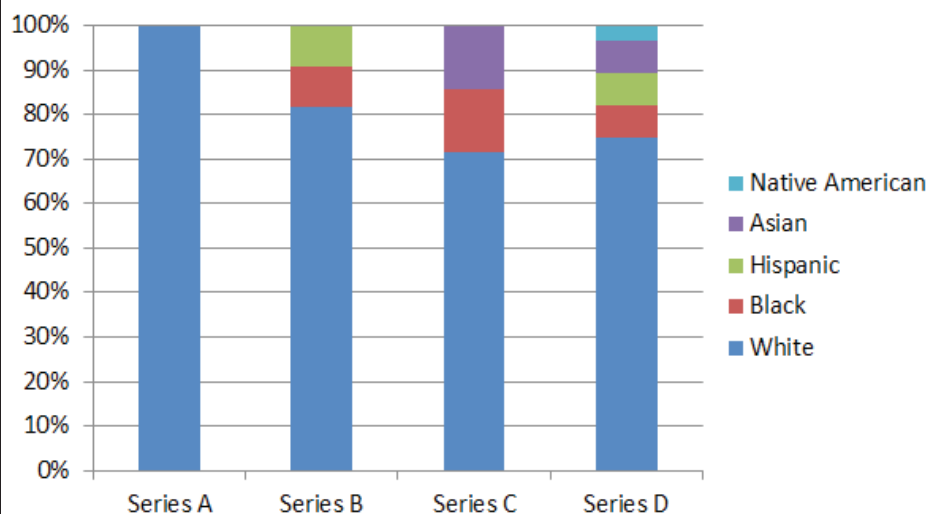
As our results reveal, predominantly White people have the upper-hand in controlling this conversation, thus shaping the sociocultural norms that are promoted (Shachar, 2012). This control spans across two main avenues: (1) the content of the stories being told—how people are represented and the norms that are privileged, and (2) how dominant cultures are indirectly portrayed as the knowers, storytellers, and beholders of information that are valued in our society.

Drawing on our critical race theoretical framework, this vast overrepresentation of White authors and illustrators in first grade reading series is in line with an existing system of privileges in society "that [work] to the advantage of Whites and to the detriment of people of color" (McNair, 2008a, p. 26).

Implications

In a study analyzing the content of first grade reading textbooks and their impact on students, Blom (1971) argues that texts

FIGURE 2
Race of Illustrators by Series



have three interdependent functions: to instruct, motivate, and socialize students. In particular, he suggests that the extent to which students may learn from these texts is dependent upon their ability to create opportunities for students to see themselves in the texts, thereby connecting with the texts.

Furthermore, Bishop (2012) argued that it is important for children who have been historically ignored in children's books to see themselves portrayed as realistically human so that they know they are valued in the social context in which they live and are being educated. With this in mind, the implications of including literature that is written by and representative of people from diverse groups spans beyond just the goal of mirroring our larger world.

As many suggest (Blom, 1971; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Martin & Halverson, 1983) the literature that we teach in the classroom sends messages to students about who they are and who they might become, thus affecting their achievement in school. As such, this is an issue that we strongly feel is worthy of teachers' consideration when making curricular and instructional decisions.

If a lack of diversity exists in both the reading series available for teachers' use, as well as the national book clubs that are offered and encouraged in most schools (McNair, 2008b), it is up to the teachers to supplement their curriculum with culturally responsive texts. Not only this, but since young children's eye gaze is already directed towards illustrations over print while reading and being read to (Justice et al., 2005), teachers should particularly capitalize on this when reading about traditionally underrepresented authors and illustrators featured in texts.

Students should be exposed to and given opportunities to discuss reading materials written and illustrated by a diverse range of professionals that are more in line with the values of a multicultural education. As the purpose of this research was to conduct a text analyses of four commonly used core reading series, we did not study how teachers utilize these texts in their classrooms. We recognize that many teachers may already consider these issues in their curricular and instructional decision-making processes; however, we present this research in aims of bringing increased attention to these important concerns.

The CCBC found the inclusion of authors and illustrators from a diverse range of backgrounds in widely distributed reading materials in our elementary schools to be

a problem in 1984, and as we demonstrate here, it is still an issue. For publishers, this is a call to action. We know that there are infinite benefits of including stories by authors and illustrators from a variety of backgrounds, but teachers need access to these in the reading series that are such an essential part of their classroom reading instruction.

For teachers and teacher educators, we hope that this raises awareness regarding the current representation of race and gender in reading series in aims of impacting the curricular and instructional decisions that you make with your students and a multicultural education in mind.

Future Research

The CCBC has analyzed the diversity in authorship of children's books published, McNair (2008a; 2008b) examined the representation of race in the authors and illustrators of the books featured in Firefly and Scholastic book order clubs, and we have attempted to do the same with widely used first grade reading series from four major publishing companies. This is a start, but significantly more research is needed to explore the authorship of other texts in a language arts curriculum and to confirm our findings.

This is very much an under-researched realm of multicultural education, but one that we view as critical towards teaching about diversity and reaching the wide range of students in our schools. With these findings, we think that it would be significant to understand how teachers use this information to make curricular and instructional decisions in the classroom.

Furthermore, we want to know the extent to which teachers make choices about texts with a multicultural education in mind. Would the results of this study change how they view the importance or existence of literature written by a diverse range of authors and illustrators in their classrooms? And finally, as we briefly explored, future research is needed on how exactly students take up the implicit messages being sent to them about who has the power to narrate their stories, and further, how this might impact their achievement, self-esteem, and educational trajectories.

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APPENDIX
Coding Form Used to Analyze Race and Gender of Authors & Illustrators

Series	Author / Illustrator	Female	Male	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	Total	Other Notes