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When Diversity Isn't the Point: Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors in the Classroom

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Abstract

This article looks past the gifted classics of children's literature to explore the incredible opportunity that is missed all too often: an opportunity to intentionally choose books in which diversity is not the point but showcase much-needed representation. Drawing on the concepts of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors this article explores how shifting titles for better representation is a seemingly small choice but one that classroom teachers can make to better engage the identities and possibilities for early childhood engagement.

Introduction

From the time birthing people learn they are pregnant, they are told about the importance of reading to children—starting in the womb. They are gifted the classics at baby showers and fill their nursery bookshelves with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), *Guess How Much I Love You* (McBratney, 1994), and *Goodnight Moon* (Brown, 1947) with good intentions. Similarly, teachers pick up their district-provided curriculum, choose books for shared reading, and write their lesson plans. Here lies an incredible opportunity that is missed all too often: an opportunity to intentionally choose books in which diversity is not the point but showcase much-needed representation.

For instance, if a Pre-K classroom is exploring fall and all that comes with the autumn season, the district-provided curriculum may suggest *Apples and Pumpkins* (Rockwell, 2012) or *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf* (Ehlert, 1991). However, *Good-*

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bye Summer, Hello Autumn (Pak, 2017) and *Amara's Farm* (Brown-Wood, 2021) highlight similar academic content but feature characters and authors/illustrators of color. By making that seemingly small choice, that Pre-K classroom is provided with mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors.

Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

The phrase "mirrors and windows" was introduced originally by Emily Style (1988) and was later expanded by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) to "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." Mirrors are stories that reflect an individual's own identity, including their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, religious, and sexual identities (Bishop, 1990). These stories affirm and validate the identities of children who see themselves in books by showing them they belong in the world and that they are valued and seen. Windows are stories that offer readers and/or listeners a view into the experience of individuals who are different from them in their various identities (Bishop, 1990). This may be how we learn about different holidays, traditions, and cultures—from everything including hair care and family reunions to religious festivals and naming ceremonies. Sliding glass doors provide readers and/or listeners with the chance to enter the story and temporarily become a part of that identity (Bishop, 1990). These stories are of particular significance because they take window stories one step further by providing further opportunities for reflection. While windows provide a view into another person's experiences based on their identities, sliding glass doors promote a change of perspective and greater understanding by inviting the readers and listeners to walk into the story and stay for a while. They are invited to try on an identity that isn't their own, as a means to reflect, learn, and take action.

Children's Literature as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors all provide unique opportunities for teachers to promote a positive classroom community by validating and celebrating the lived experiences of every single student in their classroom. Further, by choosing diverse books in which diversity is not the main point, they tell their students whose identities are mirrored in the texts that they matter here, too. An upbeat, summer-themed read aloud about paletas, such as *Paletero Man* (Diaz, 2021), tells Hispanic/Latinx students their experiences and culture matter all year long, not just during Latinx Heritage Month. An exploration into the sensorial experience of visiting a beach, such as *My Ocean is Blue* (Lebeuf, 2020), tells disabled students their existence is meaningful regardless of the frequently patronizing narratives of disability in American media. A book exploring the geography of canyons, such as *Over and Under the Canyon* (Messner, 2021), tells Black students their existence in nature is valid and essential, without ever explicitly stating that. Making the inten-

tional choice to feature a book with a character of color, or a character belonging to a marginalized group, that is not actually *about* the character's identity tells students that they are seen. They matter simply because they exist.

While it is clear why the benefits of mirrors in children's literature are plentiful, these diverse books become either windows or sliding glass doors for students whose identities do not match or align with those featured in literature. For many students in racially homogenous communities, books are typically one of the few ways they can experience diversity. These books are often opportunities to tackle difficult subjects, confront biases, teach with historical and scientific accuracy, and explain discrimination (Koss, 2015; Taylor, 2003). Further, for White students in predominantly White communities/neighborhoods, the intentional use of windows and sliding glass doors (at the very least) is an intentional step in putting anti-racism to work. Another advantage of choosing and providing mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors is the normalization that comes with featuring characters who do not match the societal default of a white, upper-middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, male, Christian individual.

Normalization of Diverse Identity Markers

The normalization of diversity in all identity markers happens naturally through picture books for young children, so children can experience an innumerable array of diverse identities within the physical confines of their communities or classrooms. When young children see different types of people in their favorite picture books, the identities of those characters become slowly normalized over time, especially when the characters' identities are irrelevant to the plot of the story. Normalization of diverse identity markers is the very foundation of the practice of value and validation. So, for example, when a White child falls in love with a funny, adventurous, Black girl with natural hair who leads characters on an alligator hunt, like in *Gator, Gator, Gator!* (Bernstrom, 2018), they start to normalize the existence of dark skin tones—an important first step in learning to acknowledge, validate, and value racial diversity. For those White children in predominantly White neighborhoods, this intentional effort to expose children to all facets of diversity lays the foundation for an appreciation of identities outside of their own. A hilarious read aloud about a wild collection of singing chickens whose caregivers happen to be two men, such as *Mr. Watson's Chickens* (Dapier, 2021), normalizes gay parenthood by showing children that is valid and good. A book about conceptualizing and chasing an idea where the main character happens to be non-binary, such as *Hold that Thought!* (Galbraith, 2021), normalizes gender identity outside the binary by showing children that is valid and good. A book about identifying shapes in constellations where the main characters happen to be South Asian, such as *Usha and the Big Digger* (Knight, 2021), shows students that having brown skin is valid and good. In all these examples, the characters'

identities are peripheral to the plot of the story, but simply highlight individuals of diverse identity markers living their lives. Teachers must show students examples of characters who do not fit that societal "default" in order to make students understand that identities outside of that societal default are meaningful, valued, and important, and providing windows and sliding glass door stories is a low-reach, high-impact way to accomplish this critically important task.

When Diversity Is the Point

Of course, choosing books that feature characters of color in which diversity *is* the point is also needed. A Thanksgiving book that features the traditions of Indigenous peoples, such as *We are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* (Sorell, 2018), validates the lived experiences and centers joy over trauma for Indigenous students. A book about visiting a food pantry, such as *Saturday at the Food Pantry* (O'Neill, 2021), reassures students facing food insecurity that it is okay to need a little help sometimes. Teachers need books like *All Because You Matter* (Charles, 2020), *I am Every Good Thing* (Barnes, 2020), and *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018) to create the classroom community their students desperately need to thrive—one that tells them they matter, especially *because* they exist.

The big opportunities, like Black children seeing Ketanji Brown Jackson confirmed to the Supreme Court, matter to tell children they can do that too. The messaging behind the big moments (Dream big! You can do anything you put your mind to! Reach for the stars! Hard work pays off!) matters, of course. The big message behind Kamala Harris' mother's now-famous saying, "You may be the first but make sure to not be the last" is incredibly important in the big picture. However, the smaller opportunities, like a gender-fluid kindergartener listening to a story about a child presented without gender wearing a dress and nail polish *(What Riley Wore)*, a disabled child listening to a story featuring a child who uses a wheelchair putting together a theatre production *(Ali and the Sea Stars)*, or a Black fifth grader listening to a story about Katherine Johnson or Mae Jemison *(Mae Among the Stars)*, matter more on the day-to-day front by showing kids they are seen, they are heard, and they are valued.

Diversity Trends in Children's Literature

For several decades, researchers have noted the substantial lack of diversity in children's literature, despite the growing diversity in demographics in the United States (Koss, 2015; Larrick, 1965; Sims, 1982). It is important to note, however, that diversity is not limited to racial/ethnic diversity, despite the use of the term in colloquial conversation. Despite the changing demographics in recent decades that reflect increased diversity across several identity markers (e.g., gender, disability, and language) both in the nation overall as well as classrooms in elementary schools nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; US Census Bureau,

2010), children's literature continues to remain heavily reflective of the societal default—White, upper middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, cisgender male, English-speaking, and Christian (Crawley, 2017; Crisp et al., 2016).

In 2018, half (50%) of children's books published depicted white people, and 27% depicted animals or other/inanimate objects (SLJ Staff, 2019). While there has been a nominal increase in the representation of Black/African American characters in children's literature, these characters often are still portrayed negatively, stereotypically, and/or deficiently (Perez Huber, 2021; Sims, 1982). "This lack of titles that feature ethnically diverse characters tells non-White children that they do not matter, and can inhibit them from developing a positive self-identity" (Koss, 2015, p. 37). The implications of the lack of diversity in children's literature extend to identity development because of how children find value in what they see; the absence of children of color in a book about princesses sends the message that only white children are beautiful and worthy of being princesses. "This lack of representation sends a subliminal message that non-White people play supporting roles in U.S. society," (Koss, 2015, p. 37) based on the breakdown of main and supporting character demographics in picture books. There is also a substantial gap in the representation of disabled children in children's literature, especially those books in which disability is not the theme or main point of the text. Despite the intricacies and complexities in representing "invisible" disabilities, or those that are not necessarily noticeable from physical appearance alone, disability continues to remain an extremely underrepresented identity dimension in children's literature. Across all dimensions of identity, especially race, the progress to create and publish books featuring diverse characters has been slow, but the reality remains that the majority of children's literature continues to feature white characters and animals/inanimate objects (trucks, construction vehicles, etc.) (CCBC, 2022; SLJ Staff, 2019). Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with books about talking bears or excavators; the issue here is the disproportionate representation of diverse characters and incredibly slow growth in remediating that issue. Tables 1 and 2 present specific demographic breakdowns of children's literature published in recent years.

Table 1

Racial Demographic Breakdown of Children's Books Published in the USA from 2018-2021

Year	*Books received at CCBC (USA)*	*Black/ African*		*Indigenous*		*Asian*		*Latinx*		*Pacific Islanders*		*Arab*	
		By	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*
2021	3,183	306	437	47	62	463	338	311	234	8	6	21	21
2020	3,261	256	401	27	41	387	310	230	195	1	5	17	22
2019	3,751	227	459	31	45	393	336	237	235	5	5	19	33
2018	3,352	205	389	27	34	358	309	208	243	2	6	15	24

Note. CCBC (2022). Children's Books By and/or About Black, Indigenous and People of Color Received by the CCBC–U.S. Publishers Only 2018.

It is worth noting that the book industry is dominated by white folks (76%), and even more so in the publishing industry (85%) (Fernando, 2021). In order to accurately and consistently make changes in children's literature, we must do so from the top down, starting with who makes publishing and editing decisions. It is also worth noting that despite growing social awareness about issues relating to diversity and inclusion, largely due to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and protests related to police killings of Black people, the relative increase in books about Black children has remained marginal (See Tables 1 and 2).

Small Steps toward Cultural Responsiveness

Montgomery (2001) described how teachers hold significant power in providing diverse learning experiences by creating culturally responsive classrooms:

> Culturally responsive classrooms specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform…Many teachers are faced with limited understanding of cultures other than their own and the possibility that this limitation will negatively affect their students' ability to become successful learners. (p. 4)

When teachers make these seemingly small decisions to choose a piece of children's literature that features diverse characters, they exercise culturally affirming teaching in a way that requires very little additional effort. While much of anti-racist and anti-biased education requires deep, intentional thought at regular and consistent time intervals (as it should), these small changes take very little time yet make a tremendous impact on students. Student representation in all facets of the classroom matters, from the decoration on the walls to the wording of math word problems to the characters (and authors) studied in literature. It is important to note that the representation must reflect all the dimensions of diversity, beyond racial and ethnic diversity, in order to truly capture the identities and intersections of identities within a classroom community.

Table 2

Racial Demographic Breakdown (Percentages) of Children's Books Published in the USA from 2018-2021

Year	*Books received at CCBC (USA)*	*Black/ African*		*Indigenous*		*Asian*		*Latinx*		*Pacific Islanders*		*Arab*	
		By	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*	*By*	*About*
2021	3,183	9.6%	13.7%	1.5%	1.9%	14.5%	10.6%	9.8%	7.4%	0.3%	0.2%	0.7%	0.7%
2020	3,261	7.9%	12.3%	0.8%	1.3%	11.9%	9.5%	7%	6%	0.03%	0.02%	0.5%	0.7%
2019	3,751	6%	12.2%	0.8%	1.2%	10%	9%	6.3%	6.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.5%	0.9%
2018	3,352	6.1%	11.6%	0.8%	1%	10.7%	9.2%	6.2%	7.2%	0.06%	0.2%	0.4%	0.7%

Note. CCBC (2022). Children's Books By and/or About Black, Indigenous and People of Color Received by the CCBC–U.S. Publishers Only 2018.

Racial/cultural Mismatch

The intentional choice to select diverse children's literature is even more essential in a classroom with racial mismatch between teacher and students. The term racial mismatch is used to describe the phenomenon in which the educator's race/ethnicity is inconsistent with the students (Morton et al., 2020). Racial mismatch is of particular importance due to the reality that over 80% of the teaching force is made up of White women, while about half of the students in schools are students of color (Morton et al., 2020). In situations of racial mismatch, active work toward cultural competence helps to promote positive relationships with students and academic outcomes, and small actions such as replacing an outdated book with a more inclusive text is significant in gaining cultural competence (Morton et al., 2020). The implications of racial mismatch extend to academic outcomes (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2017), increased attendance and decreased suspensions (Holt & Gershenson, 2015), and disciplinary actions (Morton et al., 2020). Further, teachers in racial/mismatch who are from racially homogeneous communities may hold implicit bias and preconceived notions about their students, and the implications of implicit bias are far-reaching in every educational domain (Morton et al., 2020). Thus, it is critically important to provide students with regular opportunities to celebrate and recognize their identities, but it is also critically important to provide teachers with regular opportunities to confront those biases. In early childhood and elementary classrooms where picture books are used daily in literacy instruction, herein lies a golden opportunity for both confronting those biases and increasing student representation. By getting out of our comfort zones of using years-long used books and accepting the work of identifying more inclusive literature, we invite teachers to lean into the work needed to put culturally relevant pedagogy into practice while pushing back on implicit biases, societal defaults, and exclusionary literature.

Teacher Implications

In teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers take courses on multicultural education, and we incorporate the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" in course after course without always providing sufficient context for what that means in action. Both preservice and current teachers need action steps for how to teach in a culturally relevant way, or how to be culturally responsive beyond the theoretical. We know the importance of relationship building and making lessons relevant to students' lives, so this action step (e.g., replacing outdated literature with more diverse, inclusive texts) is a low-effort, high-impact way to practice culturally relevant pedagogy. However, it remains an uncomfortable topic for many veteran teachers, as it requires both leaning in (to confront biases and accept responsibility for doing the work) and pushing back (to remain accountable for choosing more inclusive books and addressing other exclusionary elements of

the curriculum). It is uncomfortable to step out of a familiar space with familiar (often outdated) curriculum with familiar lesson plans, but it is essential in creating an inclusive classroom space in which every identity is seen, celebrated, and welcomed.

When teachers create lesson plans that feature diverse books with characters that reflect those dimensions of identity, their students may feel more invested in their learning and remain more engaged during instructional periods. Unsurprisingly, students who can relate to their academic work may feel it is more beneficial, relevant, and impactful for their own learning, which extends to their ability to remain engaged throughout long instructional periods. The academic implications of prolonged engagement speak for themselves: increased academic performance, greater rates of generalizability of learning, and ease of application of content. The social implications of this seemingly small change also speak for themselves: enhanced community building, feelings of belonging and inclusiveness, and meaningful relationships within a diverse community. In sum, the types of books we read to students matter, and it is incredibly important that we choose books that reflect the students we are teaching, in every dimension of their identities as well as the intersection of those identities. With recent legislation passing in various states that limit the curriculum taught in schools and even specific books deemed "inappropriate" for children, it is even more important for teachers to make changes within the curriculum that they are able to. There is nothing "inappropriate" about learning about the lived experiences of other people, and what is the point of 21st century learning if we are not exposing our students to the world in which they live?

Conclusion

We cannot fix all of the world's problems on our own, or overnight, or even over a school year. Further, we cannot raise and cultivate global citizens without intentional efforts to normalize, celebrate, validate, and include the experiences, narratives, and voices of all citizens on that globe. However, we can make one small change to our shared reading lesson plan to choose a picture book that features characters who use a wheelchair and other mobility aids to teach a lesson about teamwork, such as *We Move Together* (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021), instead of reaching for the classic that centers characters who fit that societal default or other classics that feature animals, such as *The Little Red Hen* (Barton, 1993). Making these small changes in daily lesson plans does require intentionality and purpose, but building a positive classroom culture is arguably the most important thing we do all year. We can collaborate with librarians and literacy specialists to help identify alternate texts; we do not exist on an island, and we have the world available at our fingertips to help make these changes. When we know better, we can do better - starting with the books we read at circle time in preschool.

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