Realism in Picture Books for Children: Representations of Our Diverse World

Abstract: Realistic representations of our world in books for children need to include authentic depictions of diversity through texts and images. When readers are faced with absent, outdated, or otherwise misrepresentative depictions of cultures, it leaves them with impressions of inaccurate worlds. Most often, such works are well-intentioned, but may be unintentionally misguided, or simply outdated perceptions and interpretations. Problematic depictions can lead to stereotyping, or condescending and patronizing attitudes. Critical race theory calls for the recognition of power relations among races, and how literature can offer inclusive and even corrective impressions of culture. This paper explores the role of critical literacy in learning to read with an analytical lens.

Keywords: multicultural, diversity, critical literacy, critical race theory, picture books

Realistic ways of representing our world to readers serve many purposes. Among those purposes is the ability to offer them a truthful depiction of varying places, people, and the enormous range of lives that are lived. Some depictions may be safe and comforting; some exotically different and enticing; still others unsettling and dangerous. These varied representations of reality are done through both words and illustrations, which, separately and together, offer a way of seeing ourselves and seeing others. Children need opportunities to see the range of realities in the world, whether they live in the midst of that reality, or it is in some distance from them and perhaps even unseen. Realism in literature affirms the worlds with which children have direct contact while also expanding
their conceptualization of the world so they can stretch to understand experiences beyond their own (Temple, Martinez & Yokota, 2014).

There are many ways to consider the range that is included under the umbrella concept of “realism”—it may be through nonfiction, longer works of fiction, poetry, picture books, and it can encompass quite an extensive range of formats. In this paper, I focus specifically on depictions of diversity in contemporary times, or “modern realistic fiction” as played out in the texts and the illustrations of books for children. Literature that offers cultural diversity as part of that realism gives children both “mirrors and windows,” a chance to see their own lives reflected, as well as to see into the lives of those whose lives are inconceivably different (Yokota, 1993). One interesting aspect of this metaphor, first coined in reference to multicultural literature by renowned scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) is an analysis made by Lee Galda (2000) who commented that, “windows are interesting in that we look out of them to see the outside, but when the light changes, we begin to see reflections of ourselves.” Especially in places where there is less diversity in day-to-day relationships, literature may be a child’s first place to encounter diverse people and their lives. Inclusion is the first step.

**Curriculum Concerns.** When diversity is missing from the stories children have available to read, the people who are not portrayed are invisible. When, for example, entire school curriculum books have no representations outside of Europe, the people from Asian, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas are all not included in the idea of “internationalism.” The stereotyped Native American in comic strips (i.e., “Lucky Luke”, a Belgian import), the token Asian folktale of long ago and far away, and other such problematic inclusions marginalize the people of the world. Even authentic but historical stories cannot represent the realism of cultures of today. Where are the depictions of the contemporary lives of people outside of Europe, or perhaps more imminently, where are the depictions of diversity within Europe? Canonization in school reading materials eliminates the possibility of including more contemporary stories because, in schools, time is limited, and students prioritize reading what is put in front of them first.
Authentic Representations

Simply stated, the features of contemporary realistic fiction are:

- They resemble real people.
- They live in a place that is or could be real.
- They participate in a plausible, if not probable, series of events.
- They are presented with a dilemma that is of interest to children.
- They discover a realistic solution.

(Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2014)

When applying these basic understandings to multicultural literature, the qualifying descriptors of “real,” “plausible,” “probable,” and “realistic” require cultural representation analysis. Often, reviews are written by intelligent, well-meaning critics, analyzing books from a well-informed literary perspective, but without attention to the need for cultural authenticity. Thus, stories that are well written, illustrations that are skillfully rendered, and also cultures that are misrepresented or viewed in patronizing ways, continue to be recommended.

The concept of “authenticity” in representation is often discussed in multicultural literature (e.g., Temple, Martinez, Yokota, 2014). Authentic depiction is recognized as representation of culture in ways that those who are inside that culture recognize as genuine and potentially possible. Not only could the places described be real, but the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of the characters also ring true. Characters face moral questions that could arise in real life and react in ways that are culturally conceivable. When cultures are authentically represented, it avoids exoticism, romanticism, and ways of showing “others” as not dimensionally developed. Flat characters, stereotyped situations, and so forth are avoided; and the tone is not patronizing, condescending, or unrealistically optimistic.
What benefits are there for readers when encountering stories of cultural authenticity, well written?

- They may come to feel that they are not alone.
- They may learn to reflect on the choices in their own lives.
- They may develop empathy for other people.
- They may see life experiences beyond their own.

(Temple, Martínez, & Yokota, 2014)

When realistic stories are set in a real or potentially real place of current times, they give glimpses into worlds of readers’ contemporaries. Komako Sakai’s books often depict a young child’s experiences that are somewhat universal, such as in *Hanna-cha ga me wo sametara* (*Hannah’s Night*, 2013) in which a little girl awakens during the night, finds her parents already asleep, so she and her cat go about the house stopping at the bathroom, having a snack, and eventually returning to bed. The absence of cultural specificity in the illustrations adds to the sense of universality, and child readers are left with images of a contemporary portrayal.

**Emotional realism.** It is especially important to have emotional realism when depicting a perspective that is out of our own experiences. The situation may be the coming of age that all go through, or struggles and experiences that fewer readers may personally experience but nevertheless offer stories depicting rarer-than-usual experiences and consider these perspectives as broadly as possible. Child readers thus can consider their own emotions within settings that may or may not be familiar; seeing how others deal with their situations allows the reader to consider how they might have responded. In *Els patins del Sebastià* (*Sebastian’s Roller Skates*) (2005) a young boy is too shy to express his many thoughts but finding an abandoned pair of roller skates leads to practice and even adventure, as the illustrations parallel his growth in self-confidence and courage. This kind of emotional realism will resonate with children across country lines.

**Culturally specific with details that ring true.** Cai (1995/2006) brings to consideration the role of imagination in depicting worlds outside those of the author’s or illustrator’s own cultural experiences; yet he recognizes the role that careful research and observation
allows in authentically depicting as an outsider to a particular culture. For the picture book 外婆住在香水村 (Grandma Lives in a Perfume Village, 2014), German illustrator Sonja Danowski researched carefully the ways in which she would illustrate a book set in China, having never been there. Working with her Chinese editor, she was able to create illustrations for the Chinese publisher. Although it is likely that Chinese people will recognize the illustrations as created by an “outsider”, they would also likely find them to be artistically representational of a Chinese story, a blend of imagination based on careful research. Of course, when a book is written and illustrated by cultural insider who has lived the portrayed culture and can represent it well, the resulting book rings true very naturally. One such example is Harlem by Walter Dean Myers (1997), illustrated by his son, Christopher Myers. Through poetic text and collaged illustrations, the pair depict an insider’s perspective on stories about Harlem that comprise the book, thus offering readers a unique sense of place.

**Problematic Representations of Diversity**

However, problems are readily found in existing children’s literature, problems that range from underrepresentation and misrepresentation to downright omission (Myers, W.D., 2014). Christopher Myers (2014) calls for the need to be more about diversity of representation, but diversity in the ways in which we tell stories. Discussions of canons of literature revolve around the notion that these so-called “classics” have given roots to a cultural history. That is, when outdated images and portrayals appear in such literature, objections are dismissed as “those were the depictions at the time, and we have to be historically accurate.” Thus, when newer interpretations, understandings or corrective images are available, they may not be made as readily available to readers due to the emphasis on “classics.” As a result, we run the likelihood of continuing damaging representation without corrective newer interpretations.

Often, parents and teachers nostalgically look back on books from their childhood and don’t even recognize the racist representations because they are focused on how fondly they remember that book and their emotional experiences with it in childhood. In a September 25, 2014 “Fuse 8” blogpost at School Library Journal, Elizabeth Bird uses the
title, “Surprise! It’s Racist! Unwanted Children’s Book Surprises.” She discusses reading a book published long ago (If I Ran the Zoo by Dr. Seuss, 1950) yet of continuing popularity to her daughter, commenting on her surprise in not remembering how racist it was. The same has been true for other parents, to the point that Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net said to his daughter that he could no longer continue to read to her a particular book he discovered as an adult to be racist in the midst of a read aloud session. But, these are two very enlightened parents when it comes to perceiving racism. What about other well-intentioned but less-informed parents and adults?

In the United States, there have been decades of addressing such issues, with mixed success. We continue to ask the question of why representation of diversity in children’s literature is not even close to its representation in society; yet there are some who believe that having elected an African American president indicates that the U.S. is already in a “post-racial society.” Such an attitude has, for all intents and purposes, spurred a new type of “Racism 2.0.” This dangerous belief that U.S. society is now post-racial takes away the need for attention to diversity and instead pretends that there is no longer discrimination due to racial lines. Those who claim that they don’t discriminate (“I don’t even see color.” “We are really all the same.”) privilege the parallels of humanity without considering that not all people have the same access to power that others have.

When time changes historical perceptions.

Times change, and events that were recent when a book was published eventually become history. La Composición (The Composition, 2003) is set during the time of Chile’s dictatorship when people were often taken away by the military police and “disappeared” for engaging in political activities like listening to the radio. Although the country, year, and other such details are unnamed, and without a doubt dictatorship continues today in other parts of our world, the fact is that this particularly story is rooted in a particular country’s past. This is an important book sharing a specific slice of history in a way that children can understand; yet if children did not also see other books portraying contemporary realistic images of democratic Chile today, they would be left to remember only this particular slice.
But what happens when, decades later, the sense of place in a book requires new descriptions to reflect the changes in the setting? In a popular series by German illustrator, Ali Migutsch (e.g., Rundherum in meiner stadt), the children represented are entirely racially homogeneous. Although the original book was published in 1968, it was recently digitized into a clever app that kept the original non-diverse illustrations. The Germany of today is very different, with many immigrants, some who have been born in and lived in Germany for decades. Moreover, what is to be done about books that have condescending attitudes toward the “others” in post-colonial years? This brings to the question the “right” to update text/illustrations as the depiction of human relations also deserves to be reconsidered. Would authors choose to keep their own words, written and illustrated in a context of its time, historically? Or if the author/illustrator were living today, would they want their words/illustrations to reflect current thinking? And what damages are inflicted on children’s perceptions of self and others when outdated images and attitudes are perpetuated in contemporary times?

**Reading Critically**

After years of emphasis on inclusion and acceptance in professional publications on children’s literature in the United States, children’s literature scholar and social critic Jack Zipes said to me, “It’s not enough. Just choosing good books is not enough.” My coauthor, Charles Temple, has long urged me to face the problems of advocating for diversity. What I have come to realize is the need for us as readers to go beyond the need for exposure to multiple perspectives and being widely informed to the reality of confronting adversarial perspectives. We must recognize embedded power relations: “Critical Literacy is concerned with critiquing relationships among language use, social practice and power. It is an analytic process that is mediated by one’s worldview . . . draws attention to inequities and calls for rethinking ideas and social assumptions considered “natural” . . .” (Stevens and Bean, 2007).

Critical reading, critical thinking, critical literacy: these are lenses through which readers may view the world they are reading. But what happens when readers choose to not read
critically, and instead intentionally avoid critical reading? Here is a quote from such a reader: “I know this book is controversial and not authentic but I don’t care. I still love it.” The lens of critical race theory (e.g., Ladsen-Billings & Tate, 1995) asks readers to recognize the role of race in relations and to consider whether the portrayal of race relations in the material being read is divisive, destructive, or corrective? What is meant by “white privilege”?

Unintended bias is not even recognizing when what is said or how something is viewed is, in fact, showing bias. Claiming not to be prejudiced because we don’t want to be and don’t intend to be, we fail to recognize nuanced behaviors and statements that show bias. It is particularly difficult to discern unintended bias in books because the overall thematic intent of the author or illustrator may be to be inclusive. An example is the American picture book One Green Apple, a well-intentioned book that is a victim of unintended bias. A scarf-wearing newcomer (from an unnamed country) arrives in the USA and doesn’t speak English. Her school class goes on a field trip to an orchard, and she chooses a hard green apple from a tree that has stopped growing. When all the children put their red apples into a cider press, she puts her hard green apple in while the teacher looks on with a patronizing look, and the children try to stop her “but it was too late.” She concludes that she will be like her apple – and blend in with the rest. This notion of “melting pot” has long been discarded by multicultural theorists in favor of cultural pluralism, retaining cultural distinctness while moving beyond tolerance to acceptance and understanding (e.g., Banks, 1988).

Nurturing the Development of Critical Reading. Young children may not automatically develop the ability to read critically. As they encounter books, it is adults (parents, teachers) who mediate such experiences and hone children’s ability for how and what they take away from the book experiences. Adults’ scaffolding of children’s interactions with books sets them on the developmental trajectory by which children become critical readers.
Addressing critical literacy through picture books feeds on the concept of a shared reading experience within a specified community and offering a common point to begin discussions. The more a book portrays a situation that differs from children’s everyday, the more the reading aloud of such books affords adult scaffolding at a maximum, allowing for effective use of think aloud strategy and close monitoring of children’s responses. The advantage of picture books as a format is that the length is appropriate for an entire group to address the theme together, yet individuals can contribute through unique backgrounds and perspectives while the teacher can moderate and guide discussion. Appropriate book choices for such experiences are ones that have cognitive depth and engage child readers with issues that matter. But what is most significant is how we think of ourselves in relation to others. How do we ask questions that matter? How do we scaffold students’ responses?

An example of a well-intended book is Jeannie Baker’s *Mirror* in which the premise is to show two children from varying cultures (Morocco and Australia) going about daily life, with the story intertwined in its telling. On the author’s website, it says, “The simple truth is that even with all these differences we are all the same.” What the website says about our similar needs for loving families, belonging to community, are true. But when analyzed from the lens of critical literacy, what we find is the depiction of rural versus suburban, differences of socioeconomic class, romanticization of storytelling (the Australian family buys the rug made by the Moroccan family and the boy draws a picture fantasizing the rug as a flying carpet) and other such relations of power and agency in ways that perpetuate misunderstandings. This book is beautifully illustrated, interestingly conceptualized, and has won critical acclaim. Adults taking a critical literacy perspective when scaffolding the story experience with children would see this as an opportunity to discuss how we think of ourselves in relation to others.

**Reading Against the Grain.** One way to employ a critical stance when reading books of contemporary realistic fiction is “to examine the unexamined, question the unquestioned, and hold up to scrutiny the unspoken assertions the text is making about the way lives are lived in our society” by “reading against the grain” (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2014).
Such a way of approaching a realistically portrayed story may not be as apparent or expedient as “reading with the flow” but can be rewarding for the deep thinking and insights that may be discovered.

**Meeting the Continuing Challenges**

It’s not easy to be inclusive, corrective, and both broad and deep when reading across cultures of our world. That is particularly true of worlds that are less frequently represented, and for which we have access to limited depictions. For example, *Sosu’s Call* by Meshack Asare has often been recognized for its sensitive portrayal of those who are differently abled. In this picture book by an author originally from Ghana, a boy who cannot walk is kept inside his house while his siblings go to school and his parents go to work because some believe it is bad luck to have a person like him in their village. But when he uses his ingenuity to effectively warn villagers of impending flood danger by drumming, he is hailed for his heroism and rewarded with a wheelchair. The *School Library Journal* review states, “this story of overcoming a serious physical challenge and achieving acceptance may offer hope and inspiration to young readers.” But when do we address the injustice of the situation, the not-so-common ways by which such cases are dealt, and what do we do if this is the only representation of Ghana in books for young children?

Another challenge facing all of us is our ability to know what literature the world has available; we seek recommendations that have been vetted by some trust-worthy organization. The International Federation of Librarians Association recently released an updated version of its project of having librarians around the world recommend their favorite books. Such a project is focused on a specific goal—that of recognizing what has popularity potential among readers. When it comes to reading internationally, the United States has been among the English-speaking countries that have been satisfied with having enough of their own publishing and not recognizing the richness of importing books from outside the country and diversifying the voices.
We live in a world that ranges from embracive of diversity to racist hatred. The messages around us in the media, popular culture, and day-to-day encounters are filled with this range. Even when well intended, diversity as naturally inclusive does not happen without conscious intention to address it and without stumbling. Sometimes the images of happy, diverse children in artificially posed situations seem to be quota-driven, at other times, end up coming across as patronizing. But how we position ourselves and young readers to think about what this means—to interpret the various messages and respond to them—can be influenced by what we read and how we think about it. In conclusion, offering children realistic images of our world involves depicting people of diversity in a range of experiences. And it is through these depictions that readers affirm their sense of self within the wider world, the roles they might play in it, and the decisions they might make. Because this is the case, our young readers deserve to see the most authentic depictions of realism they can be offered, through engaging text and enriching illustrations.

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