

LOOKING BEYOND THE PAGES: REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURE IN STORYBOOK CHOICE IN SECOND GRADE

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ABSTRACT

Children's storybooks serve a vital need in the classroom, library, and home life. The main connection between children's literature and our outside world is that books mirror a society's values and how the culture is perceived by different groups within our society. Thus, it is important for our society to become aware of how culture is portrayed in children's literature, and to become conscious of negative reinforcements such as biased, stereotypical and racist portrayals sometimes taught in our schools. In this paper, I interviewed a class of second graders in a predominantly white rural college town in eastern Washington State. I analyzed thirty-two books that represent the top three choices of each of the second graders interviewed. The analysis focused on the culture and values of main characters, the quality of the literature, and why second graders chose to read these particular books.

INTRODUCTION

Children's storybooks have become a predominant fixture in elementary classrooms. There are so many books from which teachers, librarians, parents and guardians can choose. Throughout our history, our European-based educational system has had a major influence on what students read (Brown, 1999). Storybooks that are chosen:

depict the variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups within U.S. society (known generally as multicultural picture books) and allow young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds (Mendoza and Reese, 2001:1).

However, according to many educators, culture is much more than just about race (Sloan, 1999). Culture also includes region, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, socioeconomic class, and various other social markers (Sloan, 1999). Many aspects of children's literature need to be taken into consideration when choosing storybooks. All storybooks reflect some aspect of culture. Therefore, children are exposed to various cultures and stereotypes as these are presented to them in storybooks. Most children have not been explicitly taught about culture and its meaning (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). It is important, then, that the literature children read is free from stereotypes and is culturally authentic.

The purpose of my research is to examine how culture is represented in the favorite storybooks chosen by second graders. I investigate this by conducting evaluations on character traits, character situations, and where children read their favorite stories. My research examines the relationship between the culture of the main character as portrayed in these books and the student who has chosen to read them. Finally, I examine how culture is portrayed within the story and whether it is stereotypical, distorted, and/or biased.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In previous studies, children's storybooks have been evaluated in terms of accuracy in the depictions, authenticity, and historical accuracy of main characters and the situations in which they are portrayed. Since 1992, several recommendations have been made regarding the types of criteria teachers, librarians, parents and guardians should use when selecting storybooks. "Believable characters, compelling plot, and a satisfying ending" (Sloan, 1999:30) are some common criteria that should be followed when evaluating and selecting all literature. However, more specific criteria have been recommended when evaluating multicultural literature for the classroom. Pang et al. (cited in Dean, 2003:13) suggested the following criteria: "culturally diverse theme, positive portrayal of characters, setting in the United States, authentic illustrations, strong plot and characterization, and historical accuracy". According to Sloan (1999:30): "Good multicultural literature must be aimed toward a universal appeal." A universal appeal can be defined as to how a story relates to the reader and it does not matter what ethnicity or culture the reader is from.

There has been some consensus among researchers that good illustrations in storybooks are one way to avoid stereotypes, tokenism, quaintness, and demeaning implications (Rudman, 1995). According to Dean (2003:13): "Illustrations complement the text of the story and should be accurate and portray characters with an absence of stereotypes." Similarly, Rudman (1995:223) notes that: "In some books, only the illustrations give readers clues about the ethnic heritage of the character." Teachers, librarians, parents and guardians need to have open discussions with children about culture as portrayed within storybooks, so children can learn to evaluate the authenticity and accuracy of the storybooks they choose to read on their own. This is not an easy task, according to Mendoza and Reese (2001:5), because people often are reluctant to talk to children about "the interests, concerns, and experiences of individuals and groups considered outside of the sociopolitical and cultural mainstream of American society."

Publishing Multicultural Literature

Research has shown that not only are authors of ethnic stories underrepresented in the literary circle, but also they are strongly under-published (Sloan, 1999). According to Sloan (1999:29) a publisher's mission is to:

produce stories that children of color can identify with, but that all children can enjoy. Our goal is to publish books that can help children better understand one another by showing that they all share similar feelings, concerns, no matter where the setting of the story is and what ethnic background they are.

It seems publishers often have good intentions, but are they really accomplishing their goal? Today, the works of European American writers and illustrators are clearly dominating the publishing world. At the very least, this raises questions about the authenticity of the depictions of main characters.

Each year in the publishing world, two prestigious awards are given to writers and illustrators. They are the Caldecott and the Newberry Medals. A majority of these awards have been won by European Americans (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). However, there are a growing number of awards that are beginning to focus attention on multicultural literature. These include the Coretta Scott King Award, the Tomas Rivera Award, and the New Voices Award (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Unfortunately, in determining the winners, "the critics and award committee members may be evaluating through the lens provided by schooling that presented inaccurate and biased history and social studies content, and may do little to promote cultural awareness and understanding" (Mendoza and Reese, 2001:23).

Authentic Multiculturalism

There are multiple definitions of multicultural literature. Madigan (cited in Dean, 2003:2) states that "...multicultural is interpreted as 'adding a little color' to what is already there: a little bit of Indians, Africans, Mexicans, and so on." To other researchers and educators all literature is in some way multicultural. When an author writes and illustrates a storybook dealing with multiculturalism and issues dealing with a particular culture, that author must be knowledgeable and should have first hand experience with the culture (Madison, 2003). As Madison (2003:6) notes: "[I]t is not enough for authors and illustrators to just write and depict multiculturalism." One example of this is when a book has high quality illustrations, but lacks an authentic ethnic character from an insider's point of view (see Harris, 1993).

Whether certain people are present or absent within a storyline has a direct impact on children's understanding of themselves and the world around them (Beckett, 1997). Another thing to consider when looking at multiculturalism in storybooks is whether a book's text or picture promotes distorted reflections of a culture. According to Harris (1993:24) children "will absorb negative messages about themselves and people like them." Harris (cited in Madison, 2003) states elsewhere that "... people who constantly see themselves as the majority or who are subjected to inaccurate cultural representations are miseducated into thinking they are superior to the depicted ethnic group or culture" (Madison, 2003:7). To produce culturally authentic work, the author's ethnicity and background should be taken into account.

According to Madison (2003:7), [m]ulticultural literature must seek to challenge the dominant views of Western culture." In order to avoid misrepresentations of culture and values, educators, librarians, parents and guardians need to check the authenticity and accuracy of the text and illustrations by consulting other reliable sources (see Rudman, 1995). It is vitally important for teachers, librarians, parents and guardians to check the validity and accuracy of the presentations of history and customs in children's literature. According to Rudman (1995:222), "... [h]istoric portrayals depend on the perspective and background of the author. Several books about the same event or famous person should be available to young readers." Different viewpoints and perspectives within children's literature should be readily available, so that children can be exposed to different experiences and gain a more holistic view of historical events and themes portrayed in storybooks. In Madison's (2003:7) words, "... [a] good book strives to portray diverse individuals successfully living together-celebrating their differences instead of discounting them." Beckett (cited in Madison, 2003:7) states: "True multiculturalism cannot be attained unless the writer and illustrator endeavor to elicit impartiality."

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, ASSUMPTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Four distinct issues or concerns and related hypotheses guided this research. The first relates to the favorite storybooks selected by the second graders in our sample. My hypothesis is that children will select books that are consistent with their cultural background, experiences, and values (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1985). The second issue deals with common themes in content and characteristics of the books selected by second grade students. According to past research on this topic, children will select books with believable characters, a compelling plot, and a satisfying ending (Sloan, 1999).

Third, I hope to determine the circumstances under which children select multicultural books, that is, those about children/people from different races/cultures, as their favorites. In dealing with this issue I begin with a few theoretical assumptions based on past research. The first and most important assumption is that readers' choices will depend on existing experiences and "universal appeal," and characters and plots with which readers can identify (Sloan, 1999). Another assumption is that books about other non-mainstream cultural minorities are, in general, underrepresented (Sloan, 1999). The third assumption is related to the fact that that the sample for

this study was drawn from a class in which only one ethnic minority--an African-American male—was present. It is expected, then, that very few, if any, of the favorite books will be about racial minorities. The final issue this study addresses is the common themes in children’s books about racial minorities. It is hypothesized that books about minorities will feature themes such as family life and events/experiences that are specific to the racial minority (Sloan, 1999).

Significance

It is generally accepted that children learn best and construct new knowledge and meaning when they can utilize their prior experiences and knowledge to build upon (see Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1985; Mead, 1934). It is important to help children build a knowledge base of authentic, accurate, and culturally sensitive images of underrepresented or diverse individuals. From this, children can use positive images as a base for greater knowledge and sensitivity, and new meaning as they learn about diverse populations in the future. As MacCann and Woodward (cited in Madison, 2003) state: “a child who is constantly exposed to stereotypes and biases will mirror values that differ drastically from a child who is exposed to tolerance and equality” (Madison, 2003:8). Children choose storybooks for any number of reasons. When a child feels like an “outsider,” he or she might be more inclined to choose storybooks with characters that are similar to them or in situations similar to those that the child has experienced (Mendoza and Reese, 2001). Children might pick a book they can relate to because the author or illustrator has written the story from the “insider” perspective (Mendoza and Reese, 2001).

RESEARCH STUDY

In this study I examine the top three storybooks chosen by each second grader. The purpose is to determine and compare the role of the culture of the main characters and situations in the story with the second graders’ culture and status. I hope to establish common themes among storybook choices and to determine why the students relate to the main characters. In addition, I intend to evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of the storybooks as this relates to the authors and illustrators of each book.

Sample

Eighteen second graders in one classroom were interviewed. The class included one African-American student and seventeen White/Caucasian students. There were ten boys and eight girls in the class. The students’ ages ranged from 7 to 8 years old. Each child was asked 19 structured questions (see Appendix A). In addition to the interviews, thirty-two books including 20 book chapters were reviewed (see Appendix B). Because two of the books were well over 1,000 pages they were eliminated. Finally, I interviewed both the class teacher and the school librarian. These interviews were used to provide a context for the study.

Coding Instruments

The data from each book were categorized into themes such as why children read the books they choose and the demographics of main characters, and story endings. Character analysis sheets were used to determine the demographics of the main characters. The character analysis sheet shows the ethnicity of the main character, the ethnicity of the author and illustrator, the gender of the main character, the social class of the main character, and personal traits of the main character (see Appendix C). Qualities to look for within a story, such as the ending and how satisfying it was, were added to an instrument used by Madison (2003). Also included was a section on where the children read the books and why they chose to read a particular book.

RESULTS

The initial analysis revealed that 50 per cent of the authors who wrote the top three books chosen by each second grader were women. Unfortunately, the sex of the illustrator could not be identified for 13 percent of the books. Among those illustrators who could be identified, 57 percent were men.

The ethnicity of authors and illustrators could not be determined for eight percent of the books. Of the remainder, 91 percent were identified as White/Caucasian. Fifty-four percent of the main characters were animals compared to 38 per cent human characters and eight per cent unknown.

In 46 per cent of the books, the main characters appeared to be financially stable or rich. In 21 per cent, the main characters were categorized as poor or financially insecure. In the remaining 33 percent, the financial status of the remaining main characters could not be determined.

Rewards, praise, or encouragement made up the endings in 83 per cent of the storybooks. Main characters were punished, admonished, or discouraged in 4 per cent of the endings. Rewards and/or punishment could not be determined in the remaining 13 per cent.

Of students interviewed, 22 per cent chose their favorite books because the main character was their favorite animal. Fifty-six per cent of the students chose their favorite book because it related to their real lives. Among the second graders, eleven per cent liked the fact that the main character expressed of emotions. Eleven per cent liked the story because the main character made friends.

Sixty-one per cent stated they read their favorite books at home. Twenty-eight per cent read their favorite books at school, and six per cent said they read their favorite books at the library. Another almost six per cent of the students said they read their favorite book at church.

The majority, 78 per cent, responded that they would read another book by the same author. The remaining 22 per cent said they were unsure if they would read another book by the same author though no reasons were provided.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Children choose storybooks based, in part, on whether they can relate either to the main character or the situation in which the main character finds him or her. Because my sample was composed of primarily middle-class, White/Caucasian students, it is not surprising that a majority of the authors and illustrators were White/Caucasian and middle-class as well. Most of the students who were interviewed read their books of choice at home or school. The finding that the majority of main characters are animals may mean that authors and illustrators often create animals rather than humans in order to avoid dealing with and addressing issues related to ethnicity and culture.

The data collected from the teacher and the librarian were interesting though inconclusive. Neither had a set of criteria to guide them in selecting books in general for use in the classroom and library. They stated they chose books based on theme and what the children bring to school. Similarly there were no specific criteria used to select high quality multicultural literature for children. Furthermore, the school-district administration does not set parameters on how and what to look for in selecting library or classroom books. According to the librarian, websites are searched to look for books that have won awards. However, most of the books in the library are those that are donated by people and/or organizations. These data confirmed past findings that good multicultural literature is hard for children to find. Teachers, librarians, parents and guardians need to be proactive and deliberate in exposing children to multicultural books, which focus on non-white, middle-class, mainstream populations.

When students are choosing books, they look for familiar situations or future situations in which they would like to be. Authors and illustrators play upon these notions and often are not culturally conscious. Often they lack the ability to portray a culture of a particular group from the perspective of the insider in a way that has “universal appeal”. Authors and illustrators must conduct research if they are to create a story based on a culture different from their own or risk portraying an outsider’s point of view.

Many teachers, librarians, parents and guardians are under the assumption that children will find good-quality multicultural literature on their own whether in second grade or as adults. Our society needs to teach children how to look at books critically to help eliminate bias, racism and stereotypes of cultures and ethnicities other than Euro-Americans. The adults in my study were under the impression that “one can easily find a wide range of good-quality multicultural literature in libraries and book stores, so that one has to visit either venue to locate authentic and accurate representations of non-mainstream groups” (Mendoza and Reese, 2001:11). However, my interviews with the teacher and the librarian suggests that teachers and librarians often have money and time constraints, which make searching and investigating difficult.

In this study children did choose books that related to their cultural backgrounds. Most, if not all, main characters were from the same socioeconomic class. When evaluating storybooks for children to read it is essential to look at what is on the pages, but to also look beyond the pages at the author, illustrator and hidden messages behind the plot and the overall image of the book.

Multicultural literature is not easy to define. Many authors and illustrators believe that if they put a female in a story or tint skin color, they have represented a minority group. However, there are distinct differences between cultural minority groups such as the poor, females, younger people, elderly, and ethnic minority groups such as African-Americans, Asian Americans, and Native-Americans. Many authors and illustrators do not make accurate and authentic distinctions between groups.

My findings further indicate that there is a relationship between the books second graders chose to read and their own cultural background and ethnicity. Second graders also chose books in which they hope someday to be like the main character. Hopefully, in the future this research will encourage teachers, librarians, parents and guardians to investigate and expose children to accurate, authentic and good-quality multicultural literature. It is my hope that this research will help change the way our society looks at children’s literature and encourage non-mainstream authors and illustrators to become children’s authors to create multicultural books that are readily available for everyone.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

The focus and amount of research done on this project was limited due to time and travel constraints. The student interview questions were severely limited by the school and school district. For example, questions that might lead to information about family, ethnicity, culture, free and reduced lunch, and holidays celebrated, were not allowed. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample size, and different types of school environments such as urban, rural and suburban school districts. It is also important to analyze how the publication companies market their multicultural, non-mainstream authors.

As Rudman (1995:223) notes: “Teachers, librarians, parents and guardians need to choose books for children by researching and evaluating books with a diagnostic eye, looking for balanced images for a variety of people.” Our schools and “libraries are located in diverse communities, and this needs to be taken into account when selecting storybooks for children” (Duren, 2000:18). It is vitally important for teachers, librarians, parents and guardians to select books that depict various viewpoints as well as different values and ethnicities. When children are exposed to various types of literature, our society may be better able to function as a whole instead being divided between “us” and “them.”

REFLECTIONS

My research suggests that teachers, librarians, parents and guardians should be cautious and aware that just because a book wins a Caldecott and/or Newberry award it does not necessarily mean that it is accurate or authentic. Currently, there are very few winners of these awards who are non-white/non-Caucasian. As Pinkney (cited in Madison, 2003:14) notes: "mainstream literature continues to evade multiculturalism."

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APPENDIX A: Interview Schedule

What are your three most favorite books?
Which of the three listed is your very favorite?
What is your very favorite book about?
Why is this book your favorite?
Where did you read it?
Why did you read the book?
 Did someone give it to you to read?
 Did you get to choose the book you wanted to read?
Would you like to read more books by the same author?
Would you like to read more of the same type of books?
If you could be anyone in your favorite book, who would it be?
 Why?
If you could write a storybook, what would it be about?
 Why would you write this story?
Outside of school, is there anyone that reads to you?
 If yes, who?
 How often?
 When?
What are your favorite things to do away from school?

APPENDIX B: Children's Book Selections

- Arthur's Tooth (Francine) by Marc Brown
- Arthur's Tooth (Muffy) by Marc Brown
- Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo
- Coyote: A Trickster Tale From the American Southwest by Gerald McDermott
- Charlie Brown by Charles M. Schultz
- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl and Joseph Schindelman
- Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator by Roald Dahl and Joseph Schindelman
- Charlotte's Web by E. B. White
- Frog and Toad by Arnold Lobel
- Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2nd book) by J.K. Rowling
- Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (4th book) by J.K. Rowling
- Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (3rd book) by J.K. Rowling
- Henry and Mudge by Cynthia Rylant
- Henry's Wrong Turn by Harriet Ziefert
- Horrible Harry and the Purple People by Suzy Kline
- Hug by Jez Alborough
- Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder
- Liplap's Wish by Jonathan London
- Nate the Great by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat
- Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
- Race For Survival by Marie Birkinshaw
- Santa Paws by Nicholas Edwards
- Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron by Mary Hogan
- Treasury of Bunny Stories by Beatrix Potter
- Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum

APPENDIX C: Character Analysis Sheet and Coding Instructions*

1. Book Title: _____
 2. Author(s): _____
 3. Ethnicity of Author:
 1. African-American
 2. Asian
 3. Hispanic
 4. Native-American
 5. White/Caucasian
 6. N/A or cannot be determinedEthnicity of 2nd Author:
 1. African-American
 2. Asian
 3. Hispanic
 4. Native-American
 5. White/Caucasian
 6. N/A or cannot be determined
 4. Illustrator(s): _____
 5. Ethnicity of Illustrator:
 1. African-American
 2. Asian
 3. Hispanic
 4. Native-American
 5. White/Caucasian
 6. N/A or cannot be determinedEthnicity of 2nd Illustrator:
 1. African-American
 2. Asian
 3. Hispanic
 4. Native-American
 5. White/Caucasian
 6. N/A or cannot be determined
 6. Name of Character: _____
 7. Gender of Character:
 1. Male
 2. Female
 3. N/A or cannot be determined
 8. Ethnicity of Character:
 1. African-American
 2. Asian
 3. Hispanic
 4. Native-American
 5. White/Caucasian
 6. N/A or cannot be determined
 9. Character is a(n):
 1. Animal
 2. Human
 3. Other
 4. N/A or cannot be determined
 10. The character is or appears to be:
 1. Rich or financially secure (character does not face any money struggles or hardships).
 2. Poor or financially insecure (character faces or must overcome financial hardships).
 3. N/A or cannot be determined
 11. Character is or appears to be from the following socioeconomic class:
 1. Upper-class
 2. Middle-class
 3. Lower-class
 4. N/A or cannot be determined
 12. By the end of the book, the character or the character's actions are:
 1. Rewarded, praised, or encouraged
 2. Punished, admonished, or discouraged
 3. N/A or cannot be determined
- Comments about the book: _____

*Note: This character analysis sheet is based, in part, on an analysis sheet developed by Madison (2002).