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Differentiating Between the Terms “Multicultural” and “Diversity”: Broadening the Perspective

Rose Casement

In the 1960s, as our society was in the painful process of looking at and beginning to address its history of prejudice and segregation, the world of children’s literature began to look critically at the exclusivity of Euro-American representation in its published work. Much has changed in the availability of books for children since that time. The inclusion of the works of highly talented authors and illustrators of color who had been previously excluded from the profession has led to a growing understanding of the importance of children seeing themselves in the literature they are reading, and to awareness that all children need to see representation of people of other than their own races, ethnicities, and religions to truly understand the inherent characteristics and humanity that we all share. These stories have contributed much richness to children’s literature and continue to be a strong moving force in the issues of representation in children’s literature today.

In recent decades, the publishing world has seen extraordinary work authored and illustrated by people of all races and representing the histories and the contemporary lives of all people. In spite of its critics, who have claimed that the inclusion of this literature has in some way diminished literary standards (Hymowitz 124-128 and Stotsky 17-21) and the reality that it may still be excluded from the canon (Pinkney 536), children’s literature that represents the many cultures of this country and of the world is finding a much-deserved place in the classrooms and libraries of schools across the country.

The Study of Children’s Literature

As a teacher of children’s literature in a pre-service teacher education program, I feel that it is important for my students to learn to identify the genres within the literature so that they will have the awareness to provide their students opportunities to explore a variety of genres in their classrooms. My students become critical readers of children’s literature, looking for excellent examples of great literature for children. This includes the classics; literature they remember from their own childhoods; and current literature, particularly those books that have received literary recognition. But what I really think is critically important and what I like to use to examine the literature we study is a “multicultural lens”: an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the inclusion of a multiplicity of voices that reflect perspectives and experiences, enabling children to develop understandings beyond themselves.

For the most part, my students readily accept the concept that multicultural representation in literature is important for children. But when my students begin to talk about stereotypes in children’s literature, particularly those found in their favorite books from their own childhoods, the conversation is often intense. The arguments are usually centered around their beliefs that:

- (1) The stereotypes are not intentional.
- (2) The stereotypes just represent the historical times in which they were written and thus should be acceptable.
- (3) It is a good story, nonetheless.
- (4) Anything you read is likely to offend someone.

(5) If we put everything under a microscope, we won't be able to have any books in our classrooms.

My response to these arguments is that:

- (1) Intentional or not, these portrayals are unacceptable.
- (2) Young children are not going to understand the "historical context" rationale. Even older students who can place stories in an historical perspective can be negatively impacted by stereotypical portrayals because of the initial impact of image in text.
- (3) It's not a good story if its characters are merely stereotypical representations.
- (4) This sounds like an excuse for keeping stereotypes. If someone is offended, we should ask ourselves why.
- (5) This is simply not true. There are many wonderful stories, classic and contemporary, that do not have stereotypical characters.

These discussions and the resulting defensiveness that surrounds them have led me to three questions: What do we mean when we talk about multiculturalism? What do we mean when we use the term diversity? And finally, how would a better understanding of these terms help our understandings of stereotypes? These questions are important if we hope to create an awareness of stereotypes in children's literature and an understanding that such stereotypes are not benign, to honestly revisit some of the books that we grew up with to examine them for offensive or misrepresentative stereotypes, and to go forward in the acquisition and inclusion of good children's literature in our classrooms. It is only in this way that we can avoid perpetuating ignorance and divisiveness through misleading images.

How Do We Define Multicultural Children's Literature?

Traditionally, multicultural children's literature has meant the representation of "people

of color in this country—African Americans, Asian Americans, Native American, Hispanics" (Bishop 39). Bishop goes on to say that people of color outside of the United States are also included in the definition of multicultural literature and that this work is frequently in the genre of folktales. Reflecting on the history of the word "multicultural" in reference to this work, Bishop states that the term was intentionally used to avoid using the term "minority" which seemed "to carry connotations of low status and inferiority" (39). The broadening of this definition to include Euro-American ethnic groups is not as agreed upon, according to Bishop, (40) but, nonetheless, the definition continues to be enlarged by some to include "handicapped, gay and lesbian individuals . . . any persons whose lifestyle, enforced or otherwise, distinguishes them as identifiable members of a group other than the 'mainstream'" (Smith, K. P., qtd. in Taxel 420).

Whatever one's precise definition and the limits surrounding it, one thing is clear. As Bishop points out, "Multicultural literature is one of the most powerful components of a multicultural education curriculum, the underlying purpose of which is the choice of books to be read and discussed in the nation's schools is of paramount importance" (Bishop 40).

How Do We Define Diversity?

Diversity, I believe, gets confused with multiculturalism. Do both words mean essentially the same thing, or are we talking about diversity between cultures or within cultures? Does this make a difference? How these words are defined and what they include and exclude not only have a significant influence on what is included in our classrooms and curricula, but may be the most important considerations in the elimination of stereotypes for any group; in other words, diversity is the antithesis of stereotype.

How can the definitions of "multicultural" and "diversity" impact on the static lenses through which we view the "other" people of the world and, in fact, some within our own culture creating easy

stereotypes for ourselves and others?

Frequently, “diversity” has been used to describe the range of cultural groups that are represented in the literature. It is not unusual to hear teachers proclaim that they have diversity represented in their literature collections because they have stories of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American people. Questions about what country an African folktale originated in or which Native American tribe is represented in a story may go unanswered.

This definition of the term “diverse,” which becomes interchangeable with and synonymous with “multicultural,” has confused the discourse and served to perpetuate stereotypic representation. For instance, how many teachers have large collections of books on slavery and identify that as their multicultural collection representing African Americans? Or Jews represented only by the Holocaust? Or Native Americans represented only through folktales? This, by no means, is an argument against the inclusion of literature about these events or the genres they represent, but it is a caution that when collections do not represent diversity—real diversity within contemporary cultures—there will be a misrepresentation of that culture. After all, the exclusive use of folktales to represent Native American culture has resulted in some children believing that Native American culture no longer exists (Reese and Caldwell-Wood 155).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Diversity abounds within every culture. In every culture, people live in rural areas and in cities. There are people of wealth and people of poverty. Why, then, would Andrew Allen’s second grade students, in their critical analysis of children’s literature representation, question the “over-representation of Black characters in scenes of poverty in the books they were reading” (Allen 522)? Even young children, when looking critically at the literature around them, see these stereotypes. All cultures have gay men and lesbians, individuals with disabilities, single-

parent households, etc. Rather than redefine multicultural to include diversity, why not look for the diversity within cultural representation?

By differentiating between “multicultural” and “diversity” we may not only create a lens that will offer a way to more intentionally include multicultural literature that avoids stereotypes, but also actually reflects the diverse world that children live in. When we use the words synonymously, we are likely to oversimplify a group, which will lead to stereotypes and deny individuality, having the group appear monochromatic. By reframing the context of our current understandings of these terms, we are less likely to perpetuate the hegemonic cultural myths that still influence how realities are formed.

I began this discussion by describing an exchange that I frequently have with my students regarding stereotypes. Good literature requires that the characters are well developed and real. But, even with well-written children’s literature that has well-developed, multi-dimensional characters, without a greater awareness of diversity, we may still create stereotypes with the collection of literature that we have available or present to children.

As we build our classroom and school libraries, considerations of including multicultural books may not be enough to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes. We need to look at the diversity represented within our collection. If “multiculturalism is broadening the horizons of children’s literature” (Jones 64), then intentionally including diversity within multiculturalism will broaden it even more “to reflect the complicated, diverse world that children live in” (64).

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About the Author

Rose Casement is an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan-Flint where she teaches literacy education and children's literature.