

A Study of the Availability of Multicultural Children's Literature in Treasure Valley Schools: Quality, Access and Inclusion

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to conduct an analysis of the availability of quality multicultural children's literature in Treasure Valley elementary schools in Idaho. Current research suggests multicultural literature supports the psychosocial well-being of students in all classrooms. Exposure to a variety of cultures increases awareness and acceptance among students. In addition, reading multicultural literature encourages children to reaffirm the values of their own culture and come to appreciate those of others. Furthermore, multicultural literature, defined as literature that accurately portrays views and cultures of underrepresented populations, has a significant impact on students' developing identities. For these reasons this study investigates and analyzes the quality and availability of, or lack of, multicultural literature in elementary school libraries in four different school districts in the Treasure Valley. The measure used to analyze the literature is composed of distinguished books that have received multicultural literature awards such as the Pura Belpre and the Coretta Scott King Awards. This study also takes into account the need for multicultural literature in the particular schools by comparing the demographic population of the schools and the relationship to the library's inclusion or lack of inclusion of multicultural literature. This study may be of particular interest to teachers, administrators, librarians, and parents, especially when making decisions in regards to literature purchases and donations for school libraries.

Introduction

Student engagement with multicultural literature promotes appreciation of diversity and encourages dynamic understandings of the world. As the changing face of our nation grows increasingly diverse, both students and teachers are completely immersed in cultural diversity in the classroom (Willis-Rivera & Meeker, 2002). Diversity is a reality of our nation and of the world, and with that reality comes the responsibility and opportunity for growth in order to create a more accepting and just world. Students and teachers can look to literature, particularly multicultural literature, as a part of a curriculum that actively participates in awareness of issues such as power, privilege, and oppression.

Quality multicultural literature demystifies race and culture by allowing students to gain greater perspectives of diversity. Multicultural literature promotes positive outlooks of other cultures for both dominant and non-dominant communities, which benefits all students. Cox and Galda claim:

“For mainstream children, these books can be a window, revealing a vista that juxtaposes the familiar and the less familiar. . . .” Multicultural stories can be a mirror, reflecting and validating familiar cultures and experiences for children who rarely have a ‘voice’ in the classroom (Amour, 2003).

In both cases, growth in the direction of embracing diversity is attained.

For students of non-dominant communities particularly, multicultural literature can be a means of embracing their cultural roots. A parent from a study done by Fernando Rodriguez-Valls (2011) states, “I wish all teachers would be like the teacher in this book; a teacher who creates an environment where the child and his family can be proud of their culture.” This feeling of acceptance and pride increases when students find and read books in which they see characters they can relate to, characters in whom they can see themselves. Multicultural literature not only works towards enhancing appreciation of other cultures but of one's own. It creates a cultural bridge in which

similarities and difference are valued among the diversity in classrooms and beyond. The strong emphasis on learning and embracing diversity in quality multicultural literature strongly advocates for multiculturalism overall.

Among the advantages of incorporating multicultural literature in school libraries there exists yet a further layer of importance. In order to help students gain a more equitable opportunity in school and in society, they have the right to first learn of inequalities that have occurred in the past and ones that continue to exist today. Multicultural literature provides a means for students to recognize inequalities in our social structure and create alternative solutions (Amour, 2003). It promotes social justice through transformative means of eliminating oppression and injustice (Suh, B.K., & Samuel, 2011). Multicultural literature not only helps students gain knowledge about issues in society that directly affect them, but it can also help introduce principles of action to create change. Multicultural literature has the power to cultivate awareness in order to create change.

It is important to include multicultural literature in schools and school libraries because it allows students to make connections which facilitate improved academic performance and increase confidence in students. Elley (1992) examined the availability of books to children in 32 countries and found that nations with high reading achievement had large school and class libraries, whereas nations with low reading achievement had fewer books available to children (Holmes, K., Powell, S., Holmes, S., & Witt, E., 2007). Hunter (2004), citing a 2002 National Assessment of Education Progress report, stated that “classroom libraries can help to level the playing field for students who have limited access to books outside of the classroom” (Holmes, K., Powell, S., Holmes, S., & Witt, E., 2007). A larger variety of literature increases the chances that students will have the opportunity to have their own backgrounds represented in narratives (Amour, 2003). All students have the right to access adequate resources to ensure equity.

Though dialogue and understanding of diversity and issues of power, privilege, and oppression are lifelong processes, nonetheless it can certainly begin at a young age. Scholars argue that dialogue about culture should begin with school age children, or even younger (Harris, Taxel, Miller in Willis-Rivera & Meeker, 2002). Developing identities of students, from both dominant and non-dominant cultures, are directly affected by everyday messages of the role they play in society. The literature students have access to, or limited access to, can provide these messages. The school library has a unique role in schools: it’s one of the few places that all students and teachers visit on a regular basis. For this reason, it is crucial in helping students of diverse backgrounds feel like they are an integral aspect of schools, communities, and society as a whole by providing inclusive selections of quality literature. Exposure to quality multicultural literature in school libraries is an opportunity for students to explore types of text that they may not have access to in their home classrooms, depending on the ideology of the teacher, funding, donations, etc. These fluctuating factors make the accessibility to multicultural literature in school libraries all the more significant. For these reasons, this study takes a closer look at the content of school libraries in the Treasure Valley elementary schools in Idaho.

Methodology

For the purpose of my study, I have chosen to define multicultural literature as literature that accurately portrays views and cultures of underrepresented populations. It is a common belief that multicultural literature is a term used to only encompass literature that discusses various ethnic cultures or racial themes and foci. My study includes children’s literature from various cultures including the LGBTQIA culture, physically and mentally challenged culture, as well as diverse ethnic cultures.

To reliably measure the quality of multicultural books in the elementary school libraries, I have created a measure composed of awarded books. Thirteen different awards were chosen to be used based on the purpose and criteria for which they award children’s literature. The purposes of the 13 awards chosen are closely aligned to my definition of multicultural literature. The following are the awards that were used and a description of their objectives.

Table 1. Awards and Purpose

Award Name	Purpose	Awarded Annually or Biannually
American Indian Youth Literature Award	This award was created as a way to identify and honor the very best writing and illustrations by and about American Indians. Books selected to receive the award will present American Indians in the fullness of their humanity in the present and past contexts.	Biannually

Dolly Gray Award	Recognizes authors, illustrators, and publishers of high quality fictional and biographical children, intermediate, and young adult books that appropriately portray individuals with developmental disabilities.	Biannually
The Jane Addams Children's Book Awards	Given to children's books that effectively promote the cause of peace, social justice, world community, and the equality of the sexes and all races as well as meeting conventional standards for excellence.	Annually
Mildred L. Batchelder Award	Awarded to an American publisher for a children's book considered to be the most outstanding of those books originally published in a foreign language in a foreign country, and subsequently translated into English and published in the United States. ALSC gives the award to encourage American publishers to seek out superior children's books abroad and to promote communication among the peoples of the world.	Annually
National Jewish Book Award	This award is designed to give recognition to outstanding books, to stimulate writers to further literary creativity, and to encourage the reading of worthwhile titles about the Jewish culture or by Jewish authors.	Annually
Schneider Family Book Award	Honors an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences.	Annually
Sydney Taylor Book Award	Presented to outstanding books for children and teens that authentically portray the Jewish experience.	Annually
Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award	Honor authors and illustrators who create literature that depicts the Mexican American experience.	Annually
Coretta Scott King Book Award	Given to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values. The award commemorates the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and honors his wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood.	Annually
Pura Belpré Award	Presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth.	Annually
Asian/ Pacific American Award	Honors and recognizes individual work about Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage, based on literary and artistic merit.	Annually
Américas Book Award	Given in recognition of U.S. works of fiction, poetry, folklore, or selected non-fiction (from picture books to works for young adults) published in the previous year in English or Spanish that authentically and engagingly portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States.	Annually
Carter G.	Recognizes distinguished social science books appropriate for	Annually

Woodson Book Award	young readers that depict ethnicity in the United States. The purpose of this award is to encourage the writing, publishing, and dissemination of outstanding social science books for young readers that treat topics related to ethnic minorities and relations sensitively and accurately.	
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Note: The Purpose sections of this table were taken directly from each award’s website.

The measure for this study was created by including the three most recent books which have received any of these awards. As previously stated, some of these awards are given on an annual basis and some on a biannual basis. Therefore, some books in the study are from the past three years and some are from the past six years, depending on the regulations of the particular award. Because the purpose of the study is to look at elementary school libraries, I have filtered young adults’ books from the measure. The measure is composed of 76 children’s books, although five of the books have received two of the awards, making a total of 71 book titles. The measure consists of a total of 71 elementary-age children’s books.

The school districts analyzed in this study all have an online library catalog system in place. The online catalogs were utilized to conduct this study and were accessed through each school website. All 71 of the books included in my measure were searched in the catalog by title, author, and/or illustrator at each of the school libraries.

The study also includes a demographic component. The demographic elements analyzed from each school district include ethnicity, special education, and Limited English Proficient (LEP). Although these elements do not encompass every feature of multicultural literature as defined in this study, they are some of the only elements measured by the district that are related to the definition. The statistical information regarding the demographics of the districts was accessed through the Idaho Department of Education District Profiles. The demographic data analyzed was from 2009-2010, the latest at the time of the study. The average percent of multicultural books from my measure available in each district was compared to the percentage of students who are from non-dominant ethnicities (Black, Hispanic, Native American, and/or Asian/Pacific Islander), in special education, or are LEP.

The size and demographic makeup vary greatly from district to district in the Treasure Valley. Therefore, in order to capture an informative representation of public schools in the area, schools from four different school districts were analyzed. Pseudonyms are used for these school districts: District A, District B, District C, and District D. District A and District B are significantly larger than the other two. Due to their large size, only one third of the schools were analyzed. In District A, 10 school libraries were analyzed out of the 33 public elementary schools total in the district. School District A has the following demographic characteristics: 17.5% of students from non-dominant ethnicities, 10.9% special education, and 7.2% of students are LEP. In District B, 10 schools were also analyzed out of the 33 elementary schools total in this district. In District B, 13.9% of students are from non-dominant ethnicities, 10.1% are special education, and 3.6% are LEP. All six elementary school libraries from District C were analyzed. The demographics for District C include 56.4% of students from non-dominant ethnicities, 10.4% special education, and 12% LEP. All three elementary schools from District D were analyzed. These schools, representative of rural Idaho, are composed of 11.6% students from non-dominant ethnicities, 8.6% special education, and 3.2% LEP. Each elementary school within the four districts was also given a pseudonym.

The number of schools in the two larger districts, District A and District B, was narrowed from more than 30 schools to only 10. To maintain an accurate representation of the districts despite only utilizing one third of the total elementary schools, student reading performance from each school was analyzed. The selection of the 10 schools was done by analyzing state reading assessments from 2009/2010, which was the latest data at the time of the study. The data was attained from the Idaho Department of Education School Report Cards. The percentages of “proficient” and “advanced” student reading scores were analyzed. The study includes the five schools that had the highest percentage of proficient and advanced reading scores and the five schools who had the lowest.

Findings

After the data was analyzed, the results indicated that quality multicultural literature is very limited in the majority of school libraries in all four of the school districts from the Treasure Valley. The following tables demonstrate the findings of the various school districts and the school libraries within them.

Table 2. School District A

School	Number of Books Available from Measure (of 71 Books)
A	2
B	5
C	13
D	8
E	5
F	5
G	11
H	11
I	7
J	7

Table 3. School District B

School	Number of Books Available from Measure (of 71 Books)
A	6
B	4
C	3
D	8
E	25
F	0
G	2
H	4
I	2
J	4

Table 4. School District C

School	Number of Books Available from Measure (of 71 Books)
A	16
B	7
C	13
D	17
E	6
F	18

Table 5. School District D

School	Number of Books Available from Measure (of 71 Books)
A	1
B	0
C	1

All schools in all four school districts had a very low number of books compared to the measure of 71 titles. The average number of books in District A is about seven with a high of 13 and a low of two. District B has an average of about five books with a high of 25 and a low of zero. The average number of books in District C is about 13 books with a high of 18 and a low of six. In the last school district, District D, the average number of books was about one with a high of one and a low of zero.

The following table depicts the results of the demographic comparison done in the study. It compares the average number of books available in a school district to the percentage of students of non-dominant ethnicities, percentage of special education students, and percentage of LEP students in each school district.

Table 6. Demographic Comparison

School District	Average Number of Books (from Measure)	Percentage of Students from Non-Dominant Ethnicities	Percentage of Students in Special Education	Percentage of LEP Students
A	7.4 Books (10%)	17.5%	10.9%	7.2%
B	5.8 Books (8%)	13.9%	10.1%	3.6%
C	12.8 Books (18%)	56.4%	10.4%	12%
D	.666 Books (.009%)	11.6%	8.6%	3.2%

For all school districts, the average number of multicultural books from the composed measure is significantly low compared to the percentage of students from the backgrounds of non-dominant ethnicities, special education, and LEP. The three different demographic characteristics combined show still an even higher disproportionality of multicultural literature in Treasure Valley school districts. For instance, in District A, the total percentage of students of these demographic characteristics is 35.6%, in District B it is 27.6%, in District C it is 78.8%, and in District D it is 23.4%.

Recommendations

The poor representation of multicultural literature in Treasure Valley schools could be due to funding, lack of a standard for the content of elementary school libraries, or lack of knowledge and access to multicultural literature. A recommendation for further study would explore how the selection process is conducted for literature in general and furthermore multicultural literature. The information found in this study could be significantly strengthened through a qualitative exploration with school librarians. Future studies could also include comparing the total book content of the elementary school libraries, using a more complete set of demographics, which would include free and reduced lunch among other demographic characteristics, analyzing schools within the districts closely, looking at schools and school districts across Idaho, and also looking at other states.

The list of awards used for the purpose of this study can be utilized as a resource to gain access to multicultural literature. In particular, it proves useful for elementary school personnel and parents of elementary age children and youth. Though this list should not, by any means, be the sole informer of quality multicultural books, as there are many other awards that also recognize multicultural literature, and many of the authors and illustrators that have received these awards have additional collections of work with similar purposes.

Conclusion

There has been a multiplicity of children's books written to either implicitly or explicitly deal with issues of racism, discrimination, prejudice, or eurocentrism (Willis-Rivera & Meeker, 2002). It is important for elementary schools to provide access to multicultural literature for students. Having a strong variety of quality multicultural literature increases the likelihood that all children will have access to literature that represents their various backgrounds, as well as enriches their understanding of other backgrounds. Quality multicultural literature is a great tool for schools in raising awareness of diverse backgrounds and cultures. For this reason, it is imperative for schools to provide quality multicultural literature versus literature that may appear to be multicultural but that ideologically reinforces oppression, stereotypes, and assimilation of underrepresented groups.

In this study, although some school districts have more multicultural literature than others, none of them have a significant amount. This lack of multicultural literature becomes overwhelmingly apparent when compared to the demographics of the schools. As stated earlier, one example is District C, which contains only 18% of the literature from the measure in this study, yet has the highest percentage of underrepresented students of the four districts analyzed. The disparity of multicultural books across schools in the different districts remains clear. As a general theme, the findings in Treasure Valley schools suggest significant differences in the availability of multicultural literature from district to district, and even from school to school, with no pronounced pattern in particular.

The lack of multicultural literature significantly increases the chance that students from underrepresented backgrounds are not represented in school literature. For some students this could mean receiving subtle messages that their culture is not as important as the dominant culture. For other students it could mean that cultures different than their own are not as important, and therefore, their culture continues to be the most important. It is possible that students may associate this feeling not only to the school library, but the school in general, the community, and eventually society as a whole.

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