The History of Diversity in Picture Books

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Abstract

The history of diversity in picture books parallels the history of societal change in America from the 1960s to the present and reflects the diversity found in everyday life. Picture books for children present powerful messages through the combination of text and images, which can serve as a mirror or window to constructing views of self and the world. Diversity in picture books allows all children to see themselves represented and serves as a bridge to understanding others. The discussion of diversity in this report focuses on multicultural picture books and extends to issues of gender, sexual orientation, and exceptionalities.
Introduction

Diversity in picture books today reflects society and the diversity found in everyday life. Picture books for children present powerful messages through the combination of text and images for impressionable young minds, which can serve as a mirror or window to constructing views of self and the world. Diversity in picture books allows all children to see themselves represented and serves as a bridge to understanding others. The discussion of diversity in this report focuses on multicultural picture books and extends to issues of gender, sexual orientation, and exceptionalities. Since the 1960s, there has been tremendous change in the faces and experiences found in picture books. (Lempke, 1999).

Impact of Diversity in Picture Books

Kathleen T. Horning delivered the 2010 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, “Can Children’s Books Save the World? Advocates for Diversity in Children’s Books and Libraries.” She pointed out that as librarians we often hear stories about how a book changed someone’s life. Children’s librarians make a difference in children’s lives by getting great books into their hands. In 1902, Anne Carroll Moore, head of children’s services at the New York Public Library (NYPL), said that librarians must try to find the right book at the right time for every child. This concept of connecting children and books is a guiding principle of children’s librarianship today and provides the opportunity for children to make the world a better place, one child at a time. (Horning, 2010).

Picture books have a profound influence on young children who are beginning to form ideas about cultural values. Culture and values are messages often transmitted through storytelling, which in literate cultures includes picture books. The impact of the messages is increased because of the power of the illustrations. The message is delivered through the text and through the images. These messages influence and shape the young child’s behavior. (Worland, 2008). Picture books serve as a mirror, engaging children to identify with someone like themselves and validating their sense of belonging and their experiences. These books also serve as a window to the world, exposing children to cultural groups different from their own, helping them connect with and understand others.

Historical Background for Multicultural Picture Books

Picture books for children were moralistic and didactic well into the 19th century. The first modern picture book was The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter in 1902. Millions of Cats by Wanda Gag was the first American picture book in 1928. The Caldecott Medal for picture books was established in 1938. Prior to the 1960s, people who were not European or European American were almost invisible in picture books or depicted negatively. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s increased awareness of and sensitivity towards minorities. This was also the Age of New Realism in children’s books, marked by Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak in 1963. The financial boom of the 1960s included large government grants for school libraries resulting in a
dramatic increase in children’s publishing. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), founded in 1966, pointed out racial stereotypes through published articles and helped promote minority authors and illustrators. There was a steady increase in diverse, multicultural books in the 1970s as the result of social change occurring in American society during this time period, the influence of the CIBC, and the establishment of the Coretta Scott King Award in 1969. (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

Multicultural titles decreased in the 1980s and in the 1990s the trend reversed with renewed interest in multicultural education. Educators emphasized the need for picture books for children of minority cultural groups to bolster self-esteem and pride in their heritage and for children of all groups to foster awareness and understanding of people from cultural groups different from their own. Important criteria for evaluating picture books are that they contain no racial or cultural stereotyping, represent characters as true individuals, and represent cultural details accurately. There are three categories for multicultural books; neutral, generic, and specific. Neutral books include characters from cultural minorities but are about other topics. The multicultural faces in these books make a statement about the value of diversity. Generic books have characters representing cultural groups functioning as people in the common culture. An example of this type is The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats. Specific books have cultural details that define the characters and cultural themes. (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) has tracked statistics on the number of books about people of color since 1985. Multicultural books are never over 5% of all children’s books published in any given year. (Horning, 2010).

**African Americans**

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was the impetus for social change reflected in children’s picture books. In 1962, The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats was the first picture book to showcase an African American child without negative stereotyping. It won the Caldecott Medal in 1963 and remains a favorite of children today. In 1965, an article in the Saturday Review by Nancy Larrick, “The All White World of Children’s Books”, caused people to take notice and increase efforts to include African Americans. The establishment of the Coretta Scott King Award in 1969 encouraged more books reflecting the African American experience and by African American authors and illustrators. Leo Dillon was the first African American illustrator to win the Caldecott Medal in 1976 for Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears, with his wife, Diane who is not African American. (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

Anne Carroll Moore hired Augusta Baker, an African American librarian, in 1937 to work at the Harlem branch of NYPL. Baker became the head of Children’s Services in 1961 and was a well-known American Library Association (ALA) leader, writer, storyteller, and advocate for library services for the African American community. Other librarians who created change through careful selection to help shape children’s literature and supporting diversity were Charlemae Rollins and Effie Lee Morris. Charlemae Rollins was an African American pioneer of children’s services at Chicago Public Library, starting in 1927. She published the first recommended booklist for
multicultural books in 1941. It was called “We Build Together”. Effie Lee Morris was an advocate for services to the African American community at the Cleveland Public Library, starting in 1946, and the San Francisco Public Library, starting in 1963. The issues in the article by Nancy Larrick published in 1965 had been raised before for nearly thirty years by Baker and Rollins. (Horning, 2010). There is a great selection of picture books by many successful and well-known African American authors and illustrators available today, including books such as The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson (2001).

**Hispanic Americans**

The Mexican American Civil Rights Movement lead by Cesar Chavez and others in the 1960s and 1970s was reflected in changes in society resulting in increased awareness of Hispanic Americans as a growing minority group. The renewed interest in multicultural education in the 1990s and increase in population for Hispanic Americans prompted a trend of expansion of Latino literature. This included bilingual books in Spanish and English and Spanish translations of popular picture books. The 1950 Caldecott Medal book, Song of the Swallows by Leo Politi, was the first winner with a Latino protagonist. David Diaz was the first Hispanic American to win the Caldecott Medal in 1995 for illustrating Smoky Night by Eve Bunting. (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

In 1996, the Pura Belpre Award was established to honor Hispanic American authors and illustrators. The Belpre Award has done for Latino authors and illustrators what the Coretta Scott King Award did for black authors in the 1970s. Anne Carroll Moore hired Pura Belpre in 1929 as a librarian at NYPL to meet the needs of the growing Latino population. She was Puerto Rican and well-known for her bilingual storytimes, storytelling, Spanish-language book collections, and outreach to the Hispanic community. She published a picture book, Perez y Martina, in 1932 in both English and Spanish. It was the first book in English published by a Puerto Rican writer in the United States. In 2008, a picture book about Pura Belpre, The Storyteller’s Candle/La velita de los cuentos by Lucia Gonzalez was published. In 1997, a picture book by Pat Mora, Tomas and the Library Lady, was published based on the true story of author and poet, Tomas Rivera, who was welcomed as a young migrant child into a library in Iowa in the 1940s. (Horning, 2010). Since 1996, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) has sponsored El dia de los ninos/el dia de los libros on April 30 to celebrate children, families, and reading. (ALSC, 2009). Children can find picture books representing a variety of Latino cultures in English, Spanish, or bilingual versions in libraries today.

**Asian/Pacific Americans**

In the 1990s and 2000s, there was a significant increase in publishing Asian American books along with other multicultural books for children. This represented a range of countries with very different cultural experiences and histories. Some countries are less represented in English, so importing them is an alternative. Another resource is the International Children’s Digital Library, which has original books from many
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Asian cultures represented in picture books prior to the 1990s were typically Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Indian. Cultural authenticity is an issue of concern with these earlier books that tended toward exoticism and stereotyping. Books like *The Five Chinese Brothers* have stereotypical images. Another issue in depiction of Asians in picture books is not giving them culturally specific voices. Contemporary books cover a wider range of cultural groups from many Asian and Pacific Islander nations. Some originate in Asian countries, like *Waiting for Mama* by Lee Tae-Jun (2007), which was imported from Korea. Others are written and illustrated by Asian Americans. Two Asian Americans received the Caldecott Medal in the 1990s, Chinese American Ed Young for *Lon Po Po* in 1990 and Japanese American Allen Say for *Grandfather's Journey* in 1994. The past decade has shown an increase in Asian American authors and books that are contemporary, culturally specific stories. The current popularity of graphic novels and manga and the volume of books imported from Asian countries may have a positive effect on the number of Asian picture books imported as well. The Asian Pacific American Library Association (APALA) initiated an awards program in 2003 for high quality literature relating to Asian Pacific experiences. (Yokota, 2009).

Native Americans

Inaccuracies in depiction of Native Americans contribute to cultural misunderstanding. Picture books for children have included stereotyped “Indian” characters which are offensive to Native peoples. They are often portrayed as a people of the past, not contemporary culture. There is a prevailing paternalistic attitude and lack of cultural authenticity as well. Separate Native societies are often lumped together as the generic “Indian in a tipi” instead of portraying cultural details accurately. An example of this is *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* by Susan Jeffers. In this book, the beliefs of Native people are also misappropriated by those outside of the culture to support an environmental message. In the 1970s, the CIBC published books by Native American authors, encouraging more authentic representation. In the 1990s and 2000s, more Native American authors have published picture books, such as *Jingle Dancer* by Cynthia Leitich Smith (2000). In 2005, Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale published *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* to offer criteria for stereotypes and recommended book lists. (Oyate, 2009). The American Indian Library Association established a book award in 2006 for excellence in representing Native Americans in youth literature. (Horning, 2010).

Other Cultural Groups

Middle Eastern or Arab Americans have seen an increase in representation in picture books since 2001 in response to negative stereotyping that exists surrounding current events. There have also been picture books representing biracial or multiracial children since the classic *Black is Brown is Tan* by Arnold Adoff was published in 1973. There are more children of mixed racial and cultural heritage in society today and there are few books representing them. Religion is another source of cultural groups sharing the same beliefs, practices, and holidays. Picture books describing Christian and Jewish
children’s experiences have more recently been joined by those describing Buddhist, Islamic, and other celebrations of holidays and everyday life. Another type of group children belong to is family. Since the Age of New Realism in the 1960s, family structure has been represented more realistically in picture books. Children with divorced parents living in single parent homes or shared custody are depicted, along with those who are adopted, raised by grandparents, with a parent in jail, two dads or two moms. These are the realities of family life in the 21st century and so they also exist in today’s picture books. Young children’s understanding of family is important in developing a sense of belonging. Books like *The Family Book* by Todd Parr (2003) address family diversity with developmentally appropriate content and illustrations for preschoolers. (Chick, 2008).

**Sexual Orientation**

There are few picture books with gay and lesbian themes available. Gay characters in picture books have been recent targets of censorship and stir controversy. Picture books with positive portrayals of alternative families help children in those families gain acceptance and visibility while experiencing the stress of a homophobic society. *Daddy’s Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990) and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman (1989) were pioneering efforts lacking general appeal. More recent additions to gay-themed picture book literature are well-written stories with a positive and upbeat tone. More books need to be written, published, and made available to counteract the marginalization of gay and lesbian families. (Chick, 2008). *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005) is an example of a very appealing true story about penguins that often gets challenged because it introduces the concept of homosexuality in a picture book for younger readers. Actually, the story is told in a very straightforward and understated way. Books celebrating alternative families definitely have a place in a diverse public library children’s collection.

**Gender**

Many books of the 1960s and earlier show gender stereotyping and sexism. They perpetuate sex role stereotypes and represent women and girls as inferior. Females were vastly underrepresented and were portrayed in passive roles, following or being rescued by males. Boys were active, independent, and had adventures. As the ideas of the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1970s permeated society and more women entered the work force, gender equality in picture books became an important issue. Books from the 1980s showed improvement in gender treatment. There were more female characters, less stereotyping of gender roles, and more equal treatment and positive images for girls and women. Men and women were presented in different occupational roles. Female characters appeared more frequently and in a range of activities. Sex role stereotypes negatively affect both boys and girls by limiting ideas of female potential and reinforcing rigid characteristics. There is a wide variety of picture books free of gender stereotypes available today. The prevalence of nonexist picture books is due to feminist efforts to provide positive images and build a gender-fair, multicultural world. The Amelia Bloomer Project began in 2002 to identify appealing

**Exceptionalities**

Acceptance of cultural diversity in picture books since the 1990s has not included people with disabilities or special needs (exceptionalities). Children with disabilities were portrayed in traditional literature as "brave little souls" or "poor little things". They were often used as symbolic characters or comic relief. Exceptional characters should not be portrayed stereotypically or used as catalysts for change in other characters. The earlier books were didactic in nature with messages that were too strong and not enough characterization to allow children to relate to them. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), formed in 1922, advocated for special education classes and teachers. It still is active today in serving the needs of individuals with exceptionalities. Legislation was passed in 1973 and 1975 supporting mainstreaming these children into regular classrooms. Books between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s increased in number and the diversity of exceptionalities covered. Newer books from the last decade have more up-to-date information and language use without labels. They use language that designates the person first, not the exceptionality. Good illustrations also help create connection to the character. ALA established the Schneider Family Book Awards in 2003 to honor books portraying individuals with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. Children who use sign language or a wheelchair, who are autistic or have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) are increasingly able to find books about children like themselves. A gap in the literature still exists for ethnically diverse characters and languages other than English. Other children exposed to these books can become more aware and accepting of their exceptional peers. Picture books serve as a means to talk about differences, which can lead to better understanding. (Campbell, 2006).

**Trends**

Since picture books reflect society, one trend that is apparent is the relationship between the sociopolitical movements and issues of our times and the diversity found in subsequent books. The 1960s had the most influence in social change with the Civil Rights Movement, reexamination of traditional values, the beginnings of the Chicano Movement and Feminist Movement, and sensitivity to minorities. The 1970s saw a marked increase in African American books and this influenced other minority groups as well. The CIBC supported and promoted multicultural authors; African American, Native American, Asian American, and others, during this time period. The influx of multicultural books slowed during the more politically and socially conservative 1980s. Then the 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in multicultural education and the result was a dramatic increase in publishing books of minority cultural groups, especially Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. Gender bias and stereotyping in picture books were also noticeably improved by the 1990s. Bias and negative stereotyping still exist in society towards some of these groups, although efforts to be inclusive and culturally authentic in children’s literature have been mostly successful due to the commitment of librarians and educators and vigilance of advocacy groups. In the 21st
century, several minority groups are still struggling to have their rights recognized and to gain acceptance. Arab Americans have been targets of negative stereotyping in the current political climate. The divisive struggle for legislation supporting same-sex marriage has stirred controversy regarding gay rights and challenges to children’s books representing gay and lesbian characters and families. People with exceptionalities and their advocates are also currently involved in increasing awareness.

Economic issues are another trend that greatly influences diversity in picture books. The surge of multicultural books that appeared during the 1970s was due in part to large government grants to school libraries in the 1960s, creating a financial boom in children’s publishing. The 1990s was another time of economic stability and success reflected in the publishing and marketing of multicultural books. The current economic crisis may have a negative effect on children’s publishing as small, independent publishers struggle financially and large publishing houses cut back on multicultural books that don’t sell as well because they represent such a small percentage of the market. (Horning, 2010). Teachers, librarians, and parents are encouraged to support small publishers, like Barefoot Books, that emphasize multicultural and inclusive materials and continue to buy and put diverse books into the hands of children. (Worland, 2008).

Another trend that has had a major effect on diversity in picture books is the establishment of book awards. The Coretta Scott King Award in 1969 started this trend and had an impact on African American children’s books published in the 1970s that continues to a lesser degree to this day. A similar increase in Hispanic American children’s books resulted from the Pura Belpre Award in 1996. (Horning, 2010). More recent awards that have been established are the Asian Pacific American Library Association Award in 2003, the American Indian Library Association Award in 2006, the Amelia Bloomer Project in 2002, and the Schneider Family Book Award in 2003. The additional recognition of these books due to the awards may continue the trend of increased publication.

**Summary**

There has been tremendous change in diversity in picture books in the last fifty years from 1960 to the present. Picture book collections today are inclusive of all groups, avoiding stereotyping and striving for cultural authenticity. This includes multicultural books for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian/Pacific Americans, Native Americans, and other cultural groups. It extends to issues of diversity related to sexual orientation, gender, and exceptionalities. Picture books reflect society and so the social changes of the Civil Rights Movement, Chicano Rights Movement, Feminist Movement, and changing attitudes regarding minorities, sexual orientation, and exceptionalities directly impact the faces and experiences represented. The diverse picture books of the 21st century have come a long way in providing a mirror and window for young children in the process of learning and forming cultural values. It is more important than ever in history for today’s children to have a global perspective or world view. Psychosocial development of identity, difference, and sense of belonging
that occurs in early childhood provides the opportunity for children to gain self-esteem and a sense of identity and belonging within their family and own cultural group and connect with others outside of their group, during the process of constructing views of self and the world. The impact of aesthetic response to the artistic expression of art and story from the hearts and minds of the book’s creators directly to young children can’t be underestimated. Picture books that promote diversity do affect how children feel and view themselves and the world. And that affect can make all the difference in adapting to the diverse world we live in.

Voices from the history of children’s librarianship were calling out for diversity in picture books long before they were heard by the rest of society. Pioneers like Anne Carroll Moore, Augusta Baker, Charlemae Rollins, Pura Belpre, and others asked us to look at the faces and experiences in picture books and the children we serve. This commitment to diversity from children’s librarians continued through the last fifty years of social change. Today censorship remains a challenge to children’s librarians who strive as always to make a difference in children’s lives by finding the right book at the right time for every child. (Horning, 2010).
References


