WHITE PAPER

RISING VOICES LIBRARY®

Why Diversity Matters in School Library Collections—And How to Achieve It

OCTOBER 2024

SCHOLASTIC

No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Copyright © 2024 by Scholastic Inc.
All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc. Printed in the U.S.A.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

Here's why educators and librarians/media specialists should introduce students to a wide range of stories and voices—along with how to do so effectively.

In a powerful TED Talk, author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recalled how she read mostly British and American books as a young girl growing up in Nigeria. As a result, the first stories she wrote as a child featured blond, blue-eyed characters who played in the snow and ate apples.

"What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children," she said. "Because all I had read were books in which the characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books … had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. The unintended consequence was that I did not know people like me could exist in literature."[1]

How we perceive the world—and, just as importantly, how we see *ourselves*—is a function of the stories we experience in books and other media. Yet, while the United States has become more culturally and ethnically diverse, children's books largely haven't kept pace.

That's beginning to change. School librarians/media specialists are consciously seeking to diversify their library collections, and publishers are amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups in the children's books they produce.

This white paper examines why these efforts are important—and it looks at how librarians/media specialists and other K–12 leaders can make a difference.

WHY DIVERSE BOOKS MATTER

Making sure that all students can see themselves represented in the stories they read and hear is critical.

"When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part," wrote Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, professor emerita at The Ohio State University.[2]

Lack of representation in the books that students are reading can deflate their sense of self-worth. Conversely, research suggests that culturally responsive books and curricula can improve academic outcomes for minority students. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that high school freshmen at risk of dropping out saw their GPA increase by more than a full grade point and their attendance increase by 21 percent when they took an ethnic studies course.[3]

Diversity in literature and nonfiction doesn't just benefit underrepresented populations. Students of *all* backgrounds and ethnicities benefit from reading stories outside their own experience. Reading and learning about others who are different, or those who've had very different experiences from our own, is how we develop empathy for others and a deeper understanding of the world around us.

Empathy is a vital skill for students to learn. Not only does empathy help students contribute to a safe and supportive school climate for everyone, it also improves their ability to get along with other people and enhances their future job prospects.

According to studies, empathy is the single most important skill for leaders in any organization to possess.[4] As workplaces become more culturally diverse and the nature of work becomes increasingly collaborative, intercultural sensitivity and emotional intelligence are highly desirable workforce skills.[5]

A WIDE RANGE OF STORIES IS KEY

As school librarians/media specialists are building their collections, they should keep in mind that it's important for students not just to feel seen, but to feel *welcome*. Librarians/media specialists should consider how various groups are represented in the works they choose, and they should choose books that tell a wide range of stories about each group.

During a webinar hosted by the nonprofit Alliance for Education and Future Ready Schools, Sylvie Shaffer, PreK–8 librarian/media specialist for the Capitol Hill Day School in Washington, D.C., noted that not every experience of people from underrepresented groups involves overcoming adversity—and it's important for children to see other people like themselves represented in normal, everyday ways as well.

"Again and again, we see books where someone is overcoming a struggle, and that's not the only story," Shaffer observed. "I've had children of color say to me, 'Oh you're going to hand me that book about that kid who watches his friends get shot, and I just want a book about a kid who goes to the mall and hangs out.'"[6]

Having a wide range of stories helps students avoid forming generalizations about various groups of people.

"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete," Adichie said. "They make one story become the *only* story."

When Adichie was attending college in America, her roommate was surprised to learn that she spoke English, listened to Mariah Carey, and knew how to use a stove.

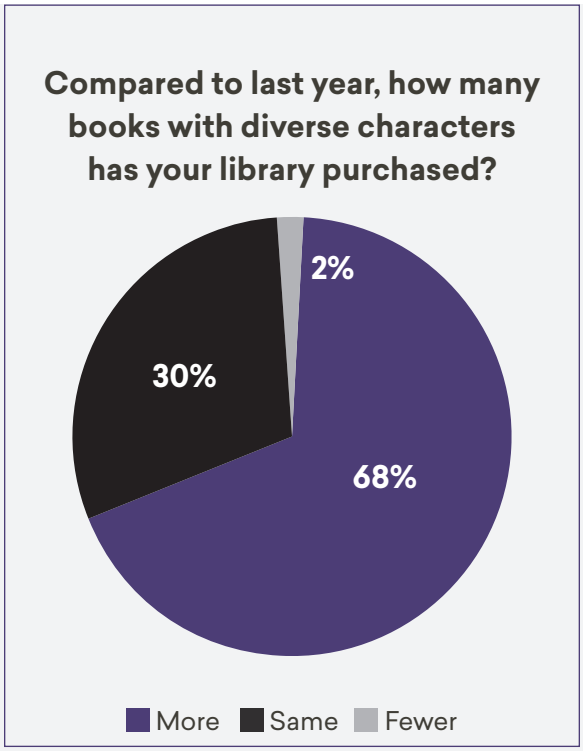
"She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me," Adichie said. "Her default position toward me as an African was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals."

The consequence of the "single story," she said, is that it emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. On the other hand, having a rich array of stories about diverse groups of people underscores our common humanity.

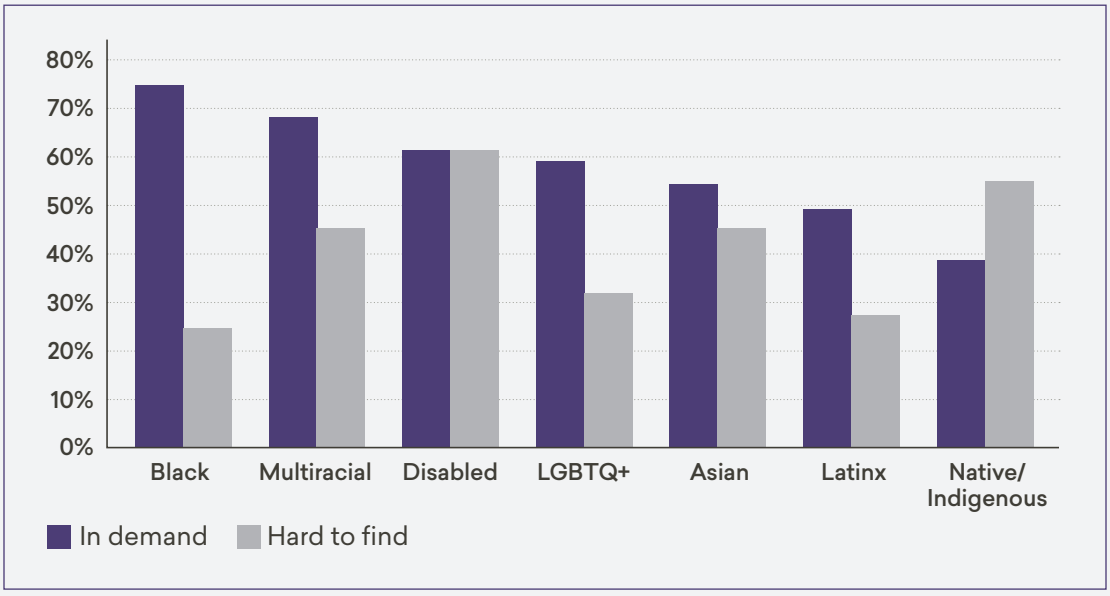
DIVERSITY IN PUBLISHING IS ON THE RISE

School librarians/media specialists overwhelmingly agree that it's important to have a book collection with diverse points of view. In a 2018 survey by the *School Library Journal*,[7] 95 percent of librarians/media specialists said this was important, and 81 percent said it was "very important." Sixty-eight percent of librarians/media specialists said they're buying more books with diverse characters.

In the same survey, librarians/media specialists also indicated that finding high-quality books with diverse points of view can be challenging. Nearly three-fourths of respondents said they'd like more authentic portrayals of Black or African American people in the books they buy, but 25 percent said these were hard to find. Sixty-two percent of librarians/media specialists said they'd like more books with disabled characters, and an equal percentage said these were hard to find.



The Children's Cooperative Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin School of Education tracks diversity in children's publishing. From 1994 to 2015, there was very little change in the market, with only 10 to 15 percent of children's books written by or about people of color.



However, those numbers have begun to climb in recent years. In 2020, 28 percent of children's books published in the United States were written by people of color, the CCBC reports—and 30 percent featured nonwhite characters.[8]

With a growing selection of books to choose from, librarians/media specialists can support positive representation for all students.

New Scholastic Collections Celebrate Underrepresented Voices

To promote diversity in representation, Scholastic has created specially curated collections of books for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. These high-interest, culturally relevant texts give context to what students are experiencing in the world around them while fostering meaningful conversations about social justice issues and identity development.

The first Rising Voices Library, issued in May 2021, focuses on celebrating Black and Latino boys. Each grade-level library contains 50 books—two copies each of 25 fiction, nonfiction, and biographical titles—complete with teaching materials.

The collection is organized around five literary themes that students and teachers can use to make cross-cultural connections, such as "Family, Culture, and Community" and "Heroes and Role Models."

While the focus of this collection is specific, it is a tool to support all learners by fostering a classroom community that supports more positive representation and equity. Children of all backgrounds will benefit as they build empathy, respect, and understanding.

The second Rising Voices Library, released in August 2021, focuses on empowering girls in STEAM. Curated in partnership with a group of five female STEAM mentors, this collection of fiction and nonfiction stories shatters misconceptions about girls and women as leaders in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math.

Three other Rising Voices Libraries will follow. To learn more, call (800) 387-1437 or go to scholastic.com/risingvoices.

HOW TO BRING MORE DIVERSE BOOKS TO STUDENTS

How can school librarians/media specialists, principals, curriculum specialists, teachers, and others ensure a diverse and culturally responsive collection of books for students to read? Here are three key suggestions.

1. Evaluate your current collection—and fill in gaps as needed.

Many librarians/media specialists are conducting "diversity audits" of their collections to discover what groups might be underrepresented. They're using this insight to guide their future purchasing.

Capitol Hill Day School involved students in a diversity audit of the picture books in its library. When students came in for their scheduled library time, Shaffer gave them a silent reflection to think about: "Do I see characters that look like me in TV shows or movies I like?" This prompted a discussion of diversity and representation in media.

Then students worked in pairs to evaluate the library's picture books. One student served as a "book looker" and the other served as a "tally marker." The book looker would pull a picture book from the shelves and indicate whether its cover featured a white human, a nonwhite human, and/or an animal or nonhuman character. The tally marker would record each result. Halfway through the period, the students switched roles.

The results for all six classes indicated that white humans and nonhumans had roughly equal representation on the books' covers—but nonwhite humans appeared on only 7 to 16 percent of covers. "Kids were shocked," Shaffer said. "Seeing the numbers was really powerful."

2. Promote diverse titles to students.

Having a diverse collection of books doesn't do any good unless students are actually reading them. Librarians/media specialists can promote these titles using various strategies, such as by featuring them in displays, highlighting them in newsletters and on social media, and showcasing them in book clubs or student reading advisories.

3. Work with teachers to integrate diverse books into the curriculum.

Encouraging teachers to read books featuring diverse authors and characters in their classrooms is also important. Librarians/media specialists can do this by creating resource lists for educators and using professional development time to discuss certain titles and how these can be integrated into the curriculum.

Stories Can "Empower and Humanize"

Ensuring diversity in school and classroom libraries benefits all students. It enables those who feel different to feel seen and have their experience validated, and it helps everyone learn empathy and understanding.

"Stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize," Adichie said. She concluded: "When we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place [or group of people], we regain a kind of paradise."

REFERENCES

[1] Adichie, C. (2009). "The Danger of a Single Story." YouTube. youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg.

[2] Bishop, R. (1990). "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6 (3). Reprinted at Scenic Regional Library. scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf.

[3] Kim, A. (2016). "A Culturally Rich Curriculum Can Improve Minority Student Achievement." Thomas B. Fordham Institute. fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/culturally-rich-curriculum-can-improve-minority-student-achievement.

[4] Deutschendorf, H. (2018). "5 Reasons Empathy Is the Most Important Leadership Skill." *Fast Company*. fastcompany.com/90272895/5-reasons-empathy-is-the-most-important-leadership-skill.

[5] Rainie, L., and Anderson, J. (2017). "The Future of Jobs and Jobs Training." Pew Research Center. pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/03/the-future-of-jobs-and-jobs-training.

[6] All4Ed. (2019). "Does My Collection Reflect My Community? Diversity in the School Library." all4ed.org/webinar-event/does-my-collection-reflect-my-community-diversity-in-the-school-library.

[7] School Library Journal. (2018). "Diverse Books Survey." slj.com/?page=slj-diverse-books-survey-2018.

[8] Cooperative Children's Book Center. (2018). "Diversity Statistics." University of Wisconsin-Madison. ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics.



Copyright © 2024 by Scholastic Inc.

5252-26 10/24