Diversity in Children’s Literature: Checking our Blind Spots in 2020

By Jennie McDonald | Categories: Diverse Literature

“From the princesses to the dragons to the stories themselves, sometimes it seems like I have been looking at the same books for fifty years. The princess, curiously enough, always looks the same: why is that? . . . Once a child sees himself represented in a book, his existence is validated, and he feels that he is part of the world. Conversely, when a child does not see herself represented in books, she doesn't feel as though she is part of the world, and her life, her existence, is not validated.”

—Eric Velasquez, award-winning author of many books, including Grandma's Records, Grandma's Gift, and Octopus Stew in an interview with Collaborative Classroom

When I wrote about my “aha” moment back in 2015 and the resulting expansion of our author interviews and the trade book diversity review we implemented for books in Collaborative Literacy, it was against a backdrop of the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray, as well as the Charleston Mother Emanuel church shootings. The violence perpetrated against unarmed African Americans was a tragically familiar story in that community but when the news was broadcast across the nation, especially in bystander videos shared on social media, many White Americans were shocked by the reality. The ripple effects of those violent acts and the responding protests emboldened many people to speak up about bias and racism throughout the culture. As one part of that response, a growing number of voices objected to the dismal representation of African Americans (and other marginalized communities) in children's books.[1] The organization We Need Diverse Books had just been founded in 2014, and really gained momentum in the following years.

At Collaborative Classroom, we were taking stock of our mission, parsing how we address fundamental inequities in education through our curricula, and looking at how we could do more. We also reviewed where our program literature figured into the equation, and, wanting to understand how the book collections stood in terms of representation, we put together a team and gathered data. We knew that expanding the diversity of literature in our curriculum alone was not going to address the educational debt owed to Black and Brown students in the United States. But books are critical for broadening the perspective of more privileged students and ensuring students of color see themselves in the classroom community as well as in the academic conversation. It's interesting to note that up to this point not a single school district had ever asked us for information on the diversity of our book sets.

Initially, I found the results of our first diversity review encouraging—we all did. But eventually we came to understand the need for more multi-layered representation. For example, I had focused on character agency and three-dimensionality to flesh out the race, ethnicity, and gender stats, but didn't note the context within which those qualities were shown. For characters of color, these attributes were often limited to operating in a setting of poverty or fighting for civil rights. Most often it was the White characters who...
had the privilege of tackling other kinds of problems: lost dogs, a new neighborhood, a moral conundrum.

So we focused on finding books that would fill the needs we saw—books that included characters from marginalized groups in a wide range of settings doing a wide range of activities—and making sure publishers knew what we were looking for. We scoured book award lists (Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpre, Schneider Family, South Asia Book Award, and more), explored new imprints that focus on underrepresented communities in children's books (Kokila, Versify, and others), tapped into trusted resources (Social Justice Books, American Indians in Children's Literature, Africa Access, Lee & Low Books), and searched for #ownvoices stories (a term which refers to an author from a marginalized or underrepresented group writing about their own experiences from their own perspective). Over the years we've had a steady flow of review copies pour into the office to expand and update the pool of books from which to make our selections.

In taking these actions we were reckoning with some of the book choices made back when Making Meaning was developed for inclusion in Collaborative Literacy. Our diversity review had identified this program as having the least representation. We were committed to improving on these books in the revisions scheduled for 2021 and 2023.

This was all in play when the world shifted in the spring of 2020. COVID-19 moved through our country, touching everyone but especially the already disenfranchised members of our communities (Black, Brown, Indigenous, elderly, disabled, and poor). And then George Floyd was killed by the police and the antiracism movement was reignited with a breadth and depth not seen in a long time—far deeper in some quarters than the outrage in 2015. I think there was a collective sense of shame among many White people—at least there was for me: How could I have not been out marching before? Why did it take so long to shift from an intellectual response to tragedy to an emotional one? Before, I knew life was dangerously different for the Black people in my community, but why had I not grappled with it in my heart? The world—and I—said we cared in 2015, but so little actually changed. This time it seems that perhaps for many more in the White community, empathy has led to a sense of responsibility. It has become personal.

It was in this environment that our teacher partners’ sharp, clear critique of some of our titles landed on fertile ground. These comments echoed previous concerns and now increased our sense of urgency. In my colleague Peter Brunn's June 23 lighthouse-themed keynote to the Collaborative Classroom Virtual Summer Institute he asked: "Who might ring the bell when we're headed off course? Who are our lighthouses?" These teachers were our lighthouses.

Suddenly, our thinking shifted from “how can we possibly change the books in Making Meaning midstream, before the next revision?” to “how can we not?” Yes, we've already expanded representation in the new edition, which will be available in a few years, but what about the children and teachers using the program right now? They can't wait. We realized we couldn't wait either. Educational publishing is a microcosm of the larger world where, though there may be hand-wringing and outrage, real change can be too slow. We decided to move quickly to do whatever we could to respond to feedback we had received that amplified those nagging voices in our own heads (and now hearts).

Our analysis and feedback from teachers helped us identify some issues that we wanted to address: problematic books that reinforced stereotypes of poverty in communities of color, White savior narratives, and an overall lack of #ownvoices stories. We wanted to replace some of the program's books for the 2020 school year, which was already shaping up to be an unusual and challenging one between virus-related deaths and economic upheaval; ongoing police killings of unarmed African Americans; civil unrest; election logistics; and natural disasters such as fires and hurricanes. We laid out each grade level's read-aloud books on a table and identified titles we would no longer want in classrooms given what we know now. With a sharper lens, we searched for books that could fit the lesson requirements and improve representation throughout.

We selected 19 books to eliminate and found replacement books, worked with publishers to rush them into our warehouse by end of
summer, and had them assembled into grade-level sets to make available to schools. We have written lessons for most of the new books and will make them available on our website. As we did this work, we were very aware that we wouldn't be able to solve all the problems with text selection at once, but we felt the urgent need to apply what we had learned and in doing so, to make the program stronger.

I'm glad we made the revisions to *Making Meaning* and it's nice to know what we can accomplish quickly when we need to. These are small changes in the scheme of things. The bigger lesson for me is how our focus expanded to include both long-term and immediate needs for change, and our thinking from what we can't do right now to what we can. How do we consistently tap into that? And when we've tapped into it, how do we execute? I know that staying close to changes in children's publishing, continuing to listen to teacher feedback, and always deepening our own book review processes will help us be prepared to turn on a dime and apply new information and new understanding to our programs when it is needed.