

Diversity in Children's Books: Check Your Blind Spot

By Jennie McDonald | Categories: Making Meaning, Being a Reader, Children's Literature, Teaching Tips, Being a Writer, Thought Leadership

"The greatest problem is not with flat-out white racists, but rather with the far larger number of Americans who believe intellectually in racial equality but are quietly oblivious to injustice around them."

Nicholas Kristof, New York Times

I made a mistake.

I realized it at a dinner I attended a few years ago with members and honorees of the Coretta Scott King Book Award Committee. (Their awards are given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults). I sat among writers, illustrators, teachers, and professors. Most of them were people of color. I am not.

I listened to the professionals around me reminisce about colleagues and friends, and laugh at jokes and stories. I also listened as they noted the lack of diversity in publishing, and I understood, right then, that I was in my own small way part of the problem.

Prior to that dinner, I had conducted a series of author interviews for Center for the Collaborative Classroom. And here's the mistake I made: When it came to finding people to interview, I naturally reached out to my own personal contacts in children's publishing. I was asking them a favor, so I talked to people I knew fairly well—people in my *circle*. Nearly all of them were white; there were no editors or sales representatives of color.

I don't think it was a coincidence, then, that the group of authors I lined up did not include a single person of color. I had even worked to get a mix of genders and to present both fiction and nonfiction authors. But the interviewees ended up being entirely white. The subjects of their books were mostly white too. This is not representative of the books we use in our programs and libraries, nor does it represent our community of students and teachers. In fact, if someone else had selected the interviewees I probably would have noticed—and balked at—the imbalance.

Keep in mind that for over 30 years, Collaborative Classroom has considered diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic location when selecting the books we use. We are committed to ensuring that students see their worlds represented in our literature-based curriculum. I've always been proud of Collaborative Classroom's commitment to diversity. I supported it in my work with children's publishers and I felt good about it.

But until that dinner, I hadn't realized how oblivious I'd been to the voices I'd left out of my interviews. True, they were only interviews. But that kind of obliviousness is all too common in our workplaces and our classrooms. It's reflected in our movies, TV programs,

news sources, and books. It impacts our systems of government, law, and justice.

In my case, more than a few good things came out of that dinner: I met Dr. Jonda McNair, the former chair of the Coretta Scott King Book Award Committee. Thanks to connecting with her and later, reading her interview on the Children's Book Council website, I was motivated to immediately begin correcting the imbalance in the authors I was interviewing. We now provide interviews of a more representative group of writers and illustrators. The entire series is richer for it, and so am I. (See my interview with her [here](#).)

Then I began to wonder whether there was a way for Collaborative Classroom to check the results of our good intentions to consider diversity when we select children's literature for our programs. We'd never quantified those efforts. Had we actually achieved inclusiveness? I hoped so. Could we do better? Probably. The data would guide us.

That's why this year we launched the Diversity Review Book Project, to take a look at diversity in our new Collaborative Literacy suite. We assembled a committed, thoughtful, interdepartmental, and-yes-diverse team. We reviewed 354 children's books and collected diversity data (using similar standards as the Cooperative Children's Book Center), and had an outside research consultant (experienced in social justice projects) help us formulate the questionnaire and analyze the data.



I will post more about the diversity review process and all the results soon.

For now I want to share just a few numbers: While 37% of the U.S.

population¹ and about 50% of K-12 students in the U.S. are members of a racial minority, only about 10% of children's books published in 1994-2014 were by or about people of color. So we were gratified to find that even with such a limited pool of books with which to work, 41% of the books about humans in the Collaborative Literacy suite are about people of color. We learned plenty more from the data and will use it to guide future reviews, inform our work with publishers, and expand representation in our programs. Further, I think sharing personal perspectives within our team has made it safer to be more open with our colleagues in general. The project began with a specific goal and has brought us so much more in terms of both concrete knowledge and our connections to one another.

But the Diversity Review Book Project is only a first step. There is an active discussion taking place about the lack of diversity in children's books, as well as in the trade publishing industry itself (see Lee & Low blog and Jason Low's diversity survey). That, in turn, is part of the larger-and badly needed-conversation about pervasive racism in our society.

The thing I realized that evening at dinner was that good intentions are not enough. We need to be alert to our own blind spots, to take the initiative and seek knowledge in unfamiliar places, and to make new friends and expand our professional networks to include people whose life experiences are different from our own. If I am going to join the conversation I need to be willing to risk getting it wrong, to admit my mistakes, and most of all, to listen.

Read part 2 of this blog series.