

# ASSESSING CHILDREN'S BOOK COLLECTIONS USING AN ANTI-BIAS LENS

By Linda A. Santora

Books have the potential to create lasting impressions. When books contain people and experiences to which children can relate, they set the scene for fostering children's positive self-concept and respect for diversity. Not seeing themselves, and the groups to which they belong, represented in books can make children feel devalued. Books should not speak to a limited group of children; they should speak to all children. Book collections in early childhood programs should serve as "mirrors" that reflect the children, staff and families in the program and "windows" that reflect the true diversity of our world.

Although children of color in the United States make up about 40% of the population and by the year 2020, that number will grow to 50%, recent statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center show a lack of diversity in children's books. Out of 3,653 children's book titles published in 2018, CCBC found that only 11.1% of the books were about African-Americans, 8.6% were about Asian-Pacific Americans, 6.8% were about Latinos and a mere 1.5% were about American Indians (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019). Further, a survey of 113 early childhood teachers showed that the majority of them could not recall any titles of children's books featuring Native-American, Asian-American and Latino-American characters; only 53 could identify two titles of children's books that contain African-American characters (Brinson, 2012). To add to the challenge of identifying books that truly reflect our current society, a recent study of children books published between 1900 and 2000 found that gender stereotyping in children books has not significantly decreased over time (Dewitt et al, 2013).

Literature, a powerful vehicle for helping children understand their homes, communities and the world, provides impressions and messages that can last a lifetime. Even before young children can read, family members, childcare providers and teachers read them stories about people in faraway places, sometimes from the distant past and sometimes about people whose lives are similar to their own. Books, at their best, invite children to use their imaginations, expand their vocabularies and gain a better understanding of themselves and others. A primary goal in early childhood programs and schools is to welcome and embrace the diversity of children and families in today's multicultural society (Brinson, 2012) and children's books provide a wonderful way for children to learn about diversity and fairness (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2012).

## Books as Window and Mirrors

Since who and what books include send indirect messages of whom and what is important, book collections should reflect all the children, staff and families, equally. When book collections serve as “mirrors,” they contain reflections of the children, their lifestyle, their family, home/school and community. “Mirror books,” by allowing children to see themselves accurately represented, help promote positive self-esteem among children. Children with a strong sense of self are less likely to put others down, a behavior that over time can lead to prejudice and bullying. Helping children learn to feel positive about themselves and others also fosters the development of their comfort with human differences.

Helping children gain comfort with differences during the early years has lasting effects, thus underscoring the importance of including “window books” in children’s book collections. When books serve as “windows,” they provide a glimpse of the diversity of the world in which children live and help them develop a comfort with and respect for unfamiliar people, places and lifestyles. Books can also illustrate the concept that people from diverse groups can play and work together, solve problems and overcome obstacles. At its best, good multicultural and anti-bias children’s literature helps children understand that within our many differences, all people have feelings and aspirations. Those feelings can include love, sadness, fear and the desire for fairness and justice.

## Selecting Books

Selecting good children’s books that serve as “windows” and “mirrors” begins with the same criteria that apply to selecting good children’s books in general—the literary elements of plot, characterization, setting, style, theme and point of view—all interwoven to create a compelling story in an age appropriate manner. Teachers and caregivers should examine children’s books for such things as historical accuracy, realistic lifestyles, believable characters and authentic language and ensure the book is developmentally appropriate. The books chosen should also represent a variety of settings, problem-solving approaches and themes, and should provide opportunities for children to consider multiple perspectives and values. Pictures should be reviewed, in addition to the text. Be sure that the illustrations and images provide opportunities for children to explore diversity, while also avoiding stereotypical portrayals.

In order to avoid “distorted mirrors and windows,” be sure the books contain accurate representations of other cultures and remember that no single book can adequately portray one particular group’s experience (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Taking the time to create such book collections that represent all cultural groups equally will help convey to children that all people are valuable. Additionally, due to the relatively small number of children’s books about people of color, LGBTQ people or people with physical and mental disabilities, adults should include high-quality children’s literature by, about and including these groups in their children’s book collections.

In addition to reviewing each book individually, it is essential to review the entire collection as a whole. The entire collection should strike a balance. It needs to contain mirror books, equally reflecting the

children within the program; it should contain enough window books that reflect the diversity of the world beyond your school or program.

## Avoiding Stereotypes

Unfortunately, not all children's literature conveys the messages that we want young people to learn. Books often contain the same stereotypes and biases that are part of other media. Selecting good children's books also involves the anti-bias approach of making an active commitment to challenging bias, stereotyping and all forms of discrimination. Good children's books challenge stereotypes, provide a realistic glimpse into the lives of diverse groups of people, help children learn to recognize unfairness and provide models for challenging inequity.

Children will not likely know whether a book includes racist, sexist or other stereotypical messages. Repeatedly exposing children to biased representations could have dangerous consequence; it could make such distortions become a part of their thinking, especially if reinforced by societal biases. Therefore, adults need to take responsibility to select books that contain accurate representations of all people. For example, as an alternative to a story like Cinderella, which perpetuates the stereotype of the lead female character as passive, dependent and naïve, adults could instead chose a story that depicts the lead female character as athletic, brave and independent and lead male character as a care provider or homemaker.

While not every book can possibly meet every standard of excellence, in some instances, the value of a particular book will sometimes outweigh those aspects that might be questionable or problematic. When encountering books that exclude certain groups or contain stereotypical portrayals, consider using them as teaching tools. For example, the teacher can help the class work on a letter to the publisher regarding the problematic material. Or, teachers can have their students rewrite the stories and make them more appropriate.

## Acquiring Books

Finding effective children's books that reflect the diversity of our world in a non-stereotypical manner takes time and can be difficult, even for schools with adequate budgets, libraries and access to educational materials. Consider having parents, family members and other members of the community make, donate and lend books to use in the program. Provide them with the following "Checklist for Assessing Children's Books & Books Collections," to guide them in making appropriate choices that will enhance the collection. Browse through ADL's [Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice](#) to incorporate into a reading collection at home and school. Draw on the resources of public libraries. Create a teacher "book wish list" from which those seeking to give "teacher gifts" can chose. Instead of sending birthday treats for the class, some teachers invite families to honor and celebrate their child's special day by donating their child's favorite storybook, to the class collection. By working together, creating book collections that serve as mirrors and windows can be fun and educational.

# CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSING CHILDREN'S BOOKS & BOOK COLLECTIONS

When choosing early childhood children's literature, consider the following criteria. While most effective when used to review a complete collection, reviewers can use the criteria to evaluate a single book.

## Collection

Does the collection as a whole:

- contain equal representation of the diverse groups that make up the staff, children and families ("mirror" books)?
- promote an understanding of all aspects of our diverse society and world ("window" books)?
- speak to all children?
- contain stories that meet the following criteria?

## Story

Do the stories:

- relate to the children's interests?
- provide various conflicts for children to explore?
- provide age-appropriate content?
- encourage discussions?

## Characters

Do the characters:

- represent people from a variety of cultural groups, age ranges and sizes, including some with disabilities?
- depicted as "good" characters reflect a variety of backgrounds?
- include females as well as males in leadership and/or non-traditional roles?

## Themes

Do the themes:

- offer children a variety of things to think about, question and consider?
- explore, instead of preach, values?
- include lessons from which children can learn?

## Settings

Do the stories:

- reflect a variety of settings?
- represent urban, suburban and rural settings realistically?
- represent cultural settings realistically?

## Illustrations

Do the story illustrations:

- include representation of diverse populations?
- contain diversity represented within cultural groups?
- include characters depicted realistically and genuinely?
- avoid reinforcing societal stereotypes?

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