

# **The Importance of Diversity in Library Programs and Material Collections for Children**

## **Background**

Diversity in library collections and programs refers to cultural diversity. Culture includes shared characteristics that define how a person lives, thinks, and creates meaning. These characteristics include customs, traditions, rituals, food, dress, and language. Typically people from the same cultural group share similar characteristics. Nieto (1999) explains that the idea of culture is complex, group share similar



glean from picture books will likely stay with them for the rest of their lives

(Roethler 1998; Henderson 1991).

The absence of a child's culture from the stories in print and digital media can also be problematic. When children never see their culture represented in a library storytime or in materials on the library shelves, they receive a resounding message that the librarian does not think their culture is important enough to feature in the library. This invisibility within the library's programs and materials can equally be harmful to a child's self-image. Latina children's book author and illustrator Maya Christina Gonzalez recalls that as a young child she felt lost in the library among the rows of books that reflected the lives of other children but not her Latino culture. Although she would often draw herself on the inside covers of her coloring books, she still did not feel important because there were no "real" hardcover library books depicting her experiences (2011). The problem of cultural invisibility or the lack of diversity in children's materials is a long-standing one. In 1941, Charlemae Hill Rollins observed that few children's books depicting African Americans were available and those that were accessible contained numerous harmful stereotypes. Later in 1965, Nancy Larrick reemphasized the lack of diversity in children's books in her seminal article "The All-White World of Children's Books," which chastised publishers for not publishing more books about African Americans. Afterwards, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) began publishing additional reports highlighting the paucity of books representing African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, American Indians, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians. In 1980, CIBC published a series of guidelines, *Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism*, that are still used by librarians today to evaluate diversity in children's books. In the 1990s, more books representing



to interact with other individuals from diverse cultures, and an understanding of how cultures are integrated together within our larger society (Montiel-Overall 2009). When children's librarians introduce diversity in materials and programming and promote cultural competence, they create learning environments that help children develop a positive sense of self, explore the larger world around them, and celebrate the accomplishments of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

One way to promote cultural competence in the library is through the literacy initiative El día de los niños/El día de los libros (Children's Day/Book Day), or Día for short. Developed in 1996 by Latina author Pat Mora along with founding partner REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking), Día is a family literacy program that uses libraries to connect children to books representing cultural and linguistic diversity. Housed at the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), Día emphasizes the importance of connecting all children from all cultural backgrounds with library materials in many languages about many cultures. The goals of Día include celebrating children and connecting them to the world of learning through books, stories, and libraries; nurturing cognitive and literacy development in ways that honor and embrace a child's home language and culture; introducing families to community resources that provide opportunities for learning through multiple literacies; and recognizing and respecting culture, heritage, and language as powerful tools for strengthening families and communities. (ALSC 2013)

Día can be celebrated year-round with culminating events on April 30, the official day for celebrating children and books. Librarians who recognize Día as a

daily commitment and incorporate its goals into their regular programming demonstrate their commitment to promoting diversity in library collections and programs.

## **Position**

Recognized as trusted spaces that welcome children to explore, discover, and connect to the larger world, libraries can play an integral role in helping them develop understanding and respect for other people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As our nation continues to diversify, it is essential that children learn to understand the important role of their culture and the cultures of other people in creating an overall global culture respectful of differences. By including diversity in its programs and collections, the library has the potential for helping children make cross-cultural connections and develop the skills necessary to function in a culturally pluralistic society.

Both the Institute of Museum and Library Services' *Growing Young Minds: How Museums and Libraries Create Lifelong Learners* (2013) and the Pew Research Center's *Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading* (Miller et al. 2013) attest to the important role of the library as one of the first teachers of young children, delivering content-rich, age-appropriate early literacy programs and providing access to high-quality, engaging print and digital material collections. When libraries offer culturally authentic materials and displays, they convey the importance of using print and digital media to learn how different cultures share commonalities that make us very similar, but also have unique traits that enrich the world. By delivering culturally responsive programs such as Día, libraries (1) link home cultures with the larger social culture to promote traditional literacy; (2) provide an opportunity for silenced voices to be heard; (3) promote lifelong

learning and achievement; (4) celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity; and (5) empower children to function in a global society (Diamond and Moore 1995).

An excellent way to build cultural bridges is to integrate authentic contemporary children's literature about diverse groups into library programs to promote cultural literacy and global understanding, thereby introducing children to the rich cultures of their peers, teachers, or future acquaintances (Moreillon 2013). Studies indicate that by preschool age, young children reveal stereotypes and negative behaviors towards those they perceive as different. These learned attitudes are fostered by the views of parents, caregivers, educators, and peers and by the social messages that reading materials convey about a particular culture. Librarians can help children develop favorable attitudes towards those perceived as the "other" by introducing them to authentic, high-quality literature about diverse cultures. Particularly, positive representations of diversity in children's materials

- provide positive role models for culturally diverse children;
- introduce children to characters with similar experiences and emotions;
- convey the richness and beauty of the diverse cultures in the United States;
- reinforce a distinct cultural identity;
- promote multilingual and literacy development;
- inspire learning of other cultures and general cultural knowledge;
- facilitate acceptance of cultures different from one's own; and
- foster global connections.

When selecting books for the library collection or to use in library programs, it is imperative that children's librarians choose materials representative of a wide range of perspectives and cultures. Opportunities should be provided for children



and caregivers to hear stories and interact with characters whose lives and experiences are different from their own. Children need a global perspective on the world in order to develop cultural competence and move beyond their immediate environment. They need to hear more than one story once a year about a particular cultural group. Adichie (2009) warns that a single story can create or perpetuate stereotypes about a particular culture, offering children their only foray in the experiences of the “other” in society.

Librarians often rely on culturally generic books for storytime programs and exile cultural explorations to holidays and specialized heritage months: Black History Month, Chinese New Year, Native American Heritage Month, Hanukkah, Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month, Day of the Dead, and so on. If a child is only introduced to books about her culture one time a year, then she internalizes that the librarian thinks she or her culture is not important. What if this one-month venture into cultures includes materials that stereotype, demean, or provide misinformation? What is the culturally diverse child internalizing and what are her classmates learning about her culture? Even the highest quality materials and culturally authentic activities are irrelevant if children learn that their particular culture or the culture of their peers is not good enough to study or talk about throughout the year. While middle-class White children in heterosexual nuclear families have the opportunity to see their culture represented in library collections, programs, and displays on a daily basis, other children are lucky if they get their own special month or day. It is imperative that diversity be included in library (terials3b4)tded

culturally competent. Children that exhibit global understanding can acknowledge how cultural differences, personal decisions, and social issues impact lives at a global level. At the same time, these children engage in local, national, or international social justice projects that reach out to their counterparts around the world. The road to developing global understanding and achieving cultural competence can start in the children's library by way of collections and programs that include cultural diversity.

Culturally responsive programs facilitate understanding and acceptance of diversity based upon culture, ethnicity, linguistic ability, religion, physical ability, immigration status, and sexual orientation. However, some librarians may not know how to offer these types of programs; instead they attempt to promote cultural competence and global understanding through a "tourist approach" common in many diversity-oriented library programs. This approach highlights the five Fs—foods, festivals, folklore, fashion, and famous people of a particular culture—rather than exploring the daily interactions of people within that culture. Ostensibly this practice may not seem objectionable, but it cannot be the only way to introduce and explore cultures in the library. Children need opportunities for meaningful engagement with cultures that are different from their own. Librarians have to be cautious when using the five Fs to avoid perpetuating cultural stereotypes and tokenism. Often this approach focuses on cultural elements that are exotic, flashy, or quaint. Introducing children to unusual fashion or "costumes" and festivals from a culture reinforces a sense of exoticism or otherness rather than fostering understanding. Only sharing folktales with children can give them a distorted view of a particular culture. When librarians rely on the five Fs to explore cultural diversity, it is extremely problematic if any of the Fs are not culturally accurate or reinforce outdated stereotypes. It is important

for librarians to select materials that include books written and illustrated by people either from the culture being profiled or with considerable knowledge about and experience related to the culture. Librarians should examine the copyright date of the materials to identify outdated content. Some publishers of informational books will use the same photo in multiple editions of a book, only updating the narrative. This becomes problematic when a book meant to represent the contemporary lives of South Africans features photos taken before apartheid ended.

Culturally responsive library programs will introduce different cultures through quality children's materials (print and digital) and promote cross-cultural connections by inviting children to explore topics such as social justice, equality, and cultural authenticity. Culturally responsive programs provide a forum for examining issues of ethnicity, class, and culture. A library fully engaged in promoting cultural competence through collections and programs provides numerous opportunities for children and their families to learn about new cultures. Language is part of a child's culture. Libraries reinforce multilingualism by offering programs introducing children to a variety of languages and encouraging them to play with language acquisition. In a culturally competent library program, librarians share books and other materials about diverse cultures and introduce children to diverse languages through read-alouds in multiple languages, or songs designed to teach language learning.

Through cultural literacy initiatives such as Día, libraries have natural avenues for infusing cultural competence into their programs and services. Día allows libraries to build bridges between home cultures and languages and those of the school, library, larger community, and world. With its focus on celebrating diverse languages and cultures, Día provides a model for librarians interested in

developing programs responsive to the

## **Conclusion**

Including diversity in library programming and materials for children is important for all librarians meeting the informational and recreational needs of their local communities. Children's print and digital materials should represent all types of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender expression, religious preference, family composition, ancestry, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language fluency, and citizenship status. More children's books representing diverse cultures should be made available to children through library collections to assist in their identity development and to help them make global connections.

Children and their families should be exposed to library programs throughout the year that celebrate cultural diversity and provide opportunities for developing bridges of understanding. The literacy initiative Día provides children's librarians with recommended materials and programming ideas for incorporating diversity into their daily library practices and emphasizes the library's commitment to serving all children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Día offers library administrators and staff a replicable model, useful information, and invaluable resources to assist them in planning and developing culturally responsive and effective programs, collections, and services to meet the informational and recreational needs of their diverse communities.

## **References**

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2009. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED video, 18:49. Accessed Feb. 20, 2014.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html).

Association for Library Service to Children. 2013. "About Día" webpage.

Accessed Feb. 28, 2014. <http://dia.ala.org>.

Baker, Augusta. 1955. "The Children's Librarian in a Changing Neighborhood."

*Top of the News 10* (Mar.): 40-41.

Bishop, Rudine Sims. 1997. "Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum."

In *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom*, edited by Violet Harris, 1-20. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

Cooperative Children's Book Center. "Children's Books by and about People of

Color Published in the United States." Annual Statistics. Accessed Mar. 6, 2014. <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1980. *Ten Quick Ways to Analyze*

*Children's Books for Sexism and Racism*. New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children.

Diamond, Barbara, and Margaret Moore. 1995. *Multicultural Literacy: Mirroring*

*the Reality of the Classroom*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Garcia, Delia, and Deborah Hasson. 2004. "Implementing Family Literacy

Programs for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Populations: Key Elements to Consider." *School Community Journal* 14 (1): 113-37.

Gonzalez, Maya Christina. 2011. "I Am All That I See: The Power of Reflection."

In *Celebrating Cuentos: Promoting Latino Children's Literature and Literacy in Classrooms and Libraries*, edited by Jamie Campbell Naidoo, 319-26. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Henderson, Virginia M. 1991. "The Development of Self-Esteem in Children of

Color." In *The Multicolored Mirror: Cultural Substance in Literature for*

- Children and Young Adults*, edited by Merri V. Lindgren, 15–30. Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press.
- Hughes-Hassell, Sandra, and Ernie J. Cox. 2010. "Inside Board Books: Representations of People of Color." *The Library Quarterly* 80 (3): 211–30.
- Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2013. *Growing Young Minds: How Museums and Libraries Create Lifelong Learners*. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services. PDF. Accessed Mar. 9, 2014. <http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/GrowingYoungMinds.pdf>
- Larrick, Nancy. 1965. "The All-White World of Children's Books." *Saturday Review* 11 (Sept.): 63–65.
- Larson, Jeanette. 2011. "Building a Culture of Literacy through Día: Library Events Celebrate Bilingual Bookjoy," *American Libraries* (Mar./Apr.). Accessed Mar. 16, 2014. <http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/article/building-culture-literacy-through-dí>.
- Miller, Carolyn, Kathryn Zickuhr, Lee Rainie, and Kristen Purcell. 2013. *Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading*. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. Accessed Mar. 8, 2014. <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/05/01/parents-children-libraries-and-reading/>.
- Montiel-Overall, Patricia. 2009. "Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals." *The Library Quarterly* 79 (2): 175–204.
- Moreillon, Judi. 2013. "Building Bridges for Cultural Understanding: Cultural Literature Collection Development and Programming." *Children and Libraries* 11 (2): 35–38.

Myers, Christopher. 2014. "The Apartheid of Children's Literature." *New York Times*, Mar. 15. Accessed Mar. 17, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html>.

Myers, Walter Dean. 2014. "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" *New York Times*, Mar. 15. Accessed Mar. 17, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>.

Nieto, Sonia. 1999. *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Roethler, Jacque. 1998. "Reading in Color: Children's Book Illustrations and Identity Formation for Black Children in the United States." *African American Review* 32 (1): 95–105.

Rollins, Charlemae Hill, ed. 1941. *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature for Elementary and High School Use*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Tate, Binnie L. 1971. "The Role of the Children's Librarian in Serving the Disadvantaged." *Library Trends* 20 (Oct.): 392–404.

Vygotsky, Lev. 1986. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

White, Pura Belpré. 1964. "A Bilingual Story Hour Program." *Library Journal* 89 (Sept. 15): 79–81.

### **Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) Diversity Resources**

- "ALSC/Candlewick Press 'Light the Way: Outreach to the Underserved' Grant" webpage,

<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/profawards/candlewicklighttheway>



- “Books on Islam for Children and Teens” webpage,  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/islambooks>
- El día de los niños/El día de los libros (Children’s Day/Book Day) Diversity Initiative website, <http://dia.ala.org>
- “Growing Up around the World: Books as Passports to Global Understanding for Children in the United States” webpage,  
<http://www.ala.org/alsc/compubs/booklists/growingupworld/GrowingUpAroundWorld>

### **Online Collection Development Resources**

- *American Indians in Children’s Literature* blog, by Debbie Reese,  
<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>
- The Brown Bookshelf website, by Varian Johnson et al.,  
<http://thebrownbookshelf.com/>
- CBC Diversity website, by Children’s Book Council,  
<http://www.cbcdiversity.com>
- *De Colores: The Raza Experience in Books for Children* blog, by Beverly Slapin et al., <http://decoloresreviews.blogspot.com>
- *Gay-Themed Picture Books for Children* blog, by Patricia A. Sarles,  
<http://booksforkidsingayfamilies.blogspot.com/>
- International Children’s Digital Library website, by the University of Maryland, <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>
- “Multicultural Reading” webpage, by Cynthia Leitich Smith,  
[http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit\\_resources/diversity/multicultural/multi\\_biblio.html](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit_resources/diversity/multicultural/multi_biblio.html)

## Awards for Culturally Diverse Children's Literature

- American Indian Youth Literature Award, sponsored by the American Indian Library Association, <http://ailanet.org/activities/american-indian-youth-literature-award/>
- Américas Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature (Latino literature), sponsored by the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, <http://www4.uwm.edu/clacs/aa/index.cfm>;  
<http://claspprograms.org/pages/detail/37/Amricas-Book-Award>
- Arab American Book Award, sponsored by the Arab American National Museum, <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/bookaward>
- Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, sponsored by the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association,  
<http://www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature-awards/>
- Carter G. Woodson Book Award (literature depicting ethnicity in the U.S.), sponsored by the National Council for the Social Studies,  
<http://www.socialstudies.org/awards/woodson>
- Coretta Scott King Book Awards (African American literature), sponsored by the American Library Association's Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT),  
<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/emiert/ckbookawards/index.cfm>
- Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award (literature depicting children with disabilities), sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities,  
<http://daddcec.org/Awards/DollyGrayAwards.aspx>
- Jane Addams Children's Book Awards (literature promoting peace, social justice, world community, and equality of the sexes), sponsored by the



- Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, sponsored by Texas State University's College of Education,  
<http://www.education.txstate.edu/c-p/Tomas-Rivera-Book-Award-Project-Link.html>

