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Representation Matters:

How Representation in Children's Literature Influences Children of Different Ethnicities

Taylor Cavalovitch

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“The media can be an instrument of change: it can maintain the status quo and reflect the views of the society or it can, hopefully, awaken people and change minds. I think it depends on who’s piloting the plane.”

Katie Couric

### **Statement of the Problem**

Katie Couric eloquently states the statement above in the film *Miss Representation*; a documentary that examines the culture that contributed to the under-representation of powerful and influential woman. As an educator, I will be “piloting the plane” as I help my students see their value and the value of others regardless of their identities or experiences. This inquiry explored the lack of diverse characters in children’s literature and how to use representational literature in an elementary classroom within a suburban school context. Representation in literature simply means that different perspectives and identities are respectfully featured in the text. Looking back at my schooling, my field experience, and my preparation for becoming a teacher, I have noticed that I have come across different types of people and yet the content being taught was not diverse enough to match the student populations. For example, during one 8-week field experience in the 2016 fall semester, not one African American character was ever featured in a book read to a group of students that were all African American. Therefore, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the use of representational literature in the classroom and teacher preparation programs. A study conducted by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, an educational program based in the University of Wisconsin-Madison, found that out of 3,600 books published in 2012, 3% were about African Americans, 2.5% were about Latinos, less than 1% were about Native Americans, and 2% were about Asian-Pacific Islanders. This left a staggering 93% of the 3,600 books reviewed to be about White characters (Kugler, 2012). This is extremely problematic since 93% of the population is not White; the world is filled with many different types of people that deserve their story told. Through my research, I hoped to discover

the benefits of reading representational literature to children who represent non-dominant populations.

### **Action Research Methods**

As a pre-service teacher, I used action research methods to conduct this line of inquiry. Action research is designed to enhance and improve current practice within a specific classroom, school, or district. Typically, it is a type of research undertaken by educational practitioners who have identified problems they wish to solve or areas they would like to enhance in their own teaching or student learning, or both (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This type of research continues to grow in use because teachers find it an empowering and collaborative activity. Action research generally includes a three-step process: identification of the problem through careful observation and reflection, planning and taking appropriate action, and the action part of the study. The goal of action research is to use findings to determine if teaching and learning have improved or if further changes are needed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To frame my research, I drew from the literacy concept of book as windows and mirrors (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). By teaching our students with this framework in mind, we are exploring how multicultural children's literature can act as windows and mirrors to diversity and expand the "single stories" students have of people, historical events, and cultural situations (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). Books that are used as windows allows for a vicarious experience to supersede the limits of the readers' own lives and identities and spend time observing those of others (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). By reading books that students can use as windows gives students the opportunity to learn about and understand perspectives that are different from their own. Children will then in turn be more willing to accept and value human differences. If teachers are able to instill these lessons into students at an early age, they will be able to continue this respect of human differences into their adult lives. Books that students can use as mirrors imply that readers see something of themselves in the text. Such a book reflects

back to readers' portions of their identities, cultures, or experiences. When readers are able to find themselves in a text, they are therefore validated; their experiences are not so unique or strange as to never be spoken or experienced by others. This inclusion, in turn, connects readers even more strongly to the larger world of books. (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). When students read books that reflect themselves, they can see that they are not alone. The reader can see that characters are experiencing the same issues and triumphs as themselves; therefore, they are able to see how different characters dealt with these commonalities. It is important that students can use literature as both windows and mirrors so they can feel more connected to the global society in which we live in.

The research context for this project is that I was placed in a first grade classroom in a suburban school in Pittsburgh during my second semester of my junior year. In my first grade classroom there were three students that were from non-dominant populations: Venezuelan, Chinese, and Korean. After careful consideration, I decided that my focus participant would be the student from Venezuela. My rationale behind this decision was this student had only lived in the United States for a year. Therefore, I was curious to see if this student's perception of his identity changed after being immersed in a United States school context. The research question that I had for this project was, how does representation in literature influence student engagement? The problem that I noticed was that there was a lack of diverse characters in children's literature. Looking back at my schooling, my field experience, and my preparation for becoming a teacher, I have noticed a lack of representational literature, particularly in PreK-4 settings. This was especially concerning after all the research I uncovered about the importance of representational literature. I know that educators need to move beyond ethnocentrism, believing that one's own ethnic identity is superior, in children's literature. Through my research, I hoped to discover the benefits of reading representational literature to children who represent non-dominant populations.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Process**

My observations and field notes were recorded over an 8-week time period. Throughout my 8 weeks of observation, there were only books about White characters being read to my first grade class. At the end of each read-aloud session, I would write down what I had observed, with emphasis on focus participant. I made strategic choice to introduce children's literature that represented Spanish-speaking cultures. I asked focus participant questions related to children's literature. As part of the data analysis process, I would reflect on my data and would connect my findings with my research question. Before I could select representational literature, I first needed to see the perception my student participant had about themselves. I took the student out into the hallway and showed them almost identical pictures of Joe Biden and Leopoldo López; the student did not recognize either of the men and therefore his background knowledge did not sway his answer. Both men were dressed the same, had the same stance and facial expression, and they both looked like in positions of power. I simply asked the student whom they thought the smarter man was. Immediately the student selected Joe Biden to be the smarter the man. When I asked him why he chose Joe Biden, the student was unable to provide me with a rational explanation about this decision. I interpreted this decision as internalized oppression, "The primary means by which we [ethnic groups] have been forced to perpetuate and "agree" to our own oppression" (Padilla, 2001). From this pretest, I knew that I could bring in representational literature to hopefully have the student more engaged in reading, and to change his perception of himself.

## **Findings & Discussion**

The first book that I decided to read to the class was *Niño Wrestles the World* by Yuyi Morales. It's about a boy from Mexico who is pretending to wrestle his toys while his twin sisters are sleeping; I adapted the book to make the boy from Venezuela. This book features many Spanish words so I had the participant help me with the pronunciation of Spanish words in the text. While reading the book, the student was actively engaged. His face lit up when I mentioned that the boy was from Venezuela and his eyes were never taken off me. When I asked questions

he always raised his hand up with visible enthusiasm. Since he was able to see a reflection of himself in the book, he was able to relate to the literature more so than the typical literature read in the classroom (Galda & Cullinan, 2000). After reading the book, the student would only want to talk to me about it. I would ask him questions about the book and he would be able to answer them with ease, “children [are] able to recall story lines...[children] were able to comment as to why or why not they liked the book” (Grice & Vaughn, 1992). By taking an interest in his own culture, I was able to start developing an authentic relationship with my student participant. Not only did my student participant benefited, but also so did the entire class; “reading about people like and different from themselves helps children to value themselves and others and to appreciate differences and similarities across cultures” (Galda & Cullinan, 2000).

The second book that I was able to read to the class was *Dream Carver* by Diana Cohn and illustrated by Amy Cordova. This book is about a family in Mexico that carves and paints animals to sell in the town square. I once again adapted this book so that all of the geographical locations were in Venezuela. This book also features many Spanish words; therefore, I again had the participant help me with the pronunciation. When the student entered the classroom and saw me, he asked me if I was reading another Spanish book. Once I told him I was, he could not wait to hear it. He was excited! By reading books about this student’s Venezuelan culture, I increased his interest in reading and engagement with literature (Taylor, 1997).

Just like with the first book, the student was actively engaged in the reading and would answer questions with ease. Not only was he able to recall parts of *Dream Carver*, he was able to recall last week’s reading of *Niño Wrestles the World*. After reading *Dream Carver*, I revisited the question I asked the student during our first session; which man looks smarter? The student was able to recall that this was the same thing I asked him three weeks prior. This time, however, instead choosing Joe Biden, he chose Leopoldo López. Once again he was not able to give a rational explanation as to why he changed his initial answer. I believe that since the books acted as a mirror to this student, they were able to see that people like them could be the main

character; their story could finally be told. Through my research I found that Hispanic children who have positive Hispanic role model are more likely to value themselves and their education (Echevarria, 1998).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The purpose of this action research was to see if representational literature influenced student engagement. The findings in my study suggest that the student's identity and presence in the classroom was validated; therefore their engagement in the lesson increased. Through my read alouds, the student and I formed an authentic, caring relationship because I showed a genuine interest in his culture. Since the student was able to see himself in the text, he was actively attentive and was able to comprehend the text throughout my weeks in the classroom.

The Spiritan tradition calls us to be a more just world through living open to the Spirit, committing to authentic relationships, and walking with those on the margins. I was able to connect my research to this tradition because children from marginalized cultural groups must have opportunities to see themselves reflected in literature, just as readers from all social/ cultural groups must be given windows offering views of the world around them, not only imaginary worlds but also reality (Tshida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014, p. 29). When educators take the time to carefully select literature that represents every student in their classroom, each student has the opportunity to have their existence validated. The research I conducted also allowed me to build an authentic relationship with my student participant because I validated him in an environment where he had little validation in curricular and instructional practices. While this project initially started out as a course assignment, I was able to continue my research throughout the summer by reading and reviewing books that respectfully represented diverse characters. The hope of this additional research was to help include more diverse children's literature to the required book list for the Content Knowledge course of the Literacy Block component of the Leading Teacher Program. The dedication to this research did inspire change to the required book list; I believe this will not only help future teachers, but also their future students. The passion that I have for



this topic will hopefully be pursued through the Teacher's College at Columbia University, pending acceptance.

After conducting this action research, I know how important it is to have literature that represents every student in your classroom. This research has many implications for teaching and learning. Even though some representational literature is hard to find, by simply taking an extra 30 minutes to adapt a book, it could mean the world for one of your students. Representation encompasses many facets of students' lives; their linguistic and cultural background, gender identity, sexuality, differences in physical & mental abilities, family dynamics, etc. No student should feel lesser because they may appear to be different. As educators it is our responsibility to value and validate each and every one of our students. Representation matters, and it does play a pivotal role in students' self-worth and engagement.

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