

Evaluating Children's Books for Bias

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|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| omission | illustrations | check the storyline |
| authenticity | relationships between people | heroines/heroes |
| main characters | child's self-image | author's/illustrator's background |
| author's/illustrator's perspective | language | copyright date |

1. Omission: In spite of the fact that many excellent multicultural books are finally being published, omission continues to be one of the biggest problems in literature for young readers today. Exclusion and erasure are some of the most insidious and painful forms of bias; a group may be excluded from an entire collection, or from the books selected for use in a particular library, school district, school, or classroom. The implicit message is that the group does not exist, has no history, is insignificant, or has made no contributions to society. Erasure is destructive not only to the group(s) involved but to the larger society.

2. Illustrations:

Stereotypes. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group which usually carries derogatory implications. Stereotypes may be blatant or subtle. Check for depictions that demean or ridicule characters because of their race, gender, age, ability, appearance, size, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or native language.

Tokenism. Is one person from the group presented as having admirable qualities while all the others of the group are stereotyped? In illustrations, do people of color look just like Whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all people from parallel cultures look stereotypically alike or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

Who is doing what? Do the illustrations depict people of color in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers?

3. Check the Storyline: Bias may be expressed in blatant or subtle ways. Check for the following forms of subtle, implicit bias:

Standards for Success. Does it take dominant culture behavior standards for a person of color or a female to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant White society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do people of color and females have to exhibit extraordinary qualities?

Resolution of Problems. How are problems conceived, presented, and resolved in the story? Are people of color considered to be "the problem"? Are the conditions facing oppressed groups represented as related to an unjust society? Does the storyline encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Are problems faced by people from parallel cultures resolved through the benevolent intervention of a White, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class male?

Role of Females. Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and work, or are achievements due to their appearance or to their relationships with males? Are

females of all ages presented as problem solvers with a life of their own, or is their role in the story only as a support of male characters? Is it assumed that female characters will marry and that this is their only or major interest in life? Is there an emphasis on describing the physical appearance of female characters? Are positive female characters portrayed as "beautiful" and negative female characters portrayed as "unattractive"? Are older females portrayed in a negative manner? Are older unmarried females ridiculed and assumed to be bitter, unfulfilled, or boring? Are the images of females of all ages "prettified?" Are they afraid of mice, spiders, or snakes? Do they have to be rescued by a male character?

4. Authenticity: Check for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of cultures and lifestyles. Are they oversimplified or do they offer genuine insight into the character? Check for quaint, cutesy, or exotic depictions. Is the portrayal of each group authentic? For example, are Native people from one group shown wearing the hair styles, clothing, or jewelry of another tribe? Does the book portray diversity among Asian Americans or are they all lumped together, ignoring differences in ethnicity, time of immigration, generations of life in the United States, and location of origin as well as the fact that some groups have been in conflict with each other at various times over thousands of years? Are recent immigrants and people from the same ethnic group who were born in the United States portrayed in the same manner? Are the issues facing lesbians subsumed under those facing gay men resulting in distortion, erasure, and/or marginalization?

5. Relationships Between People: Do the White males possess the power, take the leadership roles, and make the important decisions? Do females, people of color, lesbians, gays, elderly, or disabled people function in essentially supporting, subservient roles? Do girls and women have strong friendships with each other or do they depend on males to define them?

6. Heroines/Heroes: Whose interest is the hero/heroine serving? For many years, books showed only "safe" heroes—those who avoided serious conflict with the White, male, able-bodied, heterosexual establishment. Heroines and heroes should be defined according to the concepts of and struggles for justice appropriate to their group. When heroes/heroines from parallel cultures do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made establishment heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited the establishment?

7. Main Characters: Whose experience is centered in the story? Does the main character represent the dominant culture, while only the less significant characters are people of color? Further, do they serve as ornaments, background, or tokens? If the experiences of people of color are presented merely as relative to those of dominant culture, this communicates that their stories and lives are less valued than others'.

While the majority of children's literature depicts gender-confirming characters, be mindful about including characters that depict all genders, gender non-binary people, gender fluid people, and trans people.

Include books that positively represent people with physical and mental disabilities, people of different faiths, different family structures, interracial families, adoptive families, families with same sex parents, single parent families, intergenerational families, bilingual and multilingual families.

Be mindful to include books that depict difference as "normal" vs. "different." For example, make sure that the books with Black characters in your classroom aren't *all* about

slavery, and that the books with Asian people aren't *all* about Japanese internment camps or Chinese New Year. Books with people of color don't have to be about race or culture. Include books where the focus is primarily on the story, and secondarily, the characters are people of different races. It is important that people of color see themselves represented as more than survivors of hardship, or worse, as victims needing to be saved.

8. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self-Image: Are norms established that limit any child's aspirations or self-concept? For example, Asian Americans should not be portrayed as model minorities. Are fat people portrayed in negative ways? Every person should be portrayed as an individual with unique strengths, weaknesses, interests, values, goals, lifestyles, and beliefs.

9. Author's or Illustrator's Background: Analyze the biographical data available about the author and illustrator. What qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If they are not a member of the group they are depicting, is there anything in their background that would indicate their authority on the topic? There has been considerable debate recently regarding what has been termed *cultural thievery* or *cultural appropriation*. Is it ethical for mainstream writers to appropriate the literature of parallel cultures? Many people think it is impossible to write authentically from a perspective one has never experienced personally. People who have been silenced in the past do not take kindly to someone else trying to tell their story now that those stories are finally being recognized as significant. The publishing industry is still a world filled with scarcity: if an established European American author submits a manuscript for a story representing another culture, will there be room for emerging writers from that culture to compete?

10. Author's or Illustrator's Perspective: In the past, children's books were written by authors who were White, members of the middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and Christian, with one result being that a narrow Eurocentric perspective has dominated children's literature in the United States. For example, the abolitionists featured in the past were the White members of the Underground Railroad, when in actuality, most abolitionists were African Americans. Watch for books that present multiple perspectives. Does the total collection present many world views? Are readers encouraged to consider a situation from several perspectives?

11. Language: Examples of offensive terms include: "savage," "primitive," "conniving," "lazy," "superstitious," "treacherous," "wily," "crafty," "inscrutable," "docile," "backward," "bitter," "barren," "squaw," "papoose," and "Indian givers." Consider the effect of the use of the color *White* as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, or virtue (*angel food*); and the color *Black* or use of "dark" as evil, dirty, or menacing (*devil's food*). Watch for sexist language that excludes or in any way demeans females. The generic use of the words *man* and *he* were accepted in the past but their use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: ancestors instead of forefathers; humankind instead of mankind; firefighters instead of firemen; synthetic instead of manmade; chair or chairperson instead of chairman; and she/he/they instead of he.

12. Copyright Date: Books specifically addressing issues of diversity—often hastily conceived—suddenly began appearing in the mid- and late 1960s. Most of these books were written by White authors, edited by White editors, and published by White publishers. They often reflected a White, middle-class, mainstream point of view. Not until the early 1970s did

the children's book world begin to even remotely reflect the realities of a pluralistic society. the copyright date may be one clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly biased, although a recent copyright date is not guarantee of the book's authenticity. Conversely, do not throw out all the books with old copyright dates! Use these guidelines to examine each one.

Suggested Exercises:

Look at your own classroom library. If books are organized into theme bins (common in K-5,) apply your critical lens and see if the *Sports* bin depicts different genders, races, and ages; check to see if the *Biographies* bin includes people across identities, and notice if your *Inventors and Innovators* bin includes women and people of color.

For middle, high school, and higher ed, examine your syllabi and cross reference your book collection with your student roster to see whose identities are reflected in affirming ways, and where you may need to supplement. Notice if certain groups of people are depicted only as victims and survivors, and see where you can include texts in which hardships don't define a person's identity.

What's missing from this list? Have a conversation with your colleagues.

Consider using biased books as teaching tools with your students and colleagues. Talking about bias helps us all learn to recognize it when we see it.

References

Note: Adapted from *Guidelines for Selecting Bias Free Textbooks and Storybooks*, Council on International Books for Children, New York, NY. Accessed 11/3/2015:

<http://www.intime.uni.edu/multiculture/curriculum/children.htm>

Day, F.A. (1999). *Multicultural voices in contemporary literature: A resource for teachers* (1st ed.). New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Other resources consulted were: "Criteria for Analyzing Books on Asian Americans," unpublished paper by Florance H. Hongo (copyright pending); and *How to Tell the Difference: A Guide to Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias*.

Further Adapted by Rebecca Haslam, Seed the Way (2017).