

Storytime-Palooza!

Racial Diversity and Inclusion in Storytime

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Ten Little Darling Babies flannel pieces

If librarians truly believe the “Every” in Every Child Ready to Read, then they need to ensure that the materials and programming offered in storytimes are racially diverse, equitable, and inclusive. All children need to see themselves reflected in storytime adventures and see others who are different from them represented with equal importance.

Diversifying storytimes may seem like a logical practice in intentional storytime planning; however, too often librarians rely on the “Five F’s—food, folklore, fashion, festivals and famous people,” reducing vastly diverse cultures to a singular event.¹

Apathy, ignorance, and racism are all possible reasons for avoiding the inclusion of racial diversity in storytimes; however, from our experience, we have found that most often it is fear that holds librarians back—fear of being wrong, of not knowing the right things to say, or fear of pushback from the community. Antiracist work is difficult work, and too-often politicized. Many librarians fear that in order to have racially inclusive storytimes they need to turn storytime into a class about why racism is wrong or delve into history and politics. While that

is important work that our society needs, that is not what’s needed to create a more inclusive storytime environment; however, creating racially diverse storytimes is crucial as the demographics in the United States are rapidly changing. The 2010 census data analysis by the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows us that of the 74.2 million children under the age of eighteen in the United States, 46 percent of them are children of color and Native children.² While this demographic has been changing, the demographics for librarianship have not. Librarianship remains a majority white, female, English-speaking profession.³ While these facts may contribute to the average youth librarian’s unfamiliarity with diverse cultures and fear of making mistakes, there are still many relatively risk-free ways to add racial diversity to storytimes.⁴

Through educating themselves and the careful selection of books, activities, and props that authentically reflect children of color and Native children, librarians can ensure that racial diversity becomes a part of every storytime. While there is little to no monetary cost for this kind of planning and programming, there is a high cost to society if we continue to ignore the reality of our increasingly diverse world.



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As librarians who are passionate about social justice, we have always tried to include racial diversity in each of our weekly storytimes. Through our experiences in graduate school, our work, and our involvement with colleagues through the Minnesota Library Association, we have noticed that while many librarians speak of a desire to create more inclusive storytimes, they don't feel confident in their ability to do so in an authentic way.

Every year the Metropolitan Library Service Agency (MELSA), a regional library system promoting cooperation among eight Twin Cities metropolitan area library systems, offers "Storytime-Palooza," an event where local children's librarians can gather to share best practices and learn from colleagues.

Since we were observing librarians failing to incorporate racial diversity into otherwise quality storytimes, we approached Kathleen James, youth services and project manager for MELSA and coordinator of this annual event, to see if we could share some of our ideas and strategies. She was enthusiastic about centering the 2015 Storytime-Palooza around the theme of racial diversity in storytime, and we set to work planning the two-hour workshop.

We asked Assistant Professor Dr. Sarah Park Dahlen, at St. Catherine University's Master of Library and Information Science Program in St. Paul, Minn., to provide an authoritative voice regarding the current state of diversity in children's literature and to discuss why this is a much needed focus for storytime and library programming for children in general.

The second part of the workshop consisted of demonstrations, successes, and failures we have experienced as we have worked to create inclusive storytimes. Finally, participants were given time to browse approximately eighty diverse books we identified as a good fit for storytimes, and to share their successes and ideas.

Book Selection

Book selection has the strongest impact on creating diverse storytimes. This seems obvious, but it's easy to overlook unless planning is intentional. Stop to evaluate the plan and think about who is being represented in each storytime. Are all the books showing white main characters? If you keep track of your storytime plans, look back at the last five weeks. How many of those storytimes were racially inclusive?

Librarians rely on Every Child Ready to Read 2 to make sure that storytime plans are literacy-rich and educational, taking care to

incorporate elements of talking, reading, writing, singing, and playing into every program. We suggest that librarians think of diversity and inclusion as a sixth factor to evaluate when planning storytime.

Consider that diversity is about more than just skin color; many books with anthropomorphized animals are still culturally depicting whiteness. On the surface, it might seem neutral to present a storytime about dragons. But whose dragon myths are being presented?

Most of the dragon-themed picture books available are based on the idea of the fire-breathing European dragon, but the Chinese dragon has an equally long and important history which shouldn't be erased or ignored in a dragon-themed storytime. Even acknowledging that there are different kinds of dragons is a step in the right direction. In Ramsey County Library, Minn., we have created a set of Chinese Dragon flannels to use, and families are always intrigued by them. In order to have diverse storytimes, you have to be aware of your own biases and cultural positions. It is hard to know what you don't know, but asking yourself questions and listening to others are great ways to start.

Once you have decided to incorporate more diverse titles into your storytimes, the next step is identifying what books to use. There are many wonderful lists to be found of quality, anti-bias, multicultural children's books, and that is a great starting point, but it is important to *practice* evaluating all the titles you use in storytimes (and offer in your collection) yourself. Revisit Kathleen T. Horning's *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books*⁵ and

Louise Derman-Sparks' *Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books*.⁶ Evaluate everything that comes to your hands in the course of your work, and soon it will be automatic.

It can be particularly difficult to find universal or everyday contemporary stories featuring people of color and Native people that work for storytime (topics such as bedtime or losing a tooth), since the cataloging doesn't necessarily reflect racial diversity unless it is an "issue" book. Some blogs and websites we have found useful for general reading are Reading Is Fundamental,⁷ The Open Book,⁸ Cynsations by Cynthia Leitich Smith,⁹ Teaching for Change,¹⁰ CBC Diversity,¹¹ The Cooperative Children's Book Center,¹² and De Colores.¹³

Another resource, created specifically for children's librarians, is The Everyday Diversity Project, an online resource that specifically aims to identify and highlight great storytime books that

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Anna Haase Krueger sings "Ten Little Darling Babies" at Baby and Me storytime

feature racially diverse protagonists.¹⁴ The Everyday Diversity Project suggests diverse books for common themes and strives to make it easier for librarians to find great materials for every storytime.

Picturebooks tend to go out of print very quickly, and it can be difficult to keep lists up to date. Fortunately, public libraries often have access to books that have long been out of print. If your system policies permit it, keep high-quality inclusive books in your storytime collection rather than weeding them so that you can continue sharing them in your community.

Themes

Often, librarians only think about racially diverse programming during holidays or awareness months. This is dangerous because it compartmentalizes groups of people and sends the message that the only time minority groups matter is one month or day of the year. This encourages feelings of "otherness" between groups of people.¹⁵ When we use minorities as a theme for a white audience, we are treating groups of people like a tourist destination.

Instead, try to include diverse books in every theme. While there is definitely a significant dearth of racially diverse picture books,¹⁶ with intentional planning and thoughtful effort we can make the most of what's available.

Doing a dog theme? Try using *Please Puppy Please* by Tonya Lewis Lee and Spike Lee, *Here Comes Trouble* by Corinne Demas, or *A Vacation for Pooch* by Marian Cocca-Leffler. If your theme is bedtime, include titles such as *Monster Trouble* by Lane Fredrickson, *Can't Sleep without Sheep* by Susanna Leonard Hill, or *Marc Just Couldn't Sleep* by Gabriela Keselman. For a dance storytime, consider *How Do You Wokka-Wokka?* by Elizabeth

Bluemle, *I Got the Rhythm* by Connie Schofield-Morrison, or *My Friend Maya Loves to Dance* by Cheryl Willis Hudson.

Some suggestions for board books for baby storytime are *Where's Lenny* by Ken Wilson-Max, *Besos for Baby* by Jen Arena, *I Know a Lot* by Stephen Krensky, *Leo Loves Baby Time* by Anna McQuinn, *My Heart Fills with Happiness* by Monique Gray Smith, or *Whose Knees Are These?* by Jabari Asim.

Hosting storytime guests and facilitating cultural community collaboration are great ways to add diversity; such guests provide authentic voices and can be a resource when you have few options in other media that reflect a certain race or culture. They may also relieve the anxiety that goes along with intentional storytime planning outside of your cultural comfort zone.

Songs/Props/Activities

Although books might be the most significant way to add racial diversity, there are lots of other ways to have an impact. Using our earlier example of the dragon-themed storytime, there may not be a book depicting Chinese dragons that works for your storytime, so that's where we rely on props, flannels, and songs to add diversity.

One simple way to make a big impact is by applying resistant reading to commonplace songs and nursery rhymes already used in storytime. Resistant reading pushes back against the dominant culture that assumes whiteness. For example, when sharing "Mary Had a Little Lamb," use clip art showing Mary as a girl with dark skin. Colorado librarian Melissa Depper has an excellent post about fun, literacy-rich ways to use purchased clip art sets to share nursery rhymes in her blog post "Early Literacy Storytime: Mixed Up Mother Goose."¹⁷



From left, Tami Lee, Sarah Park Dahlen, and Anna Haase Krueger at Storytime-Palooza

When you make flannel stories or other props, take the opportunity to show kids of all colors and make non-white children the central figure—not just one of a crowd. Flannel Friday is a fantastic online resource with hundreds of ideas for making props, flannels, games, and other storytime activities.¹⁸ Many of the ideas there are already diverse, and looking through the lens of racial diversity, you might be inspired to adjust others to be more inclusive. You can browse the Flannel Friday Pinterest boards¹⁹ or view round-up archives at the Flannel Friday website.

Another simple yet powerful way to make storytime more inclusive is by paying attention to the names used during storytime. When you do an activity, create a character, or sing a song that uses children's names, use names not typically associated with whiteness, like Diego, Shanice, or Nahee. There's no reason that the child fixing the wagon in Raffi's "Bumpin' Up and Down"²⁰ can't be Precious rather than Emily.

While we have not collected formal feedback on the effect of racially diverse storytimes, we do have anecdotal evidence from families and professional colleagues. Families of color will often approach us after storytime requesting the book titles that we used, stating that they "love" the book or that the lead protagonist "looks just like me." Colleagues have thanked us for the encouragement, support, and ideas that we have given them in incorporating racial diversity in their storytimes.

There is no question that intentional storytime planning that includes racial diversity is an important endeavor that benefits children of all races. But more than just a lofty goal, it is the policy of the American Library Association that libraries and professional librarians make "efforts to include diversity in programs, activities, services,"²¹ while providing "equity of service and access to all communities."²² Simply put, making sure that all storytimes are racially diverse, equitable, and inclusive is every youth librarian's job.²³ ↻

DO:

Focus on contemporary stories set in the United States that reflect everyday life.

Bring in people from other cultures and backgrounds to share their own stories.

Share folk and fairy tales that show non-European versions of the stories.

Practice evaluating books and materials for bias/inclusiveness.

Ask advice and seek help; other librarians, staff, community members, and scholars such as professors of children's literature can all be great and supportive resources.

DON'T:

Be afraid to try; it's better to try and risk not getting it quite right than to do nothing.

Limit racial diversity to holidays, life in other countries, or historical fiction.

Make whole storytime themes about specific groups or cultures only a few times a year.

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