Social Justice in Contemporary Young Adult Literature
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Introduction
There has been a lack of diversity in Young Adult Literature (YAL) in the past, especially as it relates to race, sexuality, and mental health. (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2017; Curwood, 2013) When we first began this study, this is one of the factors that initially drew us to exploring social justice for diverse populations in YAL.

With this research, we wanted to look particularly at topics that looked specifically at race, sexuality, and mental health. We believed going into this project that these issues would be our main areas of concern. We chose three books to cover each topic respectively: The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas, American Street by by KoBozi, Towers Falling by Jewell Parker Rhodes; Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda by Becky Albertalli, Art of Starving by Sam Miller, The Best Man by Richard Peck, Holding Up the Universe by Jennifer Niven, Turtles All the Way Down by John Green, and Highly Illogical Behavior by John Corey Whaley.

What began as content analysis quickly morphed to a new concept of exploring through view, voice, and choice. This method of analyzing social justice in YAL was fairly straightforward and, we believe, usable in the classroom. It provided a new way for approaching and examining the difficult and tricky topics of social justice and representation in YAL—both for those readers finally are seeing themselves represented and for those already used to seeing themselves.

Methodology

Coverage

Diverse books: While there has been progress and change, there continues to be a lack of diverse books in young adult literature.

Results

Representation

Seeing self/others: Some books represented stories that haven’t been told or are rarely told in YAL, mostly due to the lack of diverse issues being selected by publishers. From the aspect of social justice, these books provided positive and valuable focus on diverse issues through well-developed characters. Other characters represented the normalcy of what needs to be in YAL. The issues of representation were not necessarily the main focus, but they were included as normal aspects of teenage life. The representation throughout these works allowed for diverse readers to be able to see oneself in the story as well as to see the similarities with diverse characters.

Character development

The depth of character development mattered. While main characters were the easiest to analyze, we also found important pieces of development in secondary characters. This helped to provide multiple perspectives and insights into situations and actions. The generally provided more diversity for readers to learn more about characters.

Using View, Voice, and Choice

Our experience using the View, Voice, and Choice model for analyzing YAL (particularly in the English Language Arts classroom or in a group setting) provided an opportunity for taking a deeper look at issues of social justice/injustice. Here, a reader has the chance to look at questions like:

- Does the protagonist view themself as valuable?
- Do others who disregard issues come to change or understand?
- How are characters’ voices used for themselves? For others?
- How might others’ voices reflect ignorance, but possibly changes to support or silence?
- Do the choices the protagonist makes go toward or stay toward a path that is true to themselves?

“Including multicultural resources in the school library fosters appreciation of other cultures and other ways of life among students from the majority culture” (Agosto, 2007).

Conclusions

As we concluded this study, we felt the need to take some time and really consider and discuss what social justice meant within our research. After months of deep thought and questioning we came to the conclusion that, to us, social justice meant that these works a) showed positive and valuable representation of diverse characters, b) had strong character development, where characters who are a part of the diverse population could be seen as complex and well-rounded, and c) showed some sort of justice or injustice that was addressed, be it minor or major.

After taking time to analyze these works using View, Voice, and Choice model, we recognized that this provided a unique and uncomplicated way of exploring social justice in YAL.

Recommendations

First, we recognize the continued need for even more well-written diverse books with complex and diverse characters. It is important for readers to see self and others in well-developed stories, avoiding didactic or high-moral driven narratives. The books should be a true representation of real people. Readers might have a sense of self awareness or other-awareness, but the representation doesn’t elicit sentimentality and pity, rather empathy and understanding.

Secondly, the selected books for this study were in realistic fiction. Therefore, the next step would be to evaluate books for social justice and representation of diverse characters in other major genres such as fantasy, historical fiction, and nonfiction for young adults. Because these other genres represent story of humankind to know more about self, they should fit well with the View, Voice, and Choice model as well.

Thank you to the honors department for allowing me to work on this research; John Corey Stepp for her guidance, support, and knowledge; and the many authors who show diversity in their writings!