Tennessee TECH

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 Ibi Zoboi, *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 text 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 topic of social justice and representation in YAL—both for those readers who finally are seeing themselves represented and for those already used to seeing themselves.

Methodology

Approach:
While originally the researchers felt the categories would be strongly defined and that content analysis would be the way to go, it was made clear early on in the readings that other important categories of diversity would need to be included. Therefore, the study moved to a more grounded theory approach.

Selection:
Books were initially selected based on criteria including 1) published within the previous three years; 2) written for young adults with teenage protagonists; and 3) diversity issues of race, homosexuality, and mental health. After reading the first few books, we recognized that, because of the depth of character development, other diversity issues would be part of the stories and opened the project to include relationships (family and friends) and socioeconomic status.

Analysis:
Through notes, selected quotes from the books, and discussion, we made observations on aspects of social justice for diverse characters based on Agosto's recommendations for building a multicultural collection (2007): Were diverse characters represented authentically? Even if a character did not obtain justice in the story, was he/she portrayed in a favorable and respectful manner? Were stereotypes in speech, behavior and/or appearance avoided? How did the story provide insight to characters' diverse elements without being didactic and with valuable cultural details? Additionally, a few weeks into the study we were introduced to peace education by Linda Ragsdale (personal communication) and included the aspects of view, voice and choice as a model to examine the characters.

Limitation:
We acknowledge that we are two white, cisgender, straight women. However, we are representative of teachers in the U.S. - 84% are white and 77% are female according the 2016 statistics from National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clr.asp). Therefore, we chose to conduct this research from our personal perspectives on observing social justice as a means of representation in young adult literature.

Coverage

Diverse books: While there has been progress and change, there continues to be a lack of diverse books in young adult literature.
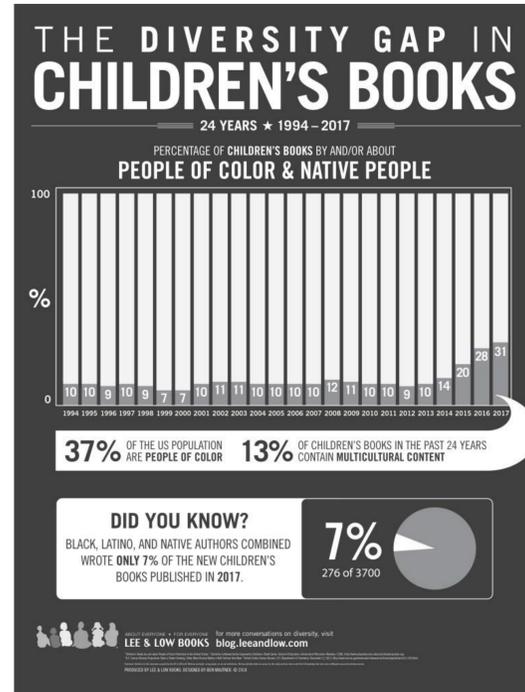
The image above shows statistics revealing how many children's books in the past twenty-four years were written about or by people of color and native people. Only thirteen percent of children's books in the past twenty-four years contain multicultural content. Combined, black, Latino, and native people wrote only seven percent of children's books released in the past year.

Social justice: To explore social justice within YAL, the exploration did not necessarily focus on characters achieving justice. Rather, our analysis explored how characters were represented equally and equitably regardless of their race, sexuality, gender, health, and other personal characteristics (Wolk, 2009; Glasgow, 2001) This was done from an educator's perspective because social justice teaching and literacy education complement each other (Enriquez, 2014). Books can be read in order to question the ways that systems are compromised in actions or situations (Glasgow, 2001).

View, Voice, and Choice: Linda Ragsdale's theory of peace education seeks to engage students through their own view of self/others, how they use their voice, and the choices they make from recognizing others' views and voices. (Ragsdale, n.d.) Using this concept for exploring these diverse books provided a unique approach.

"When minority...students do see characters, settings, and other aspects of their cultural backgrounds reflected in school library materials, they are more likely to feel a vital part of the school culture" (Agosto, 2007).

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, and 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 themselves as valuable?

• Do others who disregard issues come to change or understand?

• How are characters' voices are used for themself? For others?

• How might others' voices reflect ignorance, but possibly changes to support or silenced?

• Do the choices the protagonist makes go toward or stay toward a path that is true to themself?

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 the 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.

"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).

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