

“What Are You Reading?”: How School Libraries Can Promote Racial Diversity in Multicultural Literature

Karen Elizabeth Lafferty
San Diego State University and Claremont Graduate University

While many educators state beliefs about the importance of selecting fiction that will engage a diverse student population, use of multicultural titles in secondary classrooms has lagged, in part due to increasing focus on the Common Core State Standards in the United States. The purpose of this study was to determine if high school students in a Southern California district were using school libraries to access multicultural literature characterized by racial diversity. Four years of circulation data from the district’s five comprehensive high schools were examined. Analysis revealed that the titles with the highest circulation were overwhelmingly written by White authors and about White protagonists. Suggested are ways that educators can use resources within school libraries to promote more racially diverse multicultural literature, even as classroom titles remain static. Included are recommendations for how teachers and teacher-librarians can encourage students to select from a wider range of texts, as well as guidance on conducting a circulation analysis.

Introduction

As a novice teacher in the mid-1990s, I served on a school district committee charged with revamping the 10th grade English course. A major focus was adoption of new full-length texts to balance the “battling boys” of *Lord of the Flies*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *A Separate Peace*. We selected contemporary novels like *The Bean Trees* and *A Place Where the Sea Remembers* to introduce a range of viewpoints and include female writers alongside canonical authors. Teachers wrote thematic units, librarians purchased texts, and then—

Correspondence should be sent to Karen Elizabeth Lafferty, College of Education, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182. E-mail: karen.lafferty@cgu.edu

virtually nothing changed. Almost twenty years later most of these books just sit on the shelves.

A district-wide analysis of circulation for tenth grade core literature texts from 2007 to 2011 revealed that while *Lord of the Flies* was checked out 6,779 times, *The Bean Trees* circulated only 590 times, and *The Joy Luck Club* only made it into students’ hands 68 times.

I knew from previous conversation with a focus group of high school juniors and seniors that students were curious about exploring other cultures and perspectives. In sharing impressions of the required reading in their English classes, they pointed out that race is always presented as a “Black and White” issue from the perspective of a White narrator, citing Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Huck Finn as examples. Their insights had prompted in part my examination of students’ exposure to multicultural literature across the school district, beginning with the aforementioned circulation analysis of texts used in tenth grade English courses. This study of the fiction (FIC) students check out from their school libraries, represents the second phase of a larger project. When the textbook circulation data revealed minimal usage of the multicultural adoptions, a next step was investigating whether students were using their school libraries as a resource for multicultural fiction. If teachers were not using diverse texts in their classes, were students seeking it out from their school libraries? In this article I describe how I conducted a circulation analysis, present the findings, and then suggest how others might conduct similar analyses and use the results for their own school libraries.

Racially Diverse Multicultural Literature and School Libraries

School libraries have a role to play in promoting multicultural literature to all students, especially as inclusion of more diverse and contemporary texts has lagged in the high school English curriculum (Mackey, Vermeer,

Storie, & DeBlois, 2012; Wolk, 2010). In the context of this study, I use the terms *racially diverse* and *multicultural literature* to describe full-length fiction texts written by and about people from outside the dominant, White culture of the United States, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe. The role of school librarians in promoting multicultural fiction takes on new urgency with student demographic trends and teacher perceptions about implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Researchers have examined how literature that reflects students' lives can promote engagement and address the achievement gap (Feger, 2006; Gay, 2010; Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). At the same time, many English teachers worry the CCSS emphasis on informational text will reduce time for literature in their courses. Although Carol Jago (2013) has presented a clear explanation of why this is a mistaken perception, some English teachers are shifting focus to non-fiction text—which may or may not reflect cultural diversity—as they prepare for new assessments. As English teachers contend with the changes brought by the CCSS, school libraries are poised to play an important role in promoting multicultural literature.

The Importance of Racially Diverse Multicultural Literature

In 1995, 64.8% of students enrolled in U.S. public schools were White, 16.8% were Black, 13.5% were Hispanic, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) did not yet collect data on multiracial students (2014). By 2015 the student population of the United States is projected to be 49.2% White, 15.3% Black, 26.4% Hispanic, and 2.9% students of two or more races (NCES, 2014). As the student population of the United States continues its trend toward greater diversity, researchers like Geneva Gay (2010) have emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching, especially with regard to literacy. In working with English Learners, Feger (2006) found that when she exposed students to culturally relevant texts, they were eager to make connections between the books and their own lives, which resulted in improved academic performance. Sampson and Garrison-Wade (2011), in their research on engaging Black high school students in culturally relevant pedagogy specific to their racial identities, reported not only an enthusiastic response from Black students, but increased interest among Hispanic students as well.

Novels featuring relatable characters can create incentives for reading both inside and outside the classroom. In arguing for greater inclusion of multicultural titles, Hughes-Hassell (2013) suggested that literature can function as a counter-narrative in facilitating identity

development in youth of color. She also points to how literature can illustrate systematic discrimination for students of the dominant culture, helping them to understand others' viewpoints and potentially open the door to cross-cultural dialogue (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). Likewise, in their study of prospective teachers, Colby and Lyon (2004) found that upon reflection about their experiences with reading in school, White respondents recognized the importance of multicultural literature, with one interviewee stating, "I cannot fully understand what it must be like to have a dominant culture being portrayed everywhere I looked, however, I can only imagine the stifling effect it would impose on someone" (p. 25). Despite this recognition, the teaching of multicultural titles in the classroom remains limited, prompting the recommendation that school librarians act to fill this gap.

The Role of School Libraries in Supporting All Students

Since the turn of the 20th century, school librarians have supported literacy by encouraging students to read for pleasure and offering supplementary resources for teaching English (Abbott, 1902; Applebee, 1966; Elder & Carpenter, 1929; Norvell, 1946). Early researchers described how libraries served students with limited English, students who worked to support their families, and students with no reading material at home (Keyes, 1914; Miner, 1905). Just as librarians in the early 1900s appreciated their role in supporting the teaching of English, librarians a century later have embraced a similar stance but with increased awareness of the need to provide access to culturally relevant texts (Agosto, 2001, 2007; Freiband, 1992). Librarians have been urged to diversify their collections, promote cultural understanding, and assist in the education of English learners through their choice of materials (Agosto, 2001, 2007).

Other library researchers have advocated for school library collections that represent the communities in which they are found and building collections around student needs (Hughes-Hassell & Mancall, 2005; Van Orden & Bishop, 2001). A study by Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found students wanted to read about people like themselves but that their school's current collection had a "lack of appealing resources" (p. 26). In a project focused on fostering literacy among Black males, librarians created opportunities for group reading and discussion, student choice in selecting texts for the collection, and access through "bookmobiles" or wheeled carts that delivered books to classrooms (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012). One finding was that many students had not perceived the library as a potential source for books relevant to them. In noting the role of the library environment, Small, Shanahan, and Stasak (2010) cited

the importance of making students feel welcome and described instances where librarians had made focused efforts for inclusion of special needs students and assistance for English learners by creating displays and offering book talks.

Another focus in multicultural literacy has been genre fiction, one of the most popular types of full-length books among teenagers. In their examination of fiction reviews in *School Library Journal* and *Voice of Youth Advocates*, Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, and Gilmore-Clough (2003) found that nearly all genres (e.g., science fiction, fantasy, horror, romance) depicted mostly White characters with peoples of color represented most often in historical fiction. They identified the lack of reviews as a weakness in providing librarians with tools for recommending books for all students (Agosto et al., 2003). Together these studies reflect an interest in making school libraries responsive to the needs of all students.

Focus of This Study

A prior study examining district-wide circulation of 10th grade core literature texts had revealed that English teachers were not using the multicultural adoptions for classroom instruction. Given that students were not gaining exposure to multicultural literature in the classroom, the purpose of this study was to examine whether students at the district's five comprehensive high schools were checking out books written by authors from diverse backgrounds or featuring diverse protagonists or settings. A primary question for the study was which full-length fiction texts were students checking out from their school libraries? The collections in the school libraries hold a wide variety of titles, thus a second question was were students gaining exposure to diverse literature through school libraries?

Methods

Previous studies have relied on surveys to ascertain the reading habits of students, an approach with advantages as well as potential drawbacks. Survey data can often be incomplete or inaccurate. Teenaged library patrons may not accurately recall what they have read or may not wish to disclose book titles. This study approached the question of students' reading habits through a circulation analysis using data generated by the schools' collection management software. When students check out a book, its barcode is scanned along with the student's ID card, creating an electronic record. The process described here for collecting, coding, and analyzing data could be applied to any library that uses collection management software.

Sample

The circulation data were drawn from the five comprehensive high schools in a Southern California district over the four year period from 2007 to 2011. Total high school enrollment varied between 10,816 and 10,988 students, even as the fifth high school opened in 2009. Data were available from four schools for all four years and from the fifth school from 2009–2011. Because most data were analyzed as an aggregate for the district, it was decided to include the fifth school. The racial demographics of each school for 2010–2011, as provided by the California Department of Education's DataQuest website, are shown in Table 1. While from 2007 to 2011 the overall percentage of White students in the district decreased significantly ($p < 0.01$) from 61.7% to 59.1%, each high school has a unique demographic profile. For example, School 1 has both the largest percentages of White (68.59%) and Hispanic (17.78%) students, while School 4 has the largest percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students (34.13%).

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Procedure

A circulation analysis simply indicates whether a book was checked out, therefore, following Greiner and Cooper's (2007) recommendation to define use through circulation data (that are unambiguous and recordable), the frequency of checkouts for a text was used to gauge exposure. Although a student may check out a book and not read it, the fact that it was checked out does reflect the student's potential interest in, and thus exposure to, a text. Since the purpose of the analysis was to quantify exposure, the frequency of checkouts served as the measure. It is also important to note that while data on specific student histories are not available due to privacy considerations, this does not preclude a global analysis of patterns and trends.

Table 1. Racial Demographics Reported as Percentage of School Population: 2010—2011

School	Black	White	Asian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic	American Indian	Multi-racial
1	1.72	68.59	9.25	17.78	0.38	2.27
2	4.63	51.00	28.66	12.52	0.48	2.71
3	3.33	59.02	24.60	10.65	0.45	1.93
4	2.03	54.13	34.13	7.75	0.17	1.78
5	4.56	60.86	22.64	8.21	0.25	3.48

The head library technician at School 4 retrieved circulation data from the database, which is used by all five high schools to manage their collections. Raw circulation data for each school was downloaded for each year and exported to Excel spreadsheet files for analysis. A total of 18 Excel spreadsheet files were examined (four schools with four years of data plus one school with two years of data) and sorted by the Dewey Decimal category for FIC, Spanish fiction (SP FIC), and electronic fiction (eFIC). Multiple copies of a title were then merged into a single record to generate an overall frequency of checkouts for each title for each school in each year.

Next, the top 15 titles for each school for each year were compiled, which represented a cut-off point between four and five standard deviations above the mean for checkouts of all library fiction titles. All ties at position 15 were included. For example, if after the top 14 titles the next three books all had the same number of checkouts, all three were included for a total of 17 top titles. This procedure yielded 295 total records over the four years. Each title from the top circulation lists was coded for author’s racial and/or ethnic background, protagonist(s)’s background, and geographical setting in categories suggested by the work of Mackey et al. (2012) in their examination of the use of culturally diverse fiction in high schools. Information for coding came from publishers’ statements on Amazon.com, authors’ official webpages, and library catalog descriptions.

Author background was coded using a mix of national and geographic designations to create broad categories as a basis for comparison. These categories were United States—White, United States—not White, United Kingdom—White, Asian, Latin American, European, Middle Eastern, unknown, or mixed/multiple in the case of multiple authors. Protagonist background was coded similarly with the addition of fantasy world—White in the case of titles like *Ender’s Game*, which are set beyond the Earth but in which the protagonist is depicted as White. Geographical setting categories included fantasy world, United States, United Kingdom, Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, multiple locations, and unknown (e.g., *Lord of the Flies*) but posed classification problems that are explored in the study’s findings. Dichotomous categories were created for author gender and background as well as protagonist gender and background.

Data Analysis

Van Orden and Bishop (2001) cautioned about statistical comparisons between collections because collections may differ from site to site as was the case in this study. Each school librarian makes selections independently, thus availability of titles will vary among campuses across the district. An examination of School 4’s fiction collection, for example, revealed that 686 out of 3,885 books or 17.7% could be considered multicultural titles based on their subject classification (e.g., Mexican Americans, racially mixed peoples, Tokyo). Examining the subject classifications of books held in the other four schools’ collections revealed that while each library has a variety of multicultural fiction, the specific titles differ. Library staff may also classify titles differently. For example, staff at School 1 classified Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* as a story collection (SC) while staff at School 2 classified it as FIC. Although these differences in composition and classification are worth recognizing, the coding process generated broader categories as the basis for comparison. The top circulation lists were analyzed using descriptive statistics for overall circulation and by the categories created by the coding scheme. Chi-square analysis was used to look for differences among schools based on author background, protagonist background, and setting.

Findings

The findings indicated few differences in circulation patterns among the five schools, even those with greater racial diversity. Because initial chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences based on author background, $\chi^2(4, N = 286) = 1.96, p = 0.744$, protagonist background, $\chi^2(4, N = 267) = 5.87, p = 0.209$, or geographical setting, $\chi^2(4, N = 295) = 8.94, p = 0.063$, and no significant differences among the schools or by year, the circulation data for all 295 titles were examined as an aggregate.

In considering author background as a dichotomous coding of non-White or White, 87.5% of top titles were by White authors from the United States or United Kingdom. The greatest percentage (78.3%) were written by White authors from the United States with only 4.4% of

top titles written by a person of color from the United States. All nine records (3.1%) for a Middle Eastern author were by Khaled Hosseini for *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. No African authors appeared in the top title lists for any year. In addition, students tended to select fiction by White authors from the United States featuring White protagonists. In 64.4% of cases a White author from the United States was writing about a White protagonist or protagonists. Disaggregating the category of non-White authors from the United States revealed that 2.4% of top titles were written by Blacks, with 0.3% of titles written by either an Asian American or Hispanic author. Again considering background as a dichotomous category, 74.9% of records were of White authors writing about White protagonists. Detailed findings for author and protagonist background are reported in Table 2.

Some classifications for geographical setting proved problematic. For example, the setting of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels could be classified as fantasy world, United Kingdom, or multiple locations, while Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy could arguably be categorized under United States or fantasy world. In these cases, Mackey et al.'s (2012) coding scheme and Agosto et al.'s (2003) defining characteristics for genre served as a guide. Fantasy world settings included classic fantasy worlds (the *Eragon* series of Christopher Paolini), outer space (*Ender's Game*), and alternate realities (Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies*). Since the purpose was to examine diversity of geographic location, the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* novels were coded as being set in the United States with *Harry Potter* being classified under United Kingdom. Overall, students tended to check out books set in the United States. Over the four year period, 69.2% of checkouts were for books set in the United States.

Discussion

The findings indicate students are not checking out racially diverse multicultural literature from their school libraries. Their most common choices for full-length fiction are set in the United States, are written by White authors, and feature White protagonists. Below I offer some potential explanations, along with suggestions for future research.

One possibility is that students are using the school library to access required texts, tilting the balance toward less diverse choices. Based on the top list for School 1 from 2010–2011, this seems a reasonable conjecture given the appearance of Jane Austen and William Golding alongside Suzanne Collins and Alice Sebold but would require more investigation through survey and interview. Another factor that appears to have influenced

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Author and Protagonist Background

Background	Frequency	Percent
United States—White		
Author	231	78.3
Protagonist(s)	206	69.8
United States—not White		
Author	13	14.4
Protagonist(s)	9	3.1
United Kingdom—White		
Author	27	9.2
Protagonist(s)	24	8.1
Fantasy world—White		
Protagonist(s)	14	4.7
Mixed/multiple		
Author	1	0.3
Protagonist(s)	6	2.0
Middle Eastern		
Author	9	3.1
Protagonist(s)	9	3.1
European		
Author	2	0.7
Protagonist(s)	5	1.7
Asian		
Author	1	0.3
Protagonist(s)	6	2.0
Latin American		
Author	2	0.7
Protagonist(s)	2	0.7
Unknown		
Author	9	3.1
Protagonist(s)	14	4.7

Note. $N = 295$.

student choices is movie tie-ins. As Hopper (2005) noted, the release of theatrical movies connected to a book can drive circulation. Books on the top list with concurrent movie releases included supernatural and fantasy novels like the werewolf tale *Blood and Chocolate*, *The Golden Compass*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series as well as more realistic fiction like *The Secret Life of Bees*, *Dear John*, and *Revolutionary Road*. Most of these popular movies, like the books, feature White protagonists and are set in the United States.

Another question is whether students of all backgrounds are using their school libraries. A further possibility is that students are not finding enough multicultural literature in their school libraries. This may be due to gaps in the collection, problems with classification, or perceptions similar to those described by Hughes-Hassell and colleagues (2012), who found that students did not perceive the library as having anything to offer them. One potential explanation for the minimal circulation of racially diverse texts in the five schools is lack of student awareness. Some schools, especially School 1, hold popular books translated into Spanish in their collections, but due to privacy protections it is not possible to identify the specific students using library

resources. For example, it is not possible to determine if native Spanish speakers are checking out Spanish language fiction, or if the slight preference for books authored by women is due to more girls using the library.

The data presented here suggest that students are not using their school libraries as a resource for multicultural fiction, even as the student population of the district diversifies over time. Further research—with survey and observational data—would add explanatory power to the statistics reported here and provide greater insight into the reading habits of students, their reasons for selecting titles, and their perceptions of the school library environment. These additional forms of data gathering could help school librarians determine if there are factors inhibiting some students from accessing library resources.

Recommendations

Through their school libraries students potentially have access to a breadth of multicultural literature; the key is shifting access toward exposure. Whether it is because only a small number of students are using their school libraries, or because students are simply choosing novels that describe limited times, places, and people, school library staff can do more to encourage all students to select widely from the titles available to them.

Implementing initiatives to create an inclusive library environment, broaden access to diverse literature, and promote literacy for all students relies to a degree on the cultural competencies of school librarians. Although the K–12 population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, the demographics of those in Library and Information Science (LIS) remain static (Hill & Kumasi, 2011; Wallace & Naidoo, 2010). Hill and Kumasi (2011) found that although cultural competence has been included in LIS preparation programs, students only reported a “moderate knowledge gain” (p. 8) around cultural competence. Librarians could benefit from more explicit and strategic professional development around issues of inclusion, as well as opportunities to broaden their knowledge about young adult and genre fiction, enabling them to connect with high school students and make relevant recommendations (Hopper, 2005).

One potential strategy is leveraging the popularity of genre and young adult fiction. Hood (2009) described how the science fiction genre creates the opportunity to explore an alternate world within a cultural context, citing many titles that treat “Blackness” as a normative experience rather than a problematic one. While Hood’s (2009) recommendations are aimed more at middle school students, high school students may appreciate authors like Octavia Butler, who weave racial themes into tales of the supernatural. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) suggested authors like Walter Dean Myers and

Sandra Cisneros who set their young adult fiction in urban environments. Librarians can also promote titles by creating special displays, making recommendations, or sharing with teachers thematic lists featuring additional titles (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012; Small et al., 2010). Websites like Goodreads provide lists like “Popular Young Adult Multicultural Books” to guide recommendations. Titles may also be linked to popular books through “you might like” referrals that promote multicultural fiction dealing with similar themes.

Finally, the findings from this study reveal a strong preference for contemporary novels. One possible reason is that high school students tend to read best-selling books, especially those connected to recently released movies (Hopper, 2005). One implication for school librarians is using movie tie-ins to promote related titles when popular films feature racially diverse characters and settings. Librarians may wish to consider collecting translations of popular books to draw students into the library and show them it is a place for everyone. As Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) found, students themselves are important participants in creating more open libraries and promoting multicultural literature. My investigation into multicultural literature began with a focus group of students of color who were eager to share their opinions and recommendations for what their peers should be reading.

Conclusion

In an era when young people need to develop multifaceted perspectives on social issues, reading literature is one way for them to learn about the diversity of society and the larger world. At the same time, fiction can hold up a mirror to the lives of students of diverse backgrounds, validating their experiences. School libraries have a role to play in making racially diverse multicultural titles available and promoting them to students, especially as the current English Language Arts curriculum continues to emphasize canonical texts (Mackey et al., 2012; Wolk, 2010). Although the CCSS raise issues of diversity, the suggested texts draw from established classics rather than encouraging teachers to explore more contemporary works by authors from varying backgrounds (National Governors Association, 2010). School librarians and English educators can partner by using the school library as a resource in addressing issues of diversity, literacy, and student success.

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