

Culture and Children's Literature

Sometimes bias sneaks into our classrooms unnoticed. Take some time to look through the books, toys, and materials in your classrooms and programs. For this activity, you will analyze the children's books in your classrooms and programs. Then you will use this guide to decide whether a particular book has any common stereotypes or biases. Finally, you will talk about how you can counter these issues. As you engage in these activities, you should also talk with Training and Curriculum Specialists in your program about how you would resolve these issues.

1. Tour Classroom Libraries

Omission occurs when a particular group of people are not represented at all in your library or program. Look at collection of books as a whole and answer these questions:

- Do you see images of people from a variety of racial and ethnic groups? List the racial and ethnic groups you see:

- Do you see different religions or traditions portrayed? List the religions or traditions you see:

- Are any of the books in a language other than English? Do any characters in the books speak a language other than English? List how many books you found:

- Do you see images of different social or economic classes (e.g., range of occupations, incomes, lifestyles)? Describe the evidence you see:

- Do you see different family structures? Check the structures you see:
 - ☐ Grandparents as primary guardians
 - ☐ Single parents
 - ☐ Gay or lesbian parents
 - ☐ Extended families (aunts, uncles, cousins)
 - ☐ Divorced parents
 - ☐ Blended families (remarriage, step parents)
 - ☐ Multi-racial families

2. Choose a Children's Book:

Choose one children's book that has human or human-like characters. Fairy tales are especially good for this activity.

Title of the Book: _____

Author: _____

Year Published: _____

Look at the illustrations:

- Do you see any over-simplified pictures of a particular group? For example, are overweight people shown on a couch with food? Are Asian people drawn with slanted eyes and traditional clothing? Are teachers or librarians drawn with a stern look (or with eye glasses and their hair in a bun)? Are boys rowdy and getting into trouble?
- Are all people drawn the same (i.e., are people of color just shaded in versions of white people)? Do all people of a certain race or group look the same?
- Are women or people of color subservient or passive?
- Are males in all leadership roles?
- Are people of color shown in places other than urban areas (i.e., outside the "barrio" or inner city)?

Notes:

Look at the story line:

- Do people of color have to "act white" to succeed?
- Do people of color or female characters have to be extraordinary to succeed?
- Do white people solve the problems?
- Are minorities considered to be the problem?
- Are female character's achievements based on their looks (i.e., the princess "wins" the prince because she is so beautiful)? Are positive female characters "beautiful" while negative female characters are "ugly"? Are females afraid of mice, spiders, snakes, etc.? Are females rescued by males?
- Are the family structures usually traditional (mom, dad, and children)?
- Are depictions of lifestyles authentic?

Notes:

Think about the heroine and/or heroes:

- What characteristics are the heroes or heroines admired for? Is it beauty, bravery, brains?
- Do the heroines or heroes avoid conflict (especially with whites or males)?

Notes:

Think about children's self-images:

- Does the book limit a child's dreams or expression? For example, are Asian children shown only as quiet and bookish? Are overweight people shown as lazy or dull? Are athletes shown as "dumb jocks"? Are poor people shown as dirty?
- Does the book associate the color white with purity, cleanliness, etc. and the color black with evil, dirtiness, etc.?

Notes:

Look at the language:

- Are there offensive words in the book? Look for words like "savage" or "lazy." Look for gendered words like fireman (firefighter could be used instead).

Notes:

Guidelines Adapted from:

- *Guidelines for Selecting Bias Free Textbooks and Storybooks*, Council on Interracial Books for Children, New York, NY.
- Derman-Sparks, L., & A.B.C Task Force (YEAR). *Ten quick ways to analyze books for sexism and racism*. In Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children.