

✿ 2016 CLA WORKSHOP

Diversity 2.0: Advocating For More Than Just Diverse Faces

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At the 2016 Children’s Literature Workshop, award-winning authors, illustrators, and publishing professionals discussed the need for books that depict authentic, diverse characters in universal situations.

AT THE 2015 Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA) Workshop, Matt de la Peña advocated for the next step in the diversity discussion to be “Diversity 2.0”—books published about universal themes and topics that have diverse characters authentically depicted within them. We were inspired by this idea, so the 2016 CLA Workshop focused on the need for all children to see themselves authentically represented in the pages of children’s literature, as characters that add to the story, and in which their diversity is not the focus.

Workshop participants on Thursday afternoon heard authors of children’s literature and professionals who work in the publishing industry speak on the need for Diversity 2.0 in the books they create, publish, and promote. Keynote speaker Jason Reynolds began the session, followed by an author panel with Joseph Bruchac, Nikki Grimes, Cammie McGovern, Todd Parr, and Ami Polansky; the workshop was moderated by Janet Wong. The authors shared their experiences writing authentic diverse characters and books. A second panel of industry professionals, Hannah Ehrlich, Nikki Garcia, and Ginee Seo, moderated by Thomas Crisp, provided the insights and perspectives of those involved in publishing diverse books. This year, the workshop theme was continued in a Friday morning roundtable session entitled “Continuing the Conversation,” in which workshop speakers and participants were invited to have small, informal conversations that built upon the ideas shared in the workshop.

As our school populations become increasingly diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), the need for diverse books is critical. Linda Christensen reminds us, through her work with the organization Rethinking Schools (2016), that reading and writing are ultimately political acts. She notes that teachers must ask students to consider voice. Whose voices are heard? Whose are not? Whose are marginalized? Only when voice is examined in these more complex ways are we preparing students for the world outside of school. Banks and Banks (2010) agreed and stated that “educators must acquire the concepts, paradigms and explanations needed to become more effective practitioners in culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse classrooms and schools” (p. 397). A select group of high-quality children’s books offers a promise of insights into a variety of communities and honors a variety of voices.

Recent National Book Award winner Jason Reynolds started off the workshop by sharing his National Book Award ceremony experience, which had taken place the previous night. He spoke about his awe at meeting John Lewis and acknowledged that the work of John Lewis made it possible for him to be a writer, to be nominated for the National Book Award, and for his voice to be heard.

Having his voice heard and knowing that he and his voice matter is critically important to Reynolds. When he was growing up, there were no books for kids like him who

grew up in a neighborhood filled with HIV, cocaine, and hip hop. No authors were like him, no books were about him; only music reflected his experiences. In music he found that he mattered. He spoke of the Washington, D. C., music scene and the influence of Go-Go music, a subgenre associated with funk that originated in the D. C. area during the mid-60s to mid-70s. Go-Go music, he explained, has very set, unwritten rules. A critical part of the concert was when the “lead talker” held up the microphone to the concertgoers and asked where everyone was from. This lead talker connected with everyone in the room, and everyone in the room knew that they, and their experiences, mattered. They were given a voice. Reynolds connected this to his writing and to us, as educators. He said:

[W]e are the lead talkers. This is our job. Our job is to call out our students’ names, acknowledging them, letting them know they are seen and valuable. You know about all of your students, regardless of where they’re from and what’s going on in their community.

He continued to explain that diversity in literature, at its core, is about acknowledgement. It’s not just painting a face brown or putting an able-bodied person in a wheelchair. It’s about acknowledging the individual and giving voice to authentic stories. It’s about sharing uncomfortable spaces. Kids are waiting for us to acknowledge them, and books can be a vehicle to do so. We need to find the music at the core of each of our students’ lives.

In response to Reynolds’ talk, Janet Wong responded, “It isn’t all about acknowledgement. Not just the calling out of a name. Acknowledgement needs love. I see you. Welcome back. I’m glad you’re here.” Reynolds agreed, stating that it is the humanizing aspect that matters. As educators, we need to learn about our students, to know that the other is not always visible. If we can build consistent relationships with our students—relationships built on knowing and valuing and acknowledging—then our students will know that they are cared about. He added: “We need to listen to what they’re saying and what they’re not saying. We need be better about caring.”

Following Reynolds’ inspiring keynote was a panel of authors: Joseph Bruchac, Nikki Grimes, Todd Parr, Cammie McGovern, and Ami Polonsky; the panel was moderated by Janet Wong. Each author spoke about how and why they include authentic, diverse characters in their writing. Joseph Bruchac began the panel with a short tune from his windpipe and then introduced himself in his Native American language. Starting with music and language, elements essential in every culture, he brought home the point that diversity is humanity: “A multiplicity of voices needs to be heard in every area of diversity.”

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Building on Reynolds’ talk, Bruchac discussed how literature is a way of looking into the lives of others, learning from them, and seeing ourselves and knowing we are valued. Additionally, when authors cite their sources, technology permits us to find more information about the people in stories and allows for personal connections.

Nikki Grimes followed by reading a poem from her new book *Garvey’s Choice* (2016), in which the main character loves Star Trek. She revealed:

One of the reasons African Americans loved Star Trek is that it featured Black people in space along with everyone else. They weren’t off in some colony of Africans isolated from everyone else. They were simply part of the crew. Every child wants to be part of the crew. As editors, publishers, storytellers, and teachers, we get to make that happen.

Extending Bruchac’s point, Grimes stated that all children need to have access to books featuring diverse characters in every genre, because that is often how they are exposed to other cultures and learn that people are more alike than different.

Cammie McGovern, originally an author for adults, came to the writing of children’s books after having a child diagnosed with autism. She began the slow process of understanding that a child with a disability does not know they are different. They want the same things as everyone else, yet there exists an invisible wall. Considering the large number of children with disabilities, she started to wonder where this representation was in children’s books. “Diversity 2.0 is when the diversity of the character is not the issue. In fact, it is their greatest strength. They know who they are and they want to get on with their lives.” Cammie encouraged authors to tell stories that go beyond the disability, to tell the story of their experiences. She stated: “Difference is not the end of the world. You get past it and move on with your life. Children with disabilities just want to see reflections of themselves that are joyful.”

As a child, Todd Parr didn’t feel like he fit with other kids. He began to write books that conveyed the message that it’s all right to be different. Today, he writes books

that convey “it’s all right to be who you are.” He uses humor and unpredictability to share stories from the heart that give kids the confidence and voice to find themselves. “I didn’t set out to write diverse books. I wrote books that told my story, stories that were inclusive just because that’s who kids are.”

As a sixth-grade English teacher in Chicago, Ami Polonsky discovered that her students didn’t know how to talk about the LGBTQ community. She believes it is our job as educators to unpack why this is and to figure out why some books that feature diversity are all right to talk about, yet others are not. She encourages us to figure out ways to talk about LGBTQ topics in classrooms, to bring in diverse books that include gender and sexuality in addition to ethnicity and ability. As others have stated, Polonsky believes *Diversity 2.0* needs to go beyond the commonalities between people and focus on their unique differences in order to create real characters that are universal.

When I think about where kids are today and where we want them to be, I see a bridge lined with books that feature unique characters. The substructure or foundation of the bridge is made up of teachers, librarians, book bloggers, social workers, parents, administration, editors—everyone who helps bring these books into the world—committed to holding these books up.

Moderator Janet Wong connected all of the panelists’ thoughts and wrapped up the author panel by stating that “we keep having the same discussion. We haven’t advanced. We haven’t moved on to *Diversity 2.0*. But now, more than ever, we have to get past it.... Now more than ever we have to band together.”

Following Wong’s statement came a panel of publishing industry professionals moderated by Thomas Crisp. Participating were Ginee Seo, Executive Director at Chronicle Books; Nikki Garcia, Assistant Editor at Little, Brown Books for Children; and Hannah Ehrlich, Publishing Liaison for We Need Diverse Books and Marketing and Publicity Director at Lee & Low.

Thomas Crisp opened the conversation by discussing the first time one experiences the personal power of literature. For him, it was David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy*. This was his “landmark book,” the book where he found his truths. Ginee Seo wholeheartedly understood. Growing up in the 1970s, she noted there had been no books that reflected children like her. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977) by Maxine Hong Kingston was her “landmark book.” It helped her honor how different she was from her own conservative family. Nikki Garcia grew up in New York City and attended diverse schools, yet she acknowledged

that she had never interacted with people who are gay. Once she read *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), also by David Levithan, she felt she had greater insight into that community. Hannah Ehrlich, on the other hand, thought she saw herself in many different books. Yet when she, as a young Jewish girl, came upon *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* (1994) by Eric Kimmel, it felt right. It was then that she saw her friends, family, culture, and traditions elevated and honored.

Crisp then posed the question, “If books in which we see ourselves are so powerful, why aren’t there more diverse books?” Ginee Seo noted that publishing is a business, and companies must make money. But sometimes a publishing house can miss the mark. For example, the highly successful *Ruby Lu, Brave and True* (2004) books by Lenore Look were turned down by Scholastic, which did not see a market for a book about an Asian girl. Nikki Garcia agreed and said that it is important to remind the sales forces that there are audiences for many different kinds of books.

Hannah Ehrlich then asked, “Is there a lack of diverse books because there is a lack of diverse people working in publishing?” All agreed that publishing houses must learn to think of wider audiences in the hiring of personnel and in the reviewing and acceptance of manuscripts. These questions prompted poet and author Nikki Grimes to comment, “If you don’t see it, you can’t be it.” She stated that in her childhood neighborhood she often heard, “Writers don’t come from around here.” Christopher Myers (2014) referred to this as “cultural maps.” Children need to see avenues of possibilities to guide them into who they will become.

The discussion turned to whether or not “outsiders” could write accurately about a culture of which they are not a part. Hannah Ehrlich noted that “sensitivity readers,” cultural experts who read manuscripts for accuracy, could be especially helpful in this area. Nikki Garcia noted that “we all have blind spots and we, as publishers, need to analyze what caused an author or our staff to miss an inaccuracy.” Ginee Seo provided insight by noting that anger has grown as writers feel they are being restricted from writing outside their culture, and as scholars of children’s literature feel their population is being ignored or inaccurately portrayed. While all agreed that it is important to listen to criticism, it is also important to hear more than one perspective. All critiques must be taken seriously. Multiple voices must be heard.

The panel concluded by considering the future. How will diverse books for children look 10 years from now? Ginee Seo commented on how we all have walls. Good books in the future should continue to cause us to stretch and to move beyond our walls. Hannah Ehrlich agreed and was hopeful that the difficult conversations we’re having will teach us how to move forward in our ever-growing

majority/minority nation. While conversations about cultural sensitivity are hard and sometimes uncomfortable, it is through such talk that better representation of all cultures is illuminated.

The workshop closed with an idea that Katherine Paterson shared, that books are a “rehearsal for life,” and therefore should contain some hard truths for children. If this is the case, we need more landmark books with truths that speak to wider audiences. Let the rehearsals begin! ■

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