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Examining Diversity in the Monarch Award

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Summer 2020

Abstract

This study explores the 2016 Monarch Award Master List as an educational resource for kindergarten through grade three teachers and librarians. It focuses this exploration by examining how diversity was represented in the text and illustrations of the books in the sample. The Monarch Award is Illinois' K-3 Kids' Choice award. Illinois' children are increasingly diverse, and it is important that they have access to literature that reflects their diversity. The study revealed that diverse characters were portrayed with nuance and respect, but they were still underrepresented on the list. Additionally, diverse characters often had to display extraordinary characteristics to gain acceptance or recognition. Limitations, implications, and areas for future research are suggested.

Keywords: book awards, children's literature, Common Core, content analysis, culturally relevant instruction, diversity, elementary education, libraries, picture books

For Ryan and the kids

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Thank you, Dad, for your love and endless hours of editing labor over the course of my academic career. . . . I think a little bit has finally stuck. Thank you, Mom, for your love, support, and countless hours on the phone during all the tears and triumphs. Thank you to my dear children for being patient with me. Momma is done! Finally, thank you to my dear husband, Ryan, for your unwavering support and many a pep talk to spur me to the finish line. I could not have done this without you.

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Introduction

Educators bear the responsibility of choosing children's literature for their instruction and classroom libraries that represents the diversity of experiences present in the lives of their students. Navigating the vast landscape of children's literature for quality materials can be a daunting task, and educators often turn to award winners and curated lists for exemplary texts. However, titles on such lists must also be examined to ensure they are providing accurate and empathetic representations of diversity. Furthermore, educators should seek to go beyond these lists to choose a wide variety of children's literature for their classrooms that will serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for the children they serve (Bishop, 1990).

Many states have young readers' choice award programs where librarians and teachers select contemporary examples of excellent literature for students. Students read the literature during the year and vote for their favorite title. From 2013 through 2017, I was a teacher librarian in a first through third grade school in East Central Illinois. During my four years in the library classroom, I was encouraged by both my building administrators and my state professional organization, the Association of School Library Educators (AISLE) (n.d.), to participate in the Monarch Award: Illinois' K-3 Readers' Choice Award program. The Monarch Award was created by AISLE:

to encourage children and adults to read children's books for personal enjoyment;
to help children become familiar with books, authors, and illustrators; to
encourage children to read critically; to develop a statewide awareness of
outstanding literature for children; to promote cooperation among agencies

providing educational and library service to children. (Association of Illinois School Library Educators [AISLE], p. 1)

Not only did I include titles from the Monarch Award in my own library curriculum, but I urged teachers to use the books in their classrooms to maximize students' exposure to the list. Teachers and librarians across the state of Illinois are encouraged to "include titles from the master list in their reading or listening experiences during the school year" (AISLE, p. 1). Books chosen must be published in the past five years, and can be in picture book, easy reader, or chapter book format.

Additionally, the librarians and teachers from across Illinois on the volunteer reading committee choose books for the master list based on their literary merit, and they choose books across a variety of genres, including "biography, poetry, fairy tales, folk tales, and multicultural" (AISLE, p. 2). With more and more attention being given to the importance of including diverse texts in the curriculum, it is crucial to examine how this literature is selected and delivered by teachers, including the literature on the Monarch Award Master Lists.

I am a white, middle-class female researcher. I grew up in homogeneous suburban communities and schools. As a teacher and librarian, I also recognize I am a member of a predominately white, female profession. I taught for four years in a majority white school district, in a rural university town in East Central Illinois. Half the students come from low income households (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2019a). I am now a faculty librarian at Eastern Illinois University (EIU), a regional, four-year, predominately white institution in Charleston, Illinois. I specialize in education and children's literature.

I recognize that I am a member of the majority culture working with a predominately white population. I also recognize that most students in America find themselves in homogeneous classrooms with very little diversity (Kozol, 2005). However, as a teacher and librarian, I recognize the importance of exposing children to quality literature that portrays a diversity of experiences. I am committed to building a diverse juvenile collection at my own library, and I believe examining the Monarch Award for diversity is important work.

Literature Review

Children's literature is a cornerstone of K-12 education across a variety of disciplines, including reading, language arts, and social studies. Teachers are encouraged and required to expose children to a wide variety of both fiction and nonfiction texts in the Common Core English Language Arts curriculum (Moller, 2013; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010). Additionally, discipline-specific organizations, such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), encourage educators to utilize children's literature in discipline-specific instruction through the curation of recommended lists, such as the NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books list (Chick & Corle, 2012).

In this literature review, I will explore state and national initiatives that inform teachers' instruction, specifically the Common Core State Standards and the National Council for the Social Studies College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. I will then explore the concept of culturally relevant (CR) instruction and why it is important for educators to be aware of the practice and include it in their teaching. I will

specifically look at how teachers make decisions about selecting the literature they use in the classroom and discuss the importance of selecting culturally responsive and sensitive children's literature for classroom instruction. Then I will examine the current conversation surrounding diverse literature and best practices for selecting diverse texts for the classroom and give a rationale for why studying the Monarch Award is of particular importance for Illinois K-3 educators.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

Illinois adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts in 2010 (ISBE n.d.). The new standards focus on college and career readiness and require students to interact with a wide variety of texts, including narrative fiction, poetry, and informational texts. In fact, the Common Core State Standards place a greater emphasis on informational texts in a wide array of disciplines, including social studies, technology, and science. Although the English Language Arts standards are not prescriptive in the content children should be exposed to, they do offer suggestions "including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare" as well as classics and contemporary literature (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, the standards explicitly state that coming to understand other perspectives and cultures is an essential twenty-first century skill. The CCSS suggest that students can prepare for a future of interacting with a variety of diverse experiences and perspectives through reading and listening (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6).

Calls for incorporating diverse literature appear throughout the CCSS. For instance, in the reading standards for literature, second grade students are expected to be

able to “recount stories including fables and folktales from diverse cultures” and “compare and contrast two or more versions of the same story (e.g., Cinderella stories) by different authors or from different cultures” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 11). Included in the CCSS is a list of suggested exemplar texts. Although the CCSS challenge teachers to introduce their students to diverse perspectives, several researchers have critiqued the CCSS exemplar texts for their lack of diversity represented (Berchini, 2016; Boyd, Causey, and Galda, 2015; Koss, Martinez, and Johnson, 2017; Moller, 2013). Teachers are compelled to go beyond the CCSS to look for current diverse titles.

C3 Framework

Like the CCSS, the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework introduced by the National Council for the Social Studies also calls for students to develop critical thinking and inquiry skills to be engaged twenty-first century citizens (NCSS, 2013). One of the main ways students can do this is through exploring literature related to the ten themes covered in the National Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Science, Technology, and Society; Global Connections; and Civic Ideals and Practices (NCSS, 2010). As students develop their own identities in relationship to their responsibilities as global citizens, it becomes increasingly important for them to interact with a variety of diverse texts that both reflect their own identities and introduce them to those who are othered.

Culturally Relevant Instruction

Culturally relevant (CR) pedagogy was introduced to the educational research literature by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1990 in her article “Culturally Relevant Teaching: Effective Instruction for Black Students.” Ladson-Billings (2014) sought to construct a model in which teachers approached teaching with “an appreciation of their students’ assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students” (p. 74). Culturally relevant instruction seeks to “attend to students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, out-of-school literacies, and identities” (McIntyre and Hulan, 2013, p. 30). Furthermore, CR instruction values and activates students’ “funds of knowledge” that they bring to the classroom (Dunsmore et al., 2013). Students’ backgrounds and family life are viewed as assets to their literacy education rather than deficits.

Since Ladson-Billings’s initial studies in the 1990s, many researchers have sought to apply her principles to other racial/ethnic groups and various educational contexts and instructional methods with varying levels of success. As United States demographics continue to change from majority white to majority people of other races, culturally relevant instruction becomes even more important as teachers seek to engage the diverse students in their classrooms (Cartledge et al., 2015; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Sharma & Christ, 2017). Although incorporating culturally relevant texts and instructional practices can present challenges to educators, both teachers and students benefit when culturally relevant texts and practices are implemented in the literacy classroom.

How Do Teachers Implement Culturally Relevant Instruction?

Implementing CR instruction can be a daunting task. It requires teachers to engage beyond a scripted curriculum and match CR instructional methods to the children in their classrooms. In this next section, I will examine ways teachers can implement CR instruction.

CR Texts. One of the key ways teachers can implement CR instruction is in the selection of CR texts. In order to determine whether a text is culturally relevant for a particular student, the teacher must get to know the student, his or her background, family life, and culture(s). Sharma and Christ (2017) suggest a reader interview in order to get to know students better. They provide a series of questions, which include demographic information, family members and living arrangements, favorite family activities, perceptions about reading, and perceptions about cultural relevance of selected texts. Once the teacher knows more about the students, the teacher can apply Sharma and Christ's (2017) seven dimensions to determine the cultural relevancy of a text:

1. How the book portrays culture, in terms of presenting culture accurately, ignoring cultural differences, or perpetuating stereotypes (Sims, 1983; Sims-Bishop, 1991)
2. How the book portrays culture, in terms of being written and illustrated by someone who shares the culture represented in the book (Ebe, 2010; Walters, 1998)
3. Whether the student shares cultural markers with the main character, such as race, ethnicity, or religion (Ebe, 2010)

4. Whether the student is of the same age and gender identity as the main character (Ebe, 2010)
5. Whether the student talks in a similar way as the main character (Ebe, 2010)
6. Whether the student has lived in or visited places similar to the setting of the book (Ebe, 2010)
7. Whether the student has had experiences similar to those in the book (Ebe, 2010) (p. 301)

These questions will help teachers determine whether a text is a good fit for their students. This is essential. Just because a text portrays diverse characters does not automatically make it a CR text, so teachers must use discernment in selecting CR texts. In exercising this discernment, it is not a matter of diversity for diversity's sake, but rather a question of what kind of diversity will speak to and draw upon a given reader's "fund of knowledge" and become a point of connection in their own learning process.

Home Literacies. Students' funds of knowledge are built by their school experiences, but they are also informed by their experiences at home. Many teachers have found success in implementing CR instruction through creating special units where the focus is particularly on engaging with students' home and culture rather than on a specific literacy skill. For instance, George Herrera brought in photographs he had taken in the surrounding community and shared them with the class (Dunsmore et al., 2013). Students responded enthusiastically because they were familiar with many of the places he had photographed. In response to their enthusiasm, Herrera asked the students to write

about four photographs. Students were highly engaged and performed better on this writing assignment than they had all year, likely due to their personal investment in the project.

Mrs. Akaka had students discover the story behind the names they were given to activate and connect with the Hawaiian name story tradition, *Ola Ka Inoa* (Wurdeman-Thurston, 2015). Her intention was to explicitly connect with the indigenous storytelling culture of Native Hawaiians that was largely lost after European colonization. Although this project did not specifically target any of the five areas of reading instruction, it connected with students' home literacies and allowed them to draw on the literary strength of the Hawaiian naming tradition.

Benefits of Culturally Relevant Instruction

Incorporating CR instruction provides myriad benefits for students. Many researchers have found that students show a higher level of engagement and motivation when CR texts and instruction methods are used (Cartledge et al., 2016; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Council et al., 2016; Dunsmore et al., 2013). In fact, Christ and Sharma (2018) argue that “motivation and engagement, reading achievement, and identity are intertwined, and all are positively affected by children’s opportunities to read culturally relevant texts and have their ways of being in the world sustained through culturally relevant pedagogy” (p. 59). This point is reinforced time and time again throughout the literature. For instance, when teacher George Herrera asked his students to bring in poems from home, 31 of his 32 students came back to class with a poem, which was higher homework completion than he had previously seen (Dunsmore et al., 2013).

Students were eager to bring a piece that they connected to on a personal level and share it with the class.

Students find deeper levels of engagement with literacy activities when teachers make connections with their home cultures. Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea (2015), found that students of Native Hawaiian ancestry were highly motivated when their teacher centered a literacy lesson around finding out the stories of their names and connecting their name stories to their family histories. The project allowed students to “make critical connections between their home and school lives, as well as their home and school literacies” (p. 429). Students find more meaning in literacy instruction when they have the opportunity to make connections with their family and home context (Dunsmore et al., 2013; Wurdeman-Thurston, 2015). Council et al. (2016) found that a fluency intervention using CR texts not only improved students’ fluency scores, but the students also showed great improvements in their behavior and attitude. While the study included only three students, the use of CR texts to improve both fluency and problem behaviors is promising and warrants further study.

Challenges Implementing Culturally Relevant Instruction

Culturally relevant instruction is rewarding, yet it can also be a challenge to implement. As Boyd et al. (2015) point out, “The implementation of culturally diverse literature in classrooms occurs when teachers make it happen” (p. 380). When incorporating CR instruction methods, teachers face a variety of challenges. One of the biggest challenges to implementation of CR instruction is teacher buy-in and teacher knowledge (Christ & Sharma, 2018; Dunsmore et al., 2013; Vincent et al., 2017).

Teacher education programs vary in their implementation of teaching CR practices. Even when college course work has assigned readings addressing CR instruction, teacher candidates need practice both selecting CR texts and integrating them into their literacy lessons (Christ & Sharma, 2018). Picking a text with diverse characters is not enough. Rather, teachers must invest a significant amount of time in getting to know their individual students to be able to effectively match their students with CR texts (Berchini, 2016; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Sharma & Christ, 2017). Additionally, some teachers may never embrace the importance of using CR texts and practices with their students. Christ and Sharma (2018) give the example of a teacher candidate who still expressed skepticism and resistance to implementing CR practices in her teaching because she did not see the value of doing so.

Teachers face unique challenges serving students from indigenous populations. Vincent et al. (2017) point out that one of the greatest barriers to teachers implementing authentic CR instruction for American Indian and Native Alaskan students is that teachers are neither prepared nor comfortable doing so. In fact, the teachers they surveyed reported that they had never accessed materials that would prepare them to improve instruction for American Indians and Native Alaskans. Additionally, the authors found that when teachers incorporated what they thought was CR instruction methods during their Thanksgiving units, it actually tokenized the American Indian and Native Alaskan experience. In order to be truly effective, CR texts and instruction must be incorporated more frequently than once per year.

Teachers face additional challenges when they feel bound by mandated curriculum and timelines in the classroom. Toppel (2015) cites the rigidity of preexisting reading programs as one of the biggest obstacles to incorporating CR instruction. When teachers are working with a prescribed textbook reading program, they may not have flexibility in the texts they use. However, even when faced with a prescribed text, Toppel encourages educators that they can incorporate CR practices because “the most significant aspect of being a culturally responsive educator is building relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse students” (p. 554). Toppel describes a variety of instructional techniques that help teachers get to know their students and honor students’ different ways of communicating. However, it is vitally important that teachers also advocate for the incorporation of CR texts within the curriculum and advocate with their administration for the resources to do so.

Selecting Culturally Relevant Texts

In response to the increased use of children’s literature in the classroom to teach a variety of topics and skills, a body of scholarly literature has grown up not only analyzing how educators use children’s literature in their instruction, but also how the literature itself portrays minority groups through the research lens of content analysis. Bishop (2011) argues that “up until the mid-1960s, the world of American children’s books could be characterized as largely homogeneous and fundamentally mono-cultural” (p. 225). However, the makeup of today’s American classroom is increasingly diverse. The 2014 National Center for Education Statistics reports that “51% of students in the United States are White. Of the remaining 49%,” the student population is demonstrably diverse and

made up of Blacks, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and children of two or more races (Koss, Martinez, & Johnson, 2017, p. 51). Numerous studies indicate that the books used in classrooms are particularly important because children's literature as a cultural artifact has the power to either reinforce existing social conventions, stereotypes, and prejudices, or challenge existing social conventions, dismantle stereotypes, and prevent prejudices from developing (e.g., Bishop, 2011; Bousalis, 2016; Chick & Corle, 2012; DePalma, 2016; Gardner, 2017; Martinez et al., 2017; Moller, 2013).

When teachers seek to incorporate culturally diverse texts, it can be easy to focus solely on what Begler (1998) calls the “Five *F*s”: food, fashion, fiestas, folklore, and famous people” (p. 272). While these *F*s are a good starting place, if teachers focus only on these five areas, they can tend to portray other cultures as distant or static even though they are actually living and dynamic. Additionally, students can feel marginalized or tokenized when their culture is brought up only in relation to a holiday or in a month focusing on Black or Latin American history. Furthermore, Berchini (2016) cautions that “the mere inclusion of diverse authors in this national text does not necessitate that diverse students’ literacy needs are being met” (p. 55). *How* diverse texts are taught matters. *How* teachers present diverse texts matters.

Research on Children’s Literature

When studying diversity in children’s literature, researchers select the literature they will analyze using two methods. Some authors choose samples of books relating to specific diversity themes, such as representations of African Americans and/or African diaspora children in literature (Bishop, 2011; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Gardner, 2017),

representation of sexual identity minorities in literature and its importance with children (Bickford, 2018; DePalma, 2014), and representations of immigrants in literature during specific time periods (Bousalis, 2016). Other authors choose to examine themes in existing booklists curated by adults and intended to be used with children—such as CCSS Exemplars, NCSS Notable Trade Books, Caldecott Winners and honors.

Themes

The main reason researchers choose to study minority groups is that these groups tend to be underrepresented or misrepresented in children’s literature—and, therefore, in classrooms. Furthermore, as Gardner (2017) argues, these groups are often seen through “negative societal scripts” that shape the way all children perceive minority groups (p. 122). It is essential that educators endeavor to incorporate quality children’s literature with accurate representations of minority groups in their instruction because the messages children receive through media and mainstream education is white, heteronormative, and exclusionary of alternative identities (Bousalis, 2016; DePalma, 2016; Gardner, 2017). This leads to the following questions: Does the existing body of children’s literature offer an alternative narrative/representation? How can educators effectively incorporate alternative narratives/representations in their classroom instruction? and What books offer a compelling alternative narrative/representation?

Own Voices. An important facet of including diverse literature in the classroom is taking note not only of the authenticity of representation, but also of the authors and illustrators of the works. Rudine Sims Bishop was a forerunner of the Own Voices movement. In her landmark essay, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” she

argues “that children need mirrors in which they see themselves, windows through which they see the lives of others, and sliding glass doors through which they can traverse between groups and worlds and be changed by the experience” (Koss et al., 2017, p. 51). Bishop further argues that accurate portrayals of African Americans in children’s literature is not enough. Rather, children’s literature written and illustrated *by* African Americans written *for* African American children is absolutely essential (Bishop, 2011). This call for authenticity permeates the content analysis literature. For instance, Koss et al. (2017) not only examined the presence of Latinx main characters that appear in the Caldecott winner and honor canon, they also closely examined the number of Latinx authors and illustrators. Bousalis (2016) also argues that authors who are not immigrants cannot truly experience the lives of immigrants, and illustrators who are not from a specific ethnic group might fall into the trap of “simply drawing faces differently to honor multiculturalism” rather than capturing an authentic diversity of experience. As teachers select children’s literature for their instruction and classroom libraries, they should pay close attention to who the authors and illustrators of each book are and endeavor to include authors and illustrators of diverse backgrounds who can authentically represent the characters they create.

Identity Narrative. A variety of researchers are in agreement that students absorb messages and biases about their own identities and the identities of others from representations they find in literature (Bishop, 2011; Bousalis, 2016; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Chick & Corle, 2012; DePalma, 2016; Gardner, 2017; Koss et al., 2017; Naidoo & Quiroa, 2016). For instance, in their 2012 study, “A Gender Analysis of NCSS Notable

Trade Books for the Intermediate Grades,” Chick and Corle (2012) establish that “literature teaches gender norms and gender identity, and research indicates that gender bias in books can be harmful to young people (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Peterson & Lach, 1990; Chau & Scott, 1986; Tognoli, Pullen, & Leiber, 1994)” (p. 2). Brooks and Cueto (2018) further complicate the concept of identity narratives by pointing out that groups that look homogeneous on the outside, such as Black females, can represent highly distinct cultural groups that struggle to find common ground, such as African American girls, Afro-Caribbean girls, and girls from other African nations. This example illustrates one of the great tensions of identifying and choosing literature with diverse representations. There is not a single book that captures the entire depth and breadth of “diverse experience.” Rather, educators must spend time getting to know their specific students and seek to gather a wide array of literature that provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, as described by Bishop (1990).

Literature for the Purpose of Social Change. When educators begin to use authentically representative texts in their classrooms, they see the welcome by-product of social change. For instance, many researchers found that when books with authentic expressions of African American experiences are included, African American children and adolescents begin to assimilate messages of better self-image and self-worth (Bishop, 2011; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Gardner, 2017). Furthermore, over the course of the No Outsiders project in the United Kingdom, DePalma (2016) noted that No Outsiders program director Elizabeth Atkinson argued “a pedagogy of representation is much easier to conceptualize and describe than a pedagogy that seeks to trouble the existing social

order” (p. 837). Hence the project did not explicitly try to overturn existing social norms or conventions. Rather, the project directors sought to incorporate books that portrayed gay and lesbian relationships in a positive light. However, the by-product of including this literature is that participant prejudices began to change, and participants became more accepting of different sexual representations. Through careful selection of materials, educators can influence how their students perceive themselves, others, and society at large.

Award Literature and Book Lists

It is of particular importance to examine award literature (e.g., Caldecott and Newbery winners/honors) and curated book lists (e.g., CCSS Literature Exemplars and NCSS Notable Trade Books) for representations of diversity. Busy educators might interpret an award designation or inclusion on a recommended book list as enough reason to adopt a book for their classroom. In fact, teachers often use these book lists to build their teaching and classroom book collections (Koss et al., 2017). Considering this, researchers have a particular responsibility to examine these lists for specific diversity themes, such as representations of a specific group (e.g., Latinx) or gender representation, to help educators make informed decisions about incorporating these titles into their classrooms. For instance, when considering Latinx titles to add to their classroom libraries, teachers will need to look beyond the Caldecott winners and honors to awards such as the Pura Belpre, which specifically honors works by Latinx authors and illustrators (Koss et al., 2017). Moller (2016) concludes that the CCSS Nonfiction Literature Exemplars leave much to be desired when adopting a culturally responsive

approach to teaching, citing that “the vast majority of the CCSS exemplars were written by white authors and feature white characters” (p. 60). Those that do feature diverse characters are limited in scope and often portray historical rather than contemporary representations (Moller, 2016). Like Koss et al. (2017), Moller (2016) argued that teachers have a responsibility to seek out alternatives to the CCSS exemplars in order to adequately address the diversity in today’s classrooms.

The NCSS Notable Trade Book lists are of particular note because they strive to highlight books that can be incorporated into social studies classrooms to address a variety of themes including history, social justice, communities, etc. The social studies curriculum is a natural place to discuss a variety of issues related to diversity, and the books on the NCSS Notable Trade Book list are purposefully selected as “the very best in current social studies literature for students . . . and must demonstrate originality and uniqueness, high literary quality, reader-friendly format and illustrations, insight into human relationships, diversity, and cultural experiences” (Chick & Corle, 2012, p. 1). However, even given these criteria, educators still must look at each title with a critical eye. Chick & Corle (2012) demonstrate that even though the bar for inclusion on the NCSS Notable Trade Book list is set high, troubling representations still abound. For instance, female main characters are vastly underrepresented on the list, and when they are included, female characters tend to be portrayed in stereotypical roles, and males also tend to be in stereotypical jobs and roles. Female characters were much more likely to break out of stereotypical roles in books with only female main characters, such as

biographies about females, because those “tend to highlight those who are able to break the mold of the traditional female” (Chick & Corle, 2012, p.8).

Why the Monarch Award?

The Monarch Award was established in 2005 to promote a love of excellent literature for children in grades K-3. The volunteer reading committee chooses books of literary merit that will appeal to children. The Illinois State Board of Education (2019) reported on the *2019 Illinois State Report Card* that the majority of Illinois students are nonwhite. Although 47.6% are White, the remaining 52.4% are incredibly diverse, comprising Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, and students who identify with two or more races (ISBE, 2019b). Additionally, a noticeable minority are English Language Learners or children with disabilities. As discussed previously, minorities are still underrepresented in books published for children. Therefore, educators must apply a concentrated effort to include books in their curriculum that represent their students. Because kindergarten through third grade educators across Illinois are encouraged to use the Monarch Award Master List books in their teaching, it is imperative to examine the list to determine whether the selections reflect the students in Illinois schools.

Methods

In this study, I examined the 2016 Monarch Illinois' K-3 Readers' Choice Award Master List (see Appendix A) for diversity using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019; Maxwell, 2010). I chose to analyze this list because 2016 was an important year in United States history. The books were selected to be on the list in early 2015 at the

beginning of the seventh year of Barack Obama's presidency. All books appearing on the list were published between 2012 and 2014 during Obama's second term. Obama's presidency, in particular, ushered in a period of great social change, and diversity was at the center of public discourse. Additionally, I chose this list because it is one of the lists I used while I was a librarian in an elementary school, and I used the books with students. As I promoted the Monarch Award each year, I became more and more interested in the diversity present in the texts and illustrations of the books on each list.

The Monarch Award is the Illinois K-3 Readers' Choice Award. Each year, a committee of librarians and teachers convenes to select the master list of twenty books. The books selected must appeal to K-3 readers either to be read independently or read aloud by an adult and are evaluated based on the following criteria: "originality, physical appearance, quality of illustrations, literary quality, timelessness, clarity and readability, appropriateness of subject matter and content, appeal for the age group, likelihood of acceptance by young readers, factual accuracy" (AISLE, n.d., p. 2). Titles selected represent a variety of formats including picture books, easy readers, and early chapter books. Additionally, the committee seeks to create a well-balanced list including various genres in fiction and nonfiction, including biography, fairy and folk tales, poetry, and multicultural literature (AISLE, n.d.).

To establish patterns and anomalies, I analyzed each title using a series of open coding questions derived from the body of literature examining diversity issues in children's literature. While reading each title, I answered each open coding question, making notes of what was included and excluded. After completing open coding, I

developed a series of axial coding criteria to apply to my sample. Axial coding helped me assess the presence or degree of diversity present in the sample. This also allowed me to analyze patterns across the sample. Please see Appendix B for the full list of questions used.

This study is not without limitations. The data pool is quite limited and only includes books from the Monarch Award Master List from 2016. Additionally, the Monarch Award is targeted toward students in grades kindergarten through third in Illinois. Books were relatively homogeneous because of this. Generalizations cannot be made to Monarch Award Master Lists from other years, much less children's literature as a whole. Finally, I did not have a second rater for this study, so I was the only one to analyze the titles. Although I did several readings of each book, there is a chance I may have missed something due to no interrater reliability.

Findings

The Monarch Award's primary purpose is to expose children to quality literature published within the past five years. The primary focus is on student enjoyment, but teachers are also encouraged to use the list in their classrooms for read-aloud books or as additions to the curriculum. In this study, I investigated how books on the 2016 Monarch Award Master List integrated diverse characters into the narrative and illustrations, as well as the nature of their impact on the narratives. Here, I will discuss the significant patterns and findings related to diversity in the 2016 Monarch Award Master List.

Diversity in Primary and Secondary Characters

The twenty titles on the 2016 Monarch Award Master List were examined for diversity in both the narrative and the illustrations. Because the award is geared toward kindergarten through third grade students, it was imperative to examine both the narratives and the illustrations. Eighteen titles on the list were picture books and two were chapter books with illustrations sprinkled throughout.

At first glance, the book list seems to have a very high percentage of diversity represented. When studying the illustrations, I examined when a book had both explicitly/implicitly white and explicitly/implicitly POC in the illustrated cast of secondary characters. These books were given the designation of *Something Else*. I found that most books ($n = 14$; 70%) had a diverse cast of background characters in the illustrations. A small minority ($n = 2$; 10%) had only white characters as secondary characters. Although the majority of books had a diverse cast of secondary characters, this pattern did not translate to diversity in the main characters. In contrast, a small minority of the books ($n = 5$; 25%) had a person of color as the main character. A book was just as likely to have a white main character ($n = 5$; 25%) and even more likely to have an animal main character ($n = 6$; 30%).

The presence of diversity explicitly addressed in the narrative was also examined. Although diversity was addressed implicitly through the illustrations in a majority of the books, the majority of books containing human characters did not address diversity explicitly in the narrative. A slight majority of books did not address diversity in the narrative at all ($n = 12$; 60%). Nearly half ($n = 9$; 45%) the books had human characters

but entirely omitted integrating color, ethnicity, and race into the narrative. For an additional handful of books ($n = 3$; 15%), this measure was not applicable due to the nonfiction subject matter ($n = 1$) or only animal characters ($n = 2$). Only a small portion of books ($n = 6$; 30%) succeeded in integrating race into the narrative of the book in a nuanced and respectful way. A notable minority of books ($n = 6$; 35%) attempted to address diversity in culturally sensitive detail. These are the same books in which the illustrator portrayed a diverse set of characters in the background, but that diversity did not find its way into the narrative.

Heritage, Stereotypes, and Extraordinary Feats

Representations of diverse characters largely avoided stereotypes and heritage scenarios. A large minority of books on the list ($n = 8$; 40%) portrayed characters in either modern or unique, non-stereotypical or heritage scenarios. Only one book had a questionable stereotype/heritage treatment of other cultures. In *The Scraps Book: Notes from an Ordinary Life*, Lois Ehlert (2014) writes an autobiography of herself as a maker of children's books. Her main art form is collage, and she labels milagros that she collected from Mexico. What she does not say is that milagros are religious folk charms. The idea of collecting religious art to use in collage illustrations may be troubling for some readers. Ehlert also has a page with folk art and labels one doll "beaded doll, Africa." It is the only doll on the page that doesn't look human, and she doesn't properly identify the specific African culture from which the doll originates. A small minority of books ($n = 4$; 20%) received a Something Else designation because their portrayal of minorities in the story or illustrations could potentially be interpreted as stereotypical. For

instance, Kelly Cunnane's (2013) *Deep in the Sahara* explains the significance of hijab to Muslim girls and women and is a wonderful addition to the diversity represented on the list. However, the story is set in Mauritania, with illustrations of people riding on donkeys. It might be difficult for American children not exposed to Islam in their modern context to recognize that the story is not a historical representation of the religion.

The types of characteristics exhibited by minoritized characters was also investigated. In books explicitly about minoritized characters, it was likely that those characters needed to display extraordinary qualities to gain recognition or acceptance ($n = 5/7$; 71%). This included, for instance, a character with a disability overcoming his stutter, an outspoken woman catching the notice of the inventor of the game of basketball, an African-American painter who overcame a debilitating war injury and was finally recognized for his talent by an influential white painter, and a famous political figure excelling in academics, thereby gaining notoriety and eventually political influence and power. In the remaining books explicitly about minoritized characters ($n = 2/7$; 28%), the protagonists did not have to exhibit extraordinary qualities to gain acceptance. Rather, their minoritized status was essential to the story, but accepted as normal and not something that needed to be overcome or "dealt with."

Intergroup Relationships

Lastly, I examined the presence of intergroup relationships in the narratives and illustrations in the sample. Just as the books most likely did not explicitly address diversity in general, they were also more likely to portray inter-minoritized or inter-distinctive culture, group, or identity and dominant culture relationships in the

illustrations only ($n = 7$; 35%), or omit them entirely ($n = 6$; 30%). A small number ($n = 5$; 25%) on the list included inter-minoritized or inter-distinctive culture, group, or identity and dominant culture relationships in the narrative of the story. The presence or absence of intergroup relationships textually and visually within the sample demonstrated an important pattern.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the diversity present in the 2016 Monarch Award Master List. The Monarch Award is promoted by school and public librarians in Illinois. Classroom teachers are encouraged to read the books with their students, so that students can be exposed to recent, quality literature and vote for their favorite title. Still, it is essential that our students see themselves reflected in the books that teachers and librarians use in the classroom.

Implications

When selecting picture books for children, teachers must look deeper at the book's narrative to determine whether the book truly advances a canon of inclusivity in their classroom collection. Books can appear to fit the criteria of addressing diversity in the illustrations and yet not actually address diversity in the text. Just because a book is on an award list and appears to have diversity in the illustrations, teachers should not assume that the book is a helpful addition to their classroom library. As teachers select books to use from award lists, it is essential that they preview and dig into the narrative of the book to determine its value in terms of diversity. Additionally, although there is value

in selecting books that feature a diverse cast of characters in the illustrations, it is also important to select books that show these intergroup relationships explicitly in the text.

Teachers need to be vigilant in selecting literature that represents other cultures. If a book contains explicitly stereotypical or heritage scenarios, the teacher should find a suitable replacement for that book. If the book is questionable or does not offer a well-rounded picture of another culture or people, the teacher should find additional titles to round out the curriculum. Additionally, teachers should be self-aware that it is easy to only address other cultures around holidays or heritage months, but books portraying other cultures should be incorporated into their teaching year-round. Librarians should be intentional about purchasing a wide array of titles that show cultures from multiple angles so that teachers have a variety from which to choose.

Teachers and librarians must also consider *how* minoritized characters are portrayed in the stories they collect for the classroom and library. It is easy to find stories with minoritized characters acting in extraordinary ways to gain acceptance or recognition. It is much harder to find books that depict minoritized people in their daily life scenarios. Both types of books have value in building a canon of inclusivity, and teachers should seek out both when creating an inclusive classroom collection.

Even when teachers feel confident in their ability to select inclusive texts to use in their classroom, they may still feel uncomfortable or uncertain about how to address issues of race and equity in the classroom. In addition to learning how to evaluate texts, teachers should pursue professional development opportunities to learn how to incorporate diverse texts into their teaching practices. Professional development can

include workshops and conferences, but it can also include following authors, illustrators, and educators on social media to learn about and participate in the current conversation about diversity in children's literature and education. Additionally, school administrators should offer professional development opportunities, foster open dialogue, and provide safe spaces for conversations about race and diversity for their teachers. They can also build their teachers' confidence by developing mentorship programs and allowing teachers release time to observe exemplary teachers who effectively incorporate conversations about diversity in their teaching. Through these kinds of initiatives, teachers and administrators can create welcoming and inclusive spaces for all students.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research is needed to explore additional Monarch Award lists to see whether an emphasis on diversity in the illustrations is consistent over time. Another area of study would be to examine Monarch Award winners to see which books the majority of K-3 children are choosing as their favorite and whether diverse titles appear among the winners. Additionally, it would be helpful for future researchers to examine whether the Monarch Award reflects diversity in publishing trends as reported by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Although only one book on the 2016 Monarch Award Master List had a book with questionable heritage depictions or stereotypes, additional lists should be examined to determine whether this is consistently true across the life of the Monarch Award. Further study is needed to determine whether there is a consistent pattern of favoring inclusion of minoritized characters who display extraordinary traits to gain recognition or

acceptance on the Monarch Award Master Lists. Additionally, it would be helpful to examine if this has changed over time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the text and illustrations of the 2016 Monarch Award Master List for diversity. The books on this list are selected by a panel of librarians and are intended for kindergarten through third grade students. Results indicated that even though diversity was prevalent in the illustrations of the 2016 list, it was much less common to find diversity in the narrative of the books. In the future, books selected for the Monarch Award should include diversity in both the narrative and illustrations and include stories that portray people of color in modern, everyday life scenarios. The student population of Illinois needs exposure to literature that affirms and reflects their rich diversity.

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Appendix A – 2016 Monarch Award Master List

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Appendix B – Coding Questions for Analysis

1. How does the book portray minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identity in terms of presenting culture accurately, ignoring cultural differences, or perpetuating stereotypes (Sims, 1983; Sims-Bishop, 1991)?
 - a. Nuanced and respectful
 - b. Attempts, but struggles, to fully distinguish cultures
 - c. Ignores cultural differences or perpetuates stereotypes
 - d. N/A
2. Are books portraying minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identity written by own-voice authors or respectful-voice authors?
 - a. Author
 - i. Yes, explicitly and in culturally sensitive detail
 - ii. Yes, implicitly with some culturally sensitive detail
 - iii. No
 - iv. Not applicable
 - b. Illustrator
 - i. Yes, explicitly and in culturally sensitive detail
 - ii. Yes, implicitly with some culturally sensitive detail
 - iii. No
 - iv. Not applicable
3. Does the book portray minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identity in stereotypical/heritage scenarios (holidays/cultural/historical)? If so, how (Begler, 1998; York, 2016)? Are only stereotypical/heritage scenarios present in the sample?
 - a. Yes, explicitly stereotypical
 - b. Yes, explicitly heritage
 - c. Yes, both
 - d. Something else
 - e. No
 - f. N/A
4. Does the book underrepresent minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identities compared to the dominant culture (York, 2016)?
 - a. How many people are presented/illustrated in the book?
 - b. How many people are named in the book?
 - c. About which portion of the named individuals likely have minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identities?
 - i. <10%
 - ii. <25%
 - iii. <50%
 - iv. <75%
 - v. N/A
5. How does the book portray inter-minoritized or inter-distinctive culture, group, or identity and dominant culture relationships (York, 2016)?

- a. Explicit/detailed (text and illustrations)
 - b. Minimized/vague (illustrations only)
 - c. Omitted entirely
 - d. N/A
6. Do the characters of minoritized or distinctive culture, group, or identity need to exhibit extraordinary qualities to gain acceptance? If so, how (York, 2016)?
 - a. Explicit
 - b. Vague
 - c. No
 - d. N/A
 7. How did the author represent or integrate color, ethnicity, and race into the narrative?
 - a. Explicitly and variously (textually and visually with people)
 - b. Explicitly but simplistically
 - c. Implicitly or vaguely
 - d. Omitted entirely
 - e. N/A
 8. How did the illustrator integrate color, ethnicity, and race into the illustrations?
 - a. Explicitly and variously
 - b. Explicitly but simplistically
 - c. Implicitly or vaguely
 - d. Omitted entirely
 - e. N/A
 9. How does white privilege emerge? Are characters from dominant cultures aware of their privilege?
 - a. Explicit/detailed
 - b. Minimized/vague
 - c. Omitted entirely
 - d. N/A
 10. Does the book address socioeconomic status? How?
 - a. Explicit/detailed
 - b. Minimized/vague
 - c. Omitted/Ignored Entirely
 - d. N/A
 11. Does the book include counter narratives (Smith, 2019)?
 - a. Yes, explicitly and throughout
 - b. Yes, implicitly, vaguely, or sporadically
 - c. No
 12. Does this book advance a canon of inclusivity (Smith, 2019)? If so, how?
 - a. Yes, explicitly and throughout
 - b. Yes, implicitly, vaguely, or sporadically
 - c. No
 13. What is the identity of the main character?
 - a. Nonhuman species

- i. Mammal
 - ii. Bird
 - iii. Insect
 - iv. Reptile
 - v. Other
 - b. Human
 - i. Explicit white (in text and illustrations)
 - ii. Implicit white (illustration only)
 - iii. Explicit POC (in text and illustrations)
 - iv. Implied POC (illustration only)
 - v. Something else
 - vi. N/A (no main character)
 - c. Main character's sex/gender identity
 - i. Explicitly male/female
 - ii. Implied male/female
 - iii. Explicit gender non-binary
 - iv. Implicit gender non-binary
 - v. N/A
14. What are the identities of the secondary characters?
- a. Nonhuman species
 - i. Mammal
 - ii. Bird
 - iii. Insect
 - iv. Reptile
 - v. Other
 - b. Human
 - i. Explicit white (in text and illustrations)
 - ii. Implicit white (illustration only)
 - iii. Explicit POC (in text and illustrations)
 - iv. Implied POC (illustration only)
 - v. Something else
 - c. Secondary characters sex/gender identities
 - i. Explicitly male/female
 - ii. Implied male/female
 - iii. Explicit gender non-binary
 - iv. Implicit gender non-binary
 - v. N/A
15. What is the book's publication year?
- a. 2015
 - b. 2014
 - c. 2013
 - d. 2012
 - e. 2011