state that despite ethnic minorities making up 28% of the American population (according to the 2010 census), only 4% of books published for children and young adults centre on characters/events that are from ethnic minority backgrounds (p. 380). This in itself is alarming in what is increasingly global society, but what makes it more worrying still is that it becomes a vicious cycle. In the same article, Boyd et al. (2015) profile an award-winning Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Adichie, who describes her childhood experiences of writing. All of her stories were featured white, western protagonists, who “played in the snow, ate apples, and talked about the weather a lot” (p. 378). Adichie could only write stories that reflected the type of books she was reading, which were all about white, middle class children. It is an accepted truth that you write about what you know, and yet as a child, Adichie felt compelled to write about things she had read. If we are to encourage our young adults of all races and backgrounds to write about what they know, we also have to allow them to read about what they know: I personally enjoyed Black Girl Dreaming, but I am not a black girl, and I would have to relate personally to much of the subject matter. I am not black or female, nor did I grow up in the southern United States. However, as someone who strives to broaden my cultural horizons and understand life from the perspective of others, I got a lot out of the book. I can only imagine how useful this book would be to a black girl with aspirations to be a writer, and as an educator I would recommend this book to middle grade teachers. We should not segregate our books, everyone can learn something from any book.

The benefits for people from ethnic minority backgrounds reading books structured in their own culture are obvious, particularly for young adults. Identity is something that all adolescents struggle with and search for, and the cultural codes and cues embedded in books and other types of literature can provide some kind of compass to help guide them in forming their identity. As there are fewer YA Lit. choices that focus on ethnic minorities and their stories and experiences, these students are at a disadvantage when attempting to find identity in literature. A study on a culturally situated reader response theory by Brooks and Browne (2012) showed that when interacting with a text, young readers do so from four distinct perspectives: their ethnic group, their community, their peer group, and their family (p. 78). These lenses are crucial to the young reader making meaning and finding identity in their reading material, and this shows just how disadvantageous ethnic minorities can be when reading works written by white authors as a way of constructing identity.

Therefore, we can certainly put forward the argument that books about more diverse areas of society are needed. However, it is not enough to simply make more multicultural works available. This paper will provide a synthesis of contemporary literature on the subject, and also include personal opinions and suggestions regarding the importance of an increase in diverse literature being made available to young adults.

One of the issues present in a review of the literature regarding diverse books for young people has simply to do with the numbers. Boyd, Cause and Gaidak (2015) state that if we are to see a growth in the production of books for children and young adults that address them and validates their issues and experiences. This is not a new issue. Indeed, Yokota (2015) traces the discussion of white dominance in children’s books all the way back to 1965 (p. 19). Historically this makes sense, as it would place the debate in the context of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement. There seems to be a similar movement in this country too, something that is highlighted by numerous instances of public violence against people of color, and it could be argued that just as in 1965, there is still a paucity of literature written for young adults from minority backgrounds.

Oppression is no longer chains and manacles, it is nuanced and insidious. As Yancy (2015) explains, the comments made by Daniel Handler after Jacqueline Woodson received a national book award for her book Brown Girl Dreaming were incredibly racist and damaging, even if they were not meant in that spirit (p. 5). By generalizing Woodson and reducing her to a racial stereotype, Handler effectively made the point that she was the exception to the rule when it comes to black women writing about what you know, and yet as a child, Adichie felt compelled to write about things she had read. If we are to encourage our young adults of all races and backgrounds to write about what they know, we also have to allow them to read about what they know: I personally enjoyed Black Girl Dreaming, but I am not a black girl, and I would have to relate personally to much of the subject matter. I am not black or female, nor did I grow up in the southern United States. However, as someone who strives to broaden my cultural horizons and understand life from the perspective of others, I got a lot out of the book. I can only imagine how useful this book would be to a black girl with aspirations to be a writer, and as an educator I would recommend this book to middle grade teachers. We should not segregate our books, everyone can learn something from any book.

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and diverse books alone but rather to read a broad range of literature that covers a variety of subjects and issues. It is indeed that the more diverse books have been seen as underrepresented for a long time. This is the same argument that dispels the myth that Black Lives Matter equals White Lives Don’t Matter. Of course, all lives matter, just all books matter, but neither all lives, nor all books, are currently being represented and treated equally in this world.

The value of including diverse books in the classroom is enormous, just as the value of the classics is understood to be enormous. However, diverse books teach our students to explore and appreciate both the similarities and the differences between different contemporary social and ethnic groups, and this is something that the classics cannot do. Rather than preaching the humanistic, naïve doctrine that it is correct to see color, we should encourage our students to not only see it but also celebrate it. I worked at an inner-city school in Birmingham, UK, where approximately 70 different languages were spoken. This allowed me and other teachers to both teach and learn about a wide range of cultures and religions, and encourage tolerance and cooperation. We celebrated Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Vaisakhi and more, ensuring that all students felt that their cultural background was valued.

However, our English curriculum was still dominated by White, Western authors, and when we taught a book by a minority author, it had the uncomfortable feeling of being a token inclusion. Hyland (2020) explains the damaging effects of tokenism and inclusion of a diverse book or an author can have in an early years classroom, and I can see it being just as much of a problem in the high school classroom with events such as Black History Month.

Presenting an occasional book about a racial or ethnic group when the majority of the books and images are based on Whites or White norms reinforces the idea that groups other than Whites are the exception, not the norm, and communicates to children that some groups are less valuable than others. (pp. 3-4)

This perspective adds weight to the argument that diverse books deserve an equal standing in the curriculum, otherwise we run the risk of making our students feel more marginalized. Students need to feel that their history and heritage have been added to a curriculum in order to truly tick a box or fill a quota, they want to feel valued equally in a diverse and tolerant society. This is the challenge that teachers face in bringing diverse books into their classrooms.

This, however, is easier said than done. It was a straightforward process, this paper would not have been written, and neither would the many research articles that concern the inclusion of diverse books. Kuo and Alsip (2010) undertook a qualitative study where they interviewed middle grade and high school teachers about the difficulty of teaching diverse books. These interviews uncovered some broad reasons that are inhibiting teachers from successfully teaching literature not from the canon, including ‘lack of cultural knowledge.’ "Creating relevance for the text," and "lack of parental support" (para. 8). It is reasonable to accept that a teacher cannot have a profound understanding of the cultural norms of every single one of their students, but it is also reasonable to expect that a teacher can attempt to educate themselves. If you must teach a history unit about something you do not know about, you take the time to learn about it. I am sure that professional development for English teachers relating to diverse books takes place, but it appears that perhaps more needs to take place. Langit (2013) provides some helpful criteria that teachers can use to aid them in their selection of diverse literature:

- What are the author’s qualifications to write about this culture?
- From whose perspective is the story told?
- What do the illustrations say about the characters?
- What are the illustrator’s qualifications to depict this culture?
- What connections might the students make to this story?
- Are the characters part of society and not depicted as outsiders?
- Are the characters portrayed as individuals, not generic representations of the culture?
- Are the situations realistic and not perpetuating stereotypes?
- Are problems and conflicts solved by individuals from within the culture rather than by individuals from outside?
- Is the plot respectful of all cultures involved? (pp. 23-24)

By using these criteria, teachers should be able to think more openly and sensitively about books with diverse themes, rather than falling into the trap of selecting ‘token’ works.

It appears then, despite the odds, that it is not all doom and gloom. With a little work and a trusting school board, we are at an important moment in the history of this country. People of color are fighting for their rights and civil liberties, as they have done for many years. They do not wish to dominate society; they merely wish for equality and for their voices to be heard. This is equally true in the world of literature. Story is how we pass on our traditions, our customs. We tell stories of our past to our children so that they may tell them in the future, this is one way a community’s value system is passed on. However, as language is passed on, so that they may tell them in the future; this is one way that by allowing our students to read more diverse books, we will prepare them to live in a more diverse world, to be more reflective about themselves and others, to find and make meaning, and to construct strong identities, which can only be a good thing.

REFERENCES


Kuo, N.-H., & Alsup, J. (2010). “Why Do Chinese People Write Articles That concern the inclusion of diverse books. We learn about ourselves and learn to empathize from reading books. We learn about other cultures from books. We learn about ourselves and our own culture from books. We gain a perspective into the lives of others through reading books. It is my hope that by allowing our students to read more diverse books, we will prepare them to live in a more diverse world, to be more reflective about themselves and others, to find and make meaning, and to construct strong identities, which can only be a good thing.

We need to provide our students from diverse backgrounds with positive and authentic representations of characters that reflect who they are, to help them both construct identities and relate to a wide range of literature.

We hope Jago is a graduate student in the M.Ed English program.