

# THE DIVERSITY OF PROTAGONISTS IN ILA CHOICES



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## BACKGROUND

Children's literature is "a social transcript of the power relations of class, race, and gender (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 71)." Children's literature reflects social values and dominant perceptions representing the community in the form of a picturebook. As written artifacts that convey cultural messages and values about society, children's picturebooks play a role in helping children learn about their world (Koss, 2015). As children read picture books, they are exposed to the cultural and social symbols and norms embedded in books. To put it another way, "learning to read is part of the process of socialization and an important mechanism through which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next (Taylor, 2003, p. 301)." For instance, children could develop their femininity and masculinity based on society's gender roles and stereotypes found throughout children's literature (Bem, 1983). The study implied that children's attitudes and beliefs toward certain groups of people and individuals are socially constructed. As an essential resource for children to categorize social norms and gender roles, children could construct their behaviors and perspectives on gender by reading children's literature.

In addition to learning society's values and perspectives, children could interpret meanings and underlying viewpoints in texts and illustrations by making connections between their lives and what they read (Martinez & Roser, 1991). The differences in interpretations and responses on what they read may originate from their experience, knowledge, contexts, and purposes of reading (Probst, 1991). This notion supports the focus of the current study on differences and commonalities in the diversity of protagonists in books recommended by children and teachers. That is, the books selected by children and teachers represent their responses to the content of the books according to their experience and perspectives in the society. In this sense, the current study examined the lists of Children's Choices and Teacher's Choices by the International Literacy Association (ILA) so as to identify the diversity of protagonists' representation.

In this paper, the researcher briefly describes the ILA's Children's Choices and Teacher's Choices, and reviews the relevant literature. Next, this paper discusses theoretical backgrounds to clarify the researcher's perspectives on examining the collected data. The findings according to the theoretical backgrounds follow sampling process and data coding rationale. Discussion and conclusion will contribute to expanding teachers' knowledge and awareness on diversity in children's literature.

## The International Literacy Association (ILA)'s Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices

The International Literacy Association (ILA) annually announces children's and teachers' recommended books that are published in the previous year in the United States. Since 1974, the ILA and the Children's Book Council (CBC) have released a list of books recommended by children. According to the fact sheets provided by the ILA, Children's Choices Team Leaders and trainees from five areas of the United States recruit 2,500 young readers, K-6. The children pick their favorites based on the inventory of the year, and then approximately the top 100 choices are announced yearly. This list is called Children's Choices and represents contemporary children's preferences and viewpoints by allowing children to vote on their favorites.

In the same sense, the ILA annually annotated reading lists of newly published books in order to help teachers, librarians, booksellers, parents, and those who are interested in children's reading and literature since 1989. Teachers, reading specialists, and librarians from five areas of the United States select books for readers ages 5–14. Teachers' Choices contain 20 books every year. These lists are posted online for the use of educational practitioners, librarians, and caregivers.

## RELEVANT STUDIES ON ILA CHOICES

Related to ILA's Choices project, literacy scholars have investigated the underlying messages and themes in children's favorite picturebooks to identify children's preferences of content that may unconsciously influence their mind-

sets. The study by Carter and Harris (1981) has examined the reviews on 24 books of Children's Choices for 1980 by School Library Journals and Booklist. Their analysis have demonstrated the different perspectives: when older children endorsed a book, they meant it is the kind of book they like to read while professional reviewers tended to select books that they think children should read. With respect to the content of the books, studies have demonstrated that children's most favorite plot structure and themes are conflicts and confrontations (Abrahamson, 1980; Abrahamson & Shannon, 1983; Lehman, 1991; Ouzts & Brown, 2000). Their studies implied that children's preference in confrontation and episodic plots reflect the children's lives in school and community. The preferences in books with positive tones and resolutions also demonstrated children's underlying desires about their daily experiences and life in school.

Concerning the content of literature, individualist perspectives are dominantly embedded in the Children's Choices lists (Shannon, 1986). This study have demonstrated that social values and ideologies are perpetuated in children's literature. With respect to the biased representations of gender, scholars have pointed out that gender biased depictions are prevalent in Children's Choices such as deficit views of boys' literacy practices and traditional characteristics of girls with dependence upon the support of another character to solve issues (Gritter, Van Duinen, Montgomery, Blowers, & Bishop, 2017; Mills, Pankake, & Schall, 2010). These studies on Children's Choices represent how children's books reflect the contemporary values and perspectives of the community. Since these books are favored by participating children in Children's Choices project, the books represent the children's experience and attitudes on the content of the books as well.

On the other hand, studies about the annotated lists on Teachers' Choices are likely to focus on practical implementation of the recommended titles as useful resources for in- and pre-service teachers. Scholars have examined the content of the recommended books which are related to science topics and themes, concluding that Teachers' Choices' books are valuable resources in the curriculum with the quality of science-based content (Broemmel & Rearden, 2006; Rearden & Broemmel, 2008). Other scholars have proposed practical strategy of using Teachers' Choices to educate native speakers of Spanish with cognate databases (Montelongo & Hernández, 2013). Although the target age groups varied across the studies, the scholars' findings are used to enhance understanding of children's preferences in literature, as well as to provide educational resources to teachers for their curriculum.

Unlike other scholars, Munde (1997) compared the lists of Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and the American Library Association's Notable Books for Children. Her study revealed differences between children's and adults' selec-

tions of humorous books. She contended that "adults serve as selectors and mediators of value, while children are the best and ultimate judges of a work's appeal (p. 219)." Since children's knowledge and experiences in reading and literacy are different from educators, their perspectives on selecting children's literature would likely be distinguished from educators. However, few studies explore the different and common perspectives of children and teachers which would help teachers to design their curriculum to support children's readings. Moreover, the previous studies hardly focus on the diversity of characters in the Children's and Teachers' Choices.

Teachers are, at least in part, responsible for selecting books for their classroom libraries and curriculum. Teachers often turn to prestigious associations' recommended book lists as effective and helpful resources (Leahy & Foley, 2018). Therefore, the current study examined the content of the ILA's Children's and Teachers' Choices to explore the diversity of a protagonist since these lists can function as filters for classroom book selections. With an emphasis on childhood education and the role of picturebooks, the current study focuses on young children's literature in grades K–2 announced by Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices. The current study would help to identify hidden bias or stereotypical perspectives in Children's and Teachers' Choices that would subliminally influence child readers.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

Diversity has been highlighted in various contexts. In particular, scholars in multicultural education argue that children need exposure to diverse races/ethnicities, genders, languages, socioeconomic statuses, and religions (Bishop, 1990; Larrick, 1965) because, in reality, children live in diverse and multiple cultures. However, US classrooms lack in children's books that portray such diverse stories and characters, despite the availability and potential of these materials (Leahy & Foley, 2018). Thus, this study aims to explore the diversity found in characters in children's picturebooks by adopting two theoretical frameworks—Gender Schema Theory and Critical Race Theory.

### GENDER SCHEMA THEORY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981, 1983) explicates gender roles are socially constructed beliefs and mindsets. Children are exposed to gender norms in society throughout interactions with peers and parents at home, school and on media. Biased depictions of gender roles influenced children's gender socialization and identity (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006). Picturebooks are one of the substantial resources for young children's knowledge on gender roles. That is, gender ideology embedded in children's literature are likely to influence children's development of gender roles in the given society. For instance, the experimental study conducted by Scott and Feldman-Summers (1979) have

showed that early elementary school children increase their perceptions about gender roles in activities as portrayed by the characters in children's books. This study demonstrated that those who read gender-neutral picturebooks are likely to engage in gender-neutral plays and toys. Even preschool children are influenced by gender representations in children's literature (Flerx, Fidler, & Rogers, 1976). These studies have shown that children unconsciously learn gender norms and values of the community by reading.

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Critical race theory's premise is that racism exists everywhere in society and must be acknowledged to understand inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This perspective facilitates understanding of the characters in children's literature and the potential bias against specific populations. In 1965, Nancy Larrick conducted seminal works analyzing 5,206 picturebooks published from 1962 through 1964 that reveals the lack of racial diversity of characters. She also indicated that the depictions of people of color were stereotyped. She did not explicitly declare the racism and unequal presentation of races in children's books, but her study called for more attention to diverse racial characters in children's literature. The lack of diverse characters could be problematic for children constructing their identity. The absence of certain groups of people and biased representations of the groups could convey negative messages to readers. Thus, children need to see themselves in literature as they look into a mirror as well as to see other cultures in literature as if they were looking out a window (Bishop, 1990). Reading stories of diverse ethnic people is significant because children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may question their cultural values and traditions (Barta & Grindler, 1996).

The relevant studies on ILA's Choices and theoretical approaches support the needs of analysis of characters in children's literature by the ILA's Choices in order to understand the characteristics of the recommended books concerning diversity issues. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- *Whom are the protagonists represented in ILA's Children's and Teachers' Choices across categories of gender and race?*
- *What differences and commonalities regarding protagonists' gender and race exist in the selected books by ILA's Children's and Teachers' Choices?*

### METHODOLOGY

#### SAMPLING PROCESS

The dataset is the Children's and Teachers' Choices lists targeted for ages 5–8 for seven years (2012 - 2018). The

compiled lists identified 281 picturebooks. Only three titles were chosen by both children and teachers as their recommendation throughout this project. The three titles were excluded in the analysis because the overlapped books could have impacted the statistical analysis. Consequently, the sampling process resulted in the total of 278 titles for the analysis which is completely distinct titles.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The study adopts content analysis as a research method to analyze written artifacts and to identify patterns in the content through the systematic coding schemes (Neuendorf, 2016). Each book was read and analyzed according to the theoretical lens of gender and race based on a developed coding scheme (Koss, 2015; Koss, Johnson, & Martinez, 2018). The current study mainly focused on the primary character. If more than two characters play the lead role in the story, a textual cue "I" was considered to identify a protagonist. After the coding was completed, results were analyzed by calculating frequency counts and percentages in order to identify patterns of protagonists' gender and race diversity. In order to test how likely it is that the distribution of Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices in each variable—gender and race—is due to chance, chi-square tests were calculated. Table 1 outlines the detailed descriptions of coding schemes and rationale.

**Genre.** In order to understand children's and teachers' preferences on genre, genre of each book was considered in the initial analysis. The classification by the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) was adopted because they provide rich information on books as online public catalog. According to their classification, *fiction* is defined as the literature which contain imaginary ideas and events. *Nonfiction* (Juvenile literature) contains ideas or events that actually took place.

**Gender.** The current study analyzed the main character of each title by the physical representations of the protagonist and representations of cultural symbols and contexts. Gender category included human and anthropomorphic main characters. Coding schemes of gender included *female* and *male* labels of the protagonists based on the representations of the character in gender pronouns. For instance, if the main character was described with gender pronouns of she, the character was coded as *female*. If the protagonist was described with gender pronouns of he, the character was coded as *male*. In addition to the previous coding scheme, the researcher added *multiple*, *N/A*, *LGBTQ* category to include diverse populations. *Multiple* category includes more than two protagonists with a different gender. If the gender is not indicated clearly, it is coded as *N/A*. If the main character represents LGBTQ population in texts and illustrations, it is coded as *LGBTQ*. As a triangulation, the main character's illustrations with traditional gender representation such as clothing were also examined.

**Race.** The main character of each book was coded as *White, Black, Asian, Latinx, American Indian, Middle Eastern, Multiracial*, and *Other*. The term and classification of race can be problematic because the terms may offend specific populations and some readers may misunderstand the classification as biological elements. Despite the concerns of using race as an analytical tool (Darder & Torres, 2003; Laughter, 2018), several studies show that children are sensitive in recognizing race and gender in their young ages (Morland, 1958; Winkler, 2009). Thus, it is still an essential element considering minority children's reflection on the children's books.

Even though people could report themselves with multiple races, the characters in picturebooks do not explicitly declare themselves as any particular racial or ethnic group. Instead, text descriptions and illustrations implicitly and sometimes explicitly show racial backgrounds. Thus, the current researcher invited an undergraduate student who is interested in children's literature and racial issues. The researcher and the volunteer discussed the previous coding schemes for racial categories developed by Koss et al. (2018). If the text illustrates the characters' ethnic backgrounds, it was adopted to classify the character into the racial category. Physical features such as skin colors, hair colors, cultural artifacts such as traditional costumes and foods, and illustrations of the family members were considered to categorize the protagonists into racial categories. Again, it may not be appropriate to analyze racial representation by its physical appearances or skin colors. However, illustrations are first impression of reading picturebooks, children could acknowledge racial representation by the illustrated physical features.

Interrater reliability was measured to examine the agreement between the two raters on the categorical variable of race. There was a good level of agreement between the two raters,  $k = .859$  (95% CI, .300 to .886),  $p < 0.0005$  as a rule of thumb values of Kappa over 0.80 are considered as outstanding (Landis & Koch, 1977).

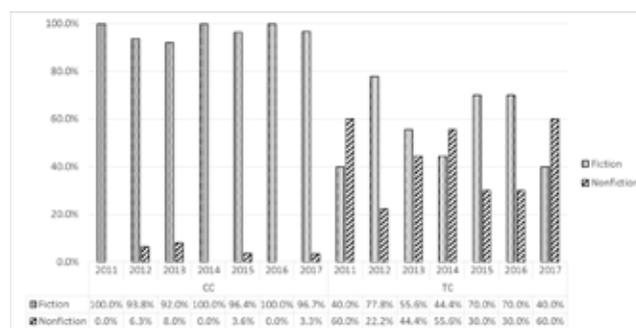
## FINDINGS

ILA Choices projects do not provide information about the initial set of titles distributed to each participating region nor the demographic information of children and teachers who voted for the books. Despite the limitations, the current study demonstrated the lack of diverse protagonists regarding gender and race in the recommended picturebooks throughout the ILA Children's and Teachers' Choices. Although it is typically predicted that the list of Children's Choices is distinct from Teachers' Choices, the current study showed that the lists have similarities on representations of diversity in gender and race.

This study analyzed 278 titles which are recommended by children ( $n = 211$ , 75.90%) and teachers ( $n = 67$ , 24.10%)

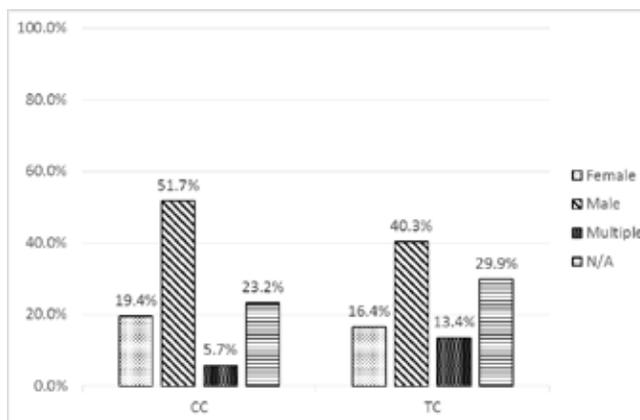
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for young readers (ages 5-9) throughout the ILA Choices for seven years according to the variables of diversity in gender and race. Teachers' Choices consistently announced approximately ten books and Children's Choices declared roughly 30 books to young readers every year. Figure 1 demonstrated that Children's Choices showed the popularity of fictional storybooks while Teachers' Choices showed the teachers' efforts to keep the balanced selections of fiction and nonfiction.



**Figure 1.** Genres in ILA Children's and Teachers' Choices for Grades K-2 over Seven Years

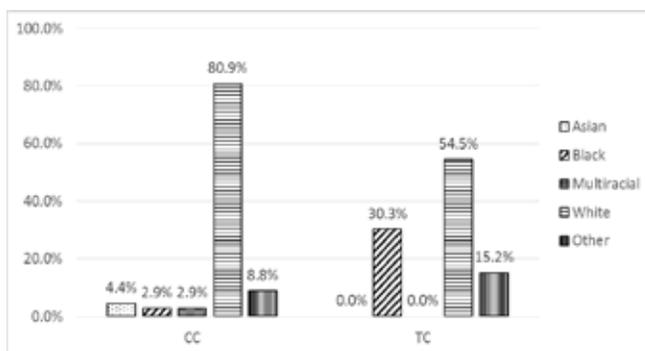
The analysis of protagonists in Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices ( $n=278$ ) revealed that male protagonists were still prevalent in children's picturebooks. The data included human and anthropomorphic characters in fiction and nonfiction picturebooks. Children's Choices was compared to Teachers' Choices in the aspect of the gender representations of the protagonists using a chi-square test. The results showed that Children's Choices were not significantly distinguished from Teachers' Choices in the protagonist's gender representation,  $\chi^2(3) = 6.527$ ,  $p = .089$ . That is, male protagonists were dominant in both Children's Choices ( $n = 109$ , 51.66%) and Teachers' Choices ( $n = 27$ , 40.30%). (See Figure 2)



**Figure 2.** Gender Representation of a Protagonist in Children's and Teachers' Choices for Grades K-2 over Seven Years

Concerning racial representation, this study demonstrated that the majority of main characters featured in a traditionally mainstream group in the U.S. Out of 278 titles, 101

picturebooks (36.33 %) had a human protagonist while 177 picturebooks (63.67%) had an anthropomorphic protagonist. The analysis on race only included human protagonists. A chi-square test regarding population variance was not described in race category because the sample size of Teachers' Choices was small, and thus the result of the test was not reliable. However, it is remarkable that the frequency of racial representation in the reviewed books, both fiction and nonfiction, indicated the dominance of white protagonists. Specifically, Children's Choices illustrated a mainstream protagonist in their recommended lists ( $n=55$ , 80.88%), distantly followed by other racial group characters. Teachers' Choices also showed the dominance of white protagonists on their lists ( $n=18$ , 54.55%). (SEE Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** Racial Representation of a Protagonist in Children's and Teachers' Choices for Grades K-2 over Seven Years

## DISCUSSION

Generally, it is plausible that ILA Children's Choices show children's favorites while ILA Teachers' Choices demonstrate educational resources. The purpose of the projects implies that both of the Choices might not reflect mainly on diverse characters when it comes to gender and race. Further, it is also reasonable to expect little overlaps out of the whole lists for seven years due to the different perspectives and purposes of their recommendations. However, the present study showed that the representations of diversity in gender and race have similar patterns in both children's and teachers' lists despite the trivial amount of book overlaps. To sum up, both of the Choices tend to include white males as their protagonists.

Gender schema and identity are influenced by the exposure of cultural transmission which refers to the learning and passing of information within a group of society (Bem, 1983). As a medium to transfer socially constructed gender identity to children, children's literature typically plays a significant role in constructing young children's perceptions of gender. However, the current study demonstrated that the lists by Children's and Teachers' Choices were not likely to show timely mannered representations of gender. Despite the gradual increase of female characters in human, animal, and fantasy characters in the 1980s (Peterson & Lach, 1990), the

current findings showed the dominance of male protagonists in both human and anthropomorphic characters. Although the recently published books might contain nontraditional female protagonists, the chances to read these books would be less for female children. In other words, little has changed in children's books concerning gender representation despite gender norms being challenged in other media cultures including transgender characters and non-traditional gendered occupations on TV.

Regarding gender schema, Bem (1983) suggested that parents could teach alternative schemata for children to encourage children to construct a less biased gender schema. However, it is inevitable for children to be exposed to socially constructed representations of gender in various forms including children's books. Several studies (Bleakley, Westerberg, & Hopkins, 1988; Connor & Serbin, 1978) supported children's socially constructed gender schema by showing that school-age children showed preference in reading stories with the main character of their gender. The current study would not explain the direct influence of children's gender and their selected books through ILA Choices project. However, the analysis encourages teachers' active roles to be conscious of gender representations of the recommended books by ILA Children's and Teachers' when implementing these books in the curriculum.

Regarding racial representations, white protagonists were outnumbered in both of the reviewed Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices. The protagonist is the one who is at the center of the story and makes decisions to lead the story. That is, a protagonist's race could be a significant factor for children when they construct their schema on racial groups and status in the community. In this sense, the current study showed that the books of ILA Children's and Teachers' Choices are less likely to represent groups who have traditionally been ostracized in the society. The lack of non-white characters in Teachers' Choices also raised a question about awareness of diversity issues in educational settings, given the current social context of multicultural education and social movements for supporting the rights of people of color in the community. That is, the reviewed children's books reflect racial inequity in our society.

Concerns about the overwhelming white protagonists in children's literature consistently have been raised, pointing out that we still do not see racially diverse characters in literature for children (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2013). As Larrick (1965) pointed out that "[...] nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them (p. 63)." It is problematic in multicultural educational settings because children could not mirror their world and themselves through children's books. The reason behind such results in racial representation could be explained based

partially on the study about the current publishing markets and prevalence of privileged populations as their main characters in children's literature (Horning et al., 2013). That is, the lack of racially diverse characters in children's books could be related to the decreased awareness of racial diversity in the current society.

### CONCLUSION

Given the facts that the recommended books throughout ILA's Choices are not selected by academic scholars but by children and educational practitioners, these books shed light on the viewpoints of participating children and teachers across the country. Since picturebooks transmit society's current values, attitudes, and ideologies onto children (Stephens, 1992), the analyzed books in this study signify the possibility of transmitting underlying perspectives and attitudes on gender and race of the community. Children's Choices and the Teachers' Choices are valuable resources for educational practitioners when developing their curriculum to create a more engaging environment for children. At the same time, being aware of embedded ideologies in the Children's Choices and Teachers' Choices would encourage teachers to build critical perspectives when applying these books in their curriculum. In learning, repeated exposure to certain perspectives are likely to have effects on the development of children's self-esteem, identity, and social behaviors. In order to build a positive identity and cognitive development, it is important to support children in acknowledging diversity issues. As Children's and Teachers' Choices are valuable resources for meeting these needs, children and teachers could build safe environments for discussing racially diverse characters and gender roles.

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