

# THE RECIPROCITY OF DIVERSE AND UNIVERSAL THEMES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



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*"I think books can open one's eyes to what else is in the world, but it's also nice if one can see oneself. I think as a boy I liked both kinds of books — I liked books that let me see that the world was wide and large but I also loved books where a character might have the same feeling that I had about something — that makes one feel like one is not alone in the world"* (NPR, 2015).

As today's society grows increasingly more diverse, the need for high quality, award winning children's literature that reflects this diversity becomes increasingly urgent. Literature provides spaces for children to learn about and embrace diversity through the cultural windows and mirrors found in books (Bishop, 1990). For those who share books with children, a challenge lies in locating quality representations of diversity in the literature we select and share. We challenge that diversity in literature is not simply the use of a different color crayon, but is also reflected in universal stories that are inclusive of diverse contexts.

This article will illustrate the importance of the universal story through examples from Kevin Henkes, an award winning author and illustrator. We provide a description of a rubric that can be used as a tool to evaluate the diversity in the literature shared with children. Finally, we provide practical examples of text sets that can reflect the universal and diverse experiences of our world (Ciecierski, 2017).

## REPRESENTATIONS OF DIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSAL STORY

One of the primary challenges in discussing books of diversity is defining the term itself. Diversity is a complex term that can hold different meanings across groups of people. As we continue to examine children's literature for the diversity present across texts, our understanding of diversity broadens and evolves. Therefore, our definition of diversity reflects that of the larger conversation, in that it is shifting and responsive to evolving current conceptions of diversity. Our view of diversity is all-encompassing in that it "mirrors the racial, ethnic, and other dimensions of diversity that are representative of our society and in our world, rather than

solely portraying perspectives of 'the other' - any people other than white, middle class, able-bodied Americans" (Pennell, Wollak, & Koppenhaver, 2017, p. 2). Bishop (1992) articulated this understanding of diversity in literature as reflective of our pluralistic society, not just a representation of non-dominant groups. Literature that reflects the way our society looks and feels represents the diversity that exists. Diversity in children's literature can be seen through various representations of race, class, gender, orientation, and ability (Bickmore, Xu, & Sheridan, 2017; Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Smolkin & Young, 2015).

For the purposes of our research, we define diversity in children's literature as reflective of our pluralistic society, including the representation of groups outside of the dominant, majority population (Caucasian, middle class, able-bodied, etc.). Another way to state this may be found in Crisp, et al's (2016) definition of diverse groups as "a result of their subordination by dominant groups" (p. 32). The term "parallel cultures" is used to describe these groups, and provides a reference point for determining representations of diversity in literature (Bishop, 2003). Given this description, diversity in children's literature can be described as various representations of race, class, gender, orientation, and ability (Smolkin & Young, 2015; Bickmore, et al, 2017) reflective of our pluralistic society.

Including books of a range of diversity in the classroom library is a critical component to fostering engagement in the classroom. Worthy, Moorman, & Turner's (1999) seminal work identified that what students want to read, they often cannot find. Conversations with children quickly identify their longing for diverse books with complex topics. Children want diverse texts. Children need and want to see themselves and others represented in the literature they read (Author & Author, 2017; Schrod, Fain, & Hasty, 2015). And yet, for over seven decades, scholars have documented the overwhelming lack of diversity represented in children's literature (Bickmore, Xu, & Sheridan 2017; Crisp, et al. 2016; Larrick, 1965).

Diverse books do not only serve the populations they mirror; rather, they have a universal audience (Bickmore, Xu, & Sheridan, 2017). Lopez-Robertson (2017) writes, "Engaging children with multicultural literature increases students' awareness that there are others like them in the world with stories of greatness to tell, encourages them to know they have stories of their own to share, and shows them doors can open up to anything" (p. 48). In short, as previously cited, diverse books serve as a mirror, window, and sliding glass door to help readers see a range of experiences, including their own. Further, stories that do not overtly represent diverse audiences, but rather, tell stories that may be universal to the experiences across groups of people, are critical to include in classroom libraries, as well. Diverse stories, as well as those that unite children around shared experiences, both have critical roles in shaping children's identities as members of one community. As children seek to hear and experience diverse perspectives, the reciprocity inherent across both the universal story and diverse texts should not be overlooked.

Movements such as the instrumental #WeNeedDiverseBooks initiative have brought needed attention to diverse authors, illustrators, and representation in children's literature. However, we also posit that attention to universal stories that implicitly represent diversity can highlight shared experiences of our diverse society. Without doubt, the field of children's literature needs more diverse authors and illustrators to share their stories; however, the voices of all authors and illustrators who create quality literature for children can and should work as one to provide children windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors through literature (Johnson, Koss & Martinez, 2018). Quality literature that communicates universal messages to which all children can relate gives them windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to see how their own experiences are universal. As Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor (2014) described, going beyond the single story to include the experiences of all children is a critical component to consider when sharing literature. In the next section, the work of Kevin Henkes will provide an example of how the universal story can be an integral part of literature selections.

### THE UNIVERSAL STORIES OF KEVIN HENKES

As an artist and storyteller, Henkes continues to win multiple book accolades, including Caldecott and Newbery medals. Henkes' works range from picture books to novels, reaching an exceedingly wide audience. Kevin Henkes is well known for his focus on the universal experiences of childhood, inviting children to the story through the common experiences they share. Henkes believes that "exposing children to good books will lead to good things," (NPR, 2015) and that when adults model appreciation for literature, children will grow in this same understanding. His work gives children access to quality literature that they can relate to, encouraging their growth as readers and writers.

The connected characters and themes of his many books also support an in-depth examination of his techniques across multiple stories. Henkes' work lends itself to the study of special moments in which he takes a childhood experience and writes about it with strong detail. His work presents characters who are unique in their personalities and experiences, but appeal to all children regardless of their backgrounds. Henkes' animal characters face bullies, anxiety, and other challenging situations, and always end up growing and changing, mirroring real-life events. These authentic, relatable experiences can engage all children as they make connections to their own lives and to the lives of others.

Four examples of Henkes' work will be used throughout this piece to highlight the universal story. *Bailey Goes Camping* tells the story of Bailey, a rabbit, who is distraught when he is told he is too little to go on an outdoor camping trip with his older brother and sister. However, his mother's ingenuity transforms the household environment, and Bailey is able to have his own indoor family camping experience. Henkes recreates the universal theme of feeling left out, something we have all experienced, with a satisfying ending that leaves any reader content.

*A Good Day* tells the story of four animals who figure out how to turn a bad day into a good one. Using limited text and detailed illustrations, the story communicates a message of ingenuity and positive thinking as the animals experience the events of the day. All readers can relate to the experience of having a bad day, and can take away the messages of persistence and positivity to help turn those bad days around.

*In Waiting*, five little toys sit on a window ledge, watching the world pass by. The story centers around the theme of waiting, building the reader's anticipation throughout the story to discover what the toys are waiting for. To the reader's delight, the toys are joined by a sixth little toy that holds a special surprise for them, four more toys nested inside of her, who jump out to join the fun. The experience of waiting for something to happen, whether it be for a new baby to join the family, school to begin, or a special visitor, is universally shared through this book.

In the wordless picture book *Egg*, Henkes tells the story of four different colored eggs, three that hatch baby birds that fly away and one egg that does not hatch. Upon returning to the fourth egg, the birds find someone different than themselves and are at first afraid but quickly accept and appreciate who they find. Through pictures alone, Henkes reminds us of the universal importance of acceptance and appreciation of each and every "egg."

### SHARING THE UNIVERSAL STORY

One of the authors, Patricia, utilized Henkes' books with a small group of young children. The four books were read over the course of multiple separate sessions. With the group, she discussed the "big events" in the story, what the children noticed about the characters' feelings, and how those feelings were conveyed through language in the text and through details in the art. Patricia followed the *What Do You Notice* and *How Do You Know* structure to support children's observations (Barnhouse, 2014).

Throughout the study of Henkes' work, the children focused their observations on the ways Henkes created animal characters in several of his books. Their observations of the emotions communicated through the illustrations and the text pointed to the universality of Henkes' stories. Animal characters brought everyone to the story, inclusive of skin color, background, and ability. Children noticed the varying thickness of the lines in the art, the ways in which Henkes placed his characters in situations based on how they feel, and how the animals' ears and tails revealed their emotions. For example, they excitedly realized and commented upon how Bailey's ears looked "droopy" when he was sad and "stood up tall" when he was excited or happy. Using their hands like rabbit ears, the students walked around the room and pretended to be Bailey at various points in the story. Their body language demonstrated a clear connection to and understanding of Bailey's emotions, which led to conversations about times when they felt left out, were jealous, or enjoyed one-on-one time with their parents.

After reading *Bailey Goes Camping*, Patricia shared *Waiting* with the children. A lively discussion about whether the characters were toys or real animals occurred, but the children were especially attracted to the notion of waiting. One child talked about waiting for a birthday party and another shared how he had to wait for his mother to come home from work. Although they were inanimate objects, the children appeared to connect easily to the toys perched on the windowsill waiting for important events in their lives. A few days later when Patricia shared *A Good Day* with the class, one of the students pointed to *Waiting* sitting on the chalk ledge and concluded, "It's all about waiting. If you just wait,

good things will happen." The children related to the experiences of the toys and animals in these two stories. Comments about the words and art Henkes included to describe emotions were shared by the students, but the connections the children made to how the characters felt when waiting were prominent in the discussion. Having to exercise patience and wait for things to occur is a universal experience. Reading and discussing several books by Kevin Henkes resulted in a deep exploration of his work, and it prompted the children to see how emotions, and the conveying of these emotions in literature and in art, are universal.

### LOOKING THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

Henkes' books are exemplary representations of universal stories to help children unite around common experiences they share. However, utilized in isolation from other texts, Henkes' work would not present windows and mirrors for all children. As we select literature for children, consideration of the role books play in helping them identify their common experiences, as well as appreciating, and celebrating, their inherent differences, is critical. As stated previously, diversity in literature can be challenging to define, and thus challenging to identify in children's literature. We maintain the importance of considering the universal story in sharing books with children, and we advocate for the intentional inclusion of books that bring to light and celebrate difference (Möller, 2016). In this section, we will discuss a tool that can be used to guide book selections, giving consideration to all types of diversity.

Using a tool, such as a rubric (see Table 1) to evaluate the diversity in the books we select for children can bring to light areas of under (or over) representation in our literature selections. We developed this rubric to provide a guide for selecting literature representing a range of diversity (Author & Author, 2017). The rubric begins with a *zero*, indicating that the book includes no diversity. Often these books are books with animals as main characters, such as many of Henkes' books. The highest level of the rubric is a *three*, indicating that the book is intentionally designed to communicate a message of diversity. For example, the book *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena intentionally communicates a message of acceptance of diversity in the world around us.

Table 1. Diversity rubric

| Rating          | 0   | 1   | 2   | 3   |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Characteristics | There is no diversity represented at all. Books in this category often have animals as the main characters, or contain only characters who are from the dominant culture. | In this category, diverse characters may be present but are highly limited in scope and incidental. Diverse characters may be present in the background but are not main or supporting characters. There is no mention of the diverse nature of the characters nor do they "stand out" or have any role other than to be present in the text. | A book rated at a two would have diversity as part of the story or part of the central theme. However, the distinction of a level two book is that the book could stand on its own without consideration of the diversity context. The book has cultural overtones that lend themselves to the story. | Books in this category intentionally and explicitly display a theme of diversity. The author's goal is to provide information or background experiences about diversity. These books cannot be read without considering the theme of diversity throughout the text. |

The rubric evaluates only the observable diversity present in books, and does not address the quality of the books, or the diverse backgrounds of the author or illustrator. A book receiving a *zero* on this rubric could also be considered an example of high quality literature, while a book receiving a *three* does not necessarily adhere to the criteria for quality literature. In addition, a book receiving a *three* is not necessarily written by a diverse author or illustrator, as in Henkes' *Egg*. This rubric is intended to guide selections concerning the representation of diversity, but other measures of quality, such as the Caldecott and other award lists, should be used to insure books we select represent standards of quality. In addition, using resources such as those provided through #WeNeedDiverseBooks will help to purposefully include selections by authors and illustrators with diverse backgrounds.

Henkes' past awards, including a Caldecott medal, demonstrate that his work is of high literary quality. A score of *zero* on this particular rubric indicates only that there are no explicit representations of diversity, so this absence should be considered when selecting other books to share with children. As described previously, Henkes' books communicate the important message of the universal story, helping children see the common elements of our shared experiences. However, children also need to be able to experience differences as a critical component to our universal stories through the books they read. Thus, books that receive a *zero* on the rubric would benefit from being paired with books representing a broader range of diverse experiences, and books by diverse authors and illustrators. The examples shared previously demonstrate the application of this rubric to the book selection process. *Bailey Goes Camping*, *A Good Day*, and *Waiting* would each receive a *zero* on this rubric, as their themes communicate a universal message through animal characters. *Egg*, how-

ever, would receive a *three* on this rubric due to its intentional message of diversity and acceptance. When identifying books for children, an awareness of the message the books communicate to children regarding diversity, and considering how other book selections can complement this message, will provide children with a richer understanding of how universality and diversity can coexist.

Selecting literature for children involves multiple considerations. Using a tool such as the rubric described here calls attention to the range of diversity represented in the literature we share with children. Books can provide windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for children as they develop their individual identities and understandings of how these fit into the world around and beyond them (Koss, Martinez & Johnson, 2016). In the next section, we will provide practical examples of how this process of selecting a range of texts across the levels of the rubric can enrich the reader's experience.

### A TEXT SET APPROACH

Though Henkes' work is a strong example of quality literature, a *potential* complication comes from primarily focusing on books that are given a *zero* on the previously described rubric. Since the rubric does not address literary quality, but only the presence of diverse elements, this categorization does not preclude books from being used meaningfully and purposefully with children. A dilemma can arise, however, when books are consistently used that do not explicitly represent diverse components (*zero* on the rubric). Rather than ruling out books of quality that do not specifically incorporate diversity, one might consider the utilization of a text set. In a text set, one can now purposefully combine texts across the rubric scale. Through this text set approach, a common theme

can be addressed with texts that might be seen as related to one another but that give purposeful and conscious attention to diverse representation (Ciecierski, 2017).

For example, in Henkes' story, *Bailey Goes Camping*, Bailey is too young to go camping with his siblings, but his parents find a way for him to do so in a developmentally appropriate way. Texts that could accompany this piece include *My Three Best Friends* and *Me and Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah*. In *My Three Best Friends and Me*, Cari Best writes a beautiful story, in which, Zulay who is blind, volunteers to run a race on Field Day. Her friends and an aid help her to find a way to participate in the race despite her disability. In *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah*, Laurie Ann Thompson shares the story of Emmanuel who could not do things like every other child because of his deformed leg, but finds ways to do things in a different way. His mom supports alternative paths for his inclusion with friends.

Both of these texts would receive a *three* on the rubric, since they intentionally communicate a message of diverse abilities. *Emmanuel's Dream* also exposes children to an African cultural context of which they may not be aware if they come from the United States. Incorporating these three texts into a set provides opportunities for children to share the universal experience of being left out, yet opens new doors and windows into other ways people are often excluded, broadening their understandings and perspectives.

*Egg* is also a touchstone example of the universal theme of learning to accept someone's differences and developing friendships. Although this book would receive a *three* on the rubric, it does not represent diverse human characters, making any mirror images absent from the text. Books that could align with this important universal theme with a stronger focus on diversity include *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson and *No English* by Jacqueline Jules. In *Each Kindness*, Chloe rejects a new student, Mia, who is struggling to fit in because of her socioeconomic status. Though Chloe eventually sees the error of her ways, it is not in time as Mia moves before Chloe can make amends, leaving Chloe with a lifelong lesson regarding embracing difference and choosing kindness. In *No English*, Blanca is a student from Argentina who spends all of her time drawing rather than doing classwork. This seems unfair to her classmates (particularly a student named Diane) until they begin to see that how she must feel being in a new place. Diane makes amends and the two girls become friends despite speaking different languages.

In this text set the universal theme of understanding and appreciating differences can also be seen through the common yet contrasting texts. *Each Kindness* and *No English* would each receive a *three* on the rubric, as they intentionally

communicate a message of diversity. In all three texts, the main characters reject someone based on differences. In two texts the story incorporates a "happy" ending and in *Each Kindness* the story ends unresolved and more despondent as Chloe does not get to amend her rejection of Mia. As we know, life does not always incorporate the happy ending we for hope it to have. These universal themes embedded within diverse experiences facilitate important conversations for children and adults alike.

A text set approach to sharing diverse and universal stories with children can help balance opportunities for students to both see themselves in the texts, as well as see that the world is "wide and large" (NPR, 2015). Books by non-diverse authors and illustrators who create universal stories for children, such as Kevin Henkes, should be surrounded by books that more explicitly communicate a diverse perspective about a common experience. Attention to the quality of the books and the diverse perspective the authors and illustrators bring, such as those examples utilized in this piece, will strengthen the text set.

### IMPLICATIONS

As we all seek to consciously include literature of greater diversity in our work with children, this article provides an example of how to use universal stories to both reflect and learn about diversity. Diversity in children's literature should include broader considerations than the incidental inclusion of diverse characters. Rather, diverse children's literature should include consideration of more complex elements, such as the background characters, purpose of the story, and the role of diverse characters in the text.

Using diverse children's literature can and should be so much more than simply placing books with diverse characters on a shelf for those students who need them. All students need diverse stories, and all students can identify with the universal story as they experience it. The intentional focus on Kevin Henkes' work described here is one way to structure an examination of the universal story with children while still paying close attention to diversity. Adults can play a critical role in facilitating and guiding discussions to help children notice the universal elements of character, theme, setting, etc. Once children engage in a study such as this, they are better equipped to experience the universal story in other literature they read beyond adult guidance.

The work of Kevin Henkes is an example of the universal elements of books including animal characters and prevalent childhood experiences. We can utilize these unifying pieces to help children see how story transcends difference. However, we will also need to consider the role of diverse literature as windows and mirrors in their environment, so that students can see themselves and others in the books they

read. Selecting quality literature representing a range of diverse perspectives will also prepare students to respond to the diversity they will experience in their lives in positive, inclusive ways.

Those selecting literature to use with children can consider the use of a tool like the diversity rubric to aid in the selection of diverse books that represent windows, mirrors, and universal stories. Grassroots movements, such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks, can also provide support for the selection of diverse children's literature. A critical component to our work is the focus that a book should or should not necessarily be selected based on a rubric score. Instead, we challenge everyone to look across their text selections for the overarching themes of who is being represented and who is not. Text sets such as those examples detailed in this article can facilitate books that represent a universal story with other texts that represent a more specific diverse experience. Conversations with colleagues are critical elements to selecting diverse children's literature representing a multiplicity of perspectives.

### CONCLUSION

Our society requires a more intentional focus on authors who help children see within and beyond the diversity surrounding them, to also identifying the universal stories we all share. Through the use of a tool such as the rubric described here, literature selections can be balanced to represent a range of diverse experiences, including universal experiences, which can unite and strengthen connections across communities. Children want and need to see themselves reflected in the literature they read, and those who share literature with children can help them see how their experiences are both unique and universal through the books they select. As we seek to develop citizens who can contribute to the greater good in our increasingly diverse society, this deep appreciation for their uniqueness, as well as what they have in common with others who may seem different from themselves, will help our children grow into adults prepared to bring diverse people together around our universal human experience.

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