



Literature as More than a Window

Building Readers' Empathy and Social Capacity through Exposure to Diverse Literature

“We Need Diverse Books” started in 2014 as a grassroots social media campaign to promote diversity in children’s and young adult (YA) literature. Authors, librarians, and readers jumped on board to encourage the reading, writing, publication, and discussion of diverse books.

The website (<http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>), in its mission statement, defines diversity as “including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.” The campaign has grown in the last year and now includes programs, grants, media kits, and a festival. The idea is simple: Our world is diverse and children’s books should reflect that. This movement caught on because the belief among librarians and authors is that diverse fiction is important for children. Librarians are known for defending diverse books and celebrating intellectual freedom during the annual Banned Books Week (<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/bannedbooksweek>) and as part of the Library Bill of Rights (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>). Though this call for more diversity in fiction did not stem from the social sciences, it is supported by research. Additional research and exploration could prove that diverse literature is beneficial, and even necessary, to human development.

Literature can provide reflections of a reader’s own experiences or offer glimpses into unfamiliar worlds and experiences. Librarians often use the terms “mirrors” and “windows” (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor, 2014) for books. Mirrors are narratives that reflect the reader’s experience or identity back to them, while windows are narratives that give readers a glimpse into an unfamiliar experience or story. Both types of narrative are important to young adults’ experiences with stories. People want to feel like they are recognized and legitimized by the literature they read, but they also need to see the diversity of the world reflected in the pages of books. While narrative mirrors are very

important to developing a young person’s sense of community, this article focuses on literature that can serve as a window into diversity.

READING AS SOCIAL ACTIVITY

In order to understand the impact of diverse literature on development, it is important to understand why people, especially young people, read fiction. “Stories exist panculturally because they represent a predicament common to all human cultures: the difficulty of navigating a sea of friends and foes, intimates and acquaintances” (Mar and Oatley, 2008, p. 177). Navigating social experiences is an important part of life. In order to develop socially, children need to learn to understand and predict the people around them. Every social interaction from conversations with peers to complex interpersonal relationships requires practiced social skills. Children constantly observe people and social situations in order to understand the world (Mar and Oatley, 2008). While most social interactions can and do happen between physical people, social interactions can also happen through stories and literature (Mar, Oatley, Hirsch, dela Paz, and Peterson, 2006). Through stories, readers are exposed to new people and new social situations.

Young children are especially drawn to experiences that will help them understand the social world around them. In an experimental setting, children as young as four years old preferred social stories to those about inanimate objects (Barnes and Bloom, 2014). These children not only preferred social stories, but they also preferred stories about multiple people and stories with

stories and truly care about them. Being attached to a character is what drives the desire to solve the mystery, continue the journey, and follow the story to the end (Djikic et al., 2013). Having an emotional connection to the protagonist can open the reader to a new world of experiences and make reading an actively emotional experience.

Literature evokes memory and mirror neurons, so that readers' brains are working as though they are actually experiencing the emotions of the story (Mar and Oatley, 2008). Readers experience the story and the emotional state of the characters, and thus gain rich insight into the reality of the character. Those emotional connections can drive not only interest and attention, but also the ability to understand and empathize with the social situation presented. Many studies have found that being emotionally involved in a narrative increased participants' scores on tests of affective empathy (Johnson, 2012; Johnson, Cushman, Borden, and McCune, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). Researchers have also found that readers who responded emotionally to stories were more likely to change their attitudes about people similar to those in the story. A 2010 study of undergraduates found that participants who self-reported an emotional connection (transportation) to a story about a homosexual student were more likely to change their attitudes toward homosexual individuals in general (Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, and Jones, 2010). The emotional connection created in narratives seems to influence not just the reader's experience, but also their attitudes and beliefs. The potential for literature to change attitudes could be very valuable when dealing with prejudices and diverse populations.

READING AS A NEW PERSPECTIVE

While reading, readers let go of their own views to experience and give into the world of the story and identify with the protagonist's point of view (Djikic et al., 2013). This helps the reader more clearly understand the story, and, therefore, the social constructs in the world of the story. Actively experiencing the protagonist's point of view can help the reader predict the character's actions and behaviors, and enhances understanding of the story. While surrendering his or her own point of view, the reader is able to take on a new perspective and even adopt some of this new social experience.

Researchers have explored reading as it relates to the reader's identity. Reading presents a potential for self-other merging, even when it comes to powerful self-identities such as race (Johnson et al., 2014). When a reader is transported into a story, he or she can lose track of self-awareness and become immersed in the social experience of the story (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). While experiencing the story, readers let go of differences between themselves and the people in the story in order to experience and understand the narrative. A study of Italian teenagers found that students who read a book about another culture (a summer assignment) were more likely to have positive attitudes toward other cultures and were less likely to engage in negative stereotypes (Vezzali, Stathi, and Giovannini, 2012). These students were also more willing to have personal contact with other cultures in the future.

A study of predominately white adults in the U.S. found that participants who read an emotional narrative about a Muslim woman (rather than a synopsis or unrelated story) were more likely to categorize ambiguous faces as mixed-race and were less likely to categorize angry faces as members of an outside group (Johnson et al., 2014). Research has shown that, in general, people tend to categorize angry faces as belonging to an outgroup, or a race other than their own (Johnson et al., 2014). Readers stopped thinking of the characters as completely separate from themselves

and, instead, started to see the similarities. After emotionally connecting to the story of the Muslim woman, the participants were able to see faces as both Arab and Caucasian rather than one or the other. They were able to do this with faces that expressed anger as well as those that were impassive.

The experience of emotionally merging with a culturally different character allowed the reader to change and adapt their attitudes and beliefs (Mar and Oatley, 2008). Literature can also help readers understand their own experience. Through examination of the similarities and differences of another culture, the reader has space to examine their own experiences and beliefs. This active examination is more persuasive than a simple presentation of information (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). Each reader assimilates the experience of the story into their own life experience. It's not as simple as absorbing another person's story. Reading is much more complex and, in turn, much more effective than other forms of persuasion.

READING AS A SAFE SPACE FOR EXPLORATION

Literature is a safe place to practice new thought processes and to experience new situations. Researchers postulate that works of fiction presents a safe place to experience emotions because they do not affect the reader's real life (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). They found that nonfiction stories, such as the news, present an obligation to act and that this sense of responsibility lowered empathy. Fiction, on the other hand, is a safe, non-threatening place to approach new people and social situations. These indirect interactions cause less anxiety than personal contact; it is more a cognitive experience that can prepare people for personal contact (Vezzali et al., 2012).

Researchers found when white elementary school children read short stories about multiethnic characters, their attitudes toward African Americans were more effectively improved than when they interacted with a group of African American children (Mar and Oatley, 2008). The stories seemed to provide a safe place for children to explore the idea of different cultures. Not only are stories safe, but they also help people who are not adept at perspective-taking. People who tend not to consider other perspectives are more anxious about new social experiences but also benefit from indirect interaction in a story (Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, and Huffman, 2013). Stories are the perfect way to prepare for the world. Indirect interaction with new people and new situations provides a safe haven to perfect social skills and to alleviate anxiety about that new group or situation. Not only are diverse stories a simple way for young people to interact with new types of people, the indirect experience might be less stressful than a direct social situation.

READING AS A CATALYST FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Reading is a social experience that helps increase empathy and perspective-taking, and it also helps change real-life behavior. Readers who were emotionally transported into a story were more likely to help a stranger during an experiment (Djikic et al., 2013). While reading, a stranger walked by and dropped a box of pens. Readers who were experiencing transportation were more compelled to help that person than others in the same experiment. Transportation while reading also produced more affective empathy, making readers especially sensitive to subtle fearful expressions (Johnson, 2012). Research has shown that empathy is associated with a stronger ability to identify fearful facial expressions (Johnson, 2012). Those participants who were more connected to the story were more likely to worry that strangers were fearful, even if they had neutral expressions. While this might not

be an accurate assessment on the part of those identifying the facial expressions, this sensitivity shows that readers are more attentive to small changes in expression and more likely to be ready to help if necessary.

Readers who used mental imagery (part of transportation) while reading were more empathetic toward the characters and were also more likely to help a stranger, just as in the previous study (Johnson, 2012). Actively engaging with and imagining a story seems to make people more attuned to other people and their need for help. Not only does reading seem to improve empathy, but it also seems to improve helping behavior. It is unknown whether these behaviors are isolated or will transfer to other social interactions, but it certainly seems hopeful.

CONCLUSIONS

Reading is not the passive, anti-social activity it seems to be. Readers are actively experiencing new social situations and empathizing with new types of people—some of whom they would never meet otherwise. This social practice not only makes readers more empathetic, but it also improves attitudes, reduces prejudice, and increases helping behavior. In fact, there is evidence that adult fiction readers have more well-developed social skills than nonfiction readers (Djikic et al., 2013; Mar et al., 2006).

The assumption is that readers collect and generalize all of those fictional experiences and use them in their social interactions. More research is needed to explore the effect of diverse narratives beyond those dealing with race. As the We Need Diverse Books campaign indicates, diversity includes aspects such as religion, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identification, at the very least (We Need Diverse Books: Mission Statement, 2016). In addition, research should be done with more high school students who are reading the modern and diverse young adult books described by the campaign. Most studies mentioned in this paper were done with undergraduates and adults. Teenagers are still actively developing Theory of Mind skills and so would be informative test subjects in this type of research.

Diverse books expose people, especially young people, to many perspectives and experiences from which they can learn. By reading about diverse people and practicing Theory of Mind skills, readers can become more open-minded, more empathetic, and more likely to help others. These behaviors are what make good citizens and respectful people.

As technology makes the world smaller and our social interactions more diverse, exposure to diversity is more important than ever. The exposure through narrative fiction is more complex than simply showing children that differences exist. The act of reading narrative fiction presents a unique opportunity for young people to experience the world from another perspective. This intimate look into the thoughts and feelings of a character seems to have lasting effects on the reader.

So it would seem that we do, in fact, need diverse books. In order for young people to reap the benefits of these books, though, they have to emotionally connect with the characters and truly experience the story. These experiences could be different for each reader, so a wide range of diverse books is needed. The challenge is that these books need to be not only published, but also read, assigned, recommended, and approved by the adults in the lives of young people. Young people certainly pick up books on their own; but, if diverse literature were embraced by parents, educators, and communities, as well as by publishers and librarians, the effect would be more accessible diverse titles being available.

In order for a campaign like We Need Diverse Book to truly work, it needs to be paired with social science and education

research. Once the scientific and educational communities join librarians and publishers, the push for more diverse books will be unstoppable. ■

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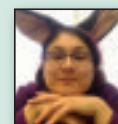


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