

## The Importance of Reading Beyond the Struggle

The importance of reading diversely and making titles available in libraries that represent the diverse communities they serve is well-known. Allowing readers to access materials in which they can see themselves has many positive effects. Titles about lived experiences dealing with race, differing abilities, gender and sexuality, and other factors are important to offer to young adults as they reflect on their own identities, as well as to broaden their views on subjects that may be unfamiliar to them.

In recent years, there has been an increasingly bright spotlight on issues of equality and injustice, highlighted by movements like [Black Lives Matter](#). In response to these real-world issues, many young adult (YA) titles have been published that highlight issues marginalized communities, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) individuals, LGBTQ+ individuals, and neurodiverse and differently abled individuals often face. While these are important, it should also be noted that people in these communities should not be identified and represented solely by their struggles and issues.

Another issue surrounding YA literature, and indeed all literature, is the importance of people who are within a community or identity writing their own stories. Initially sparked by a Twitter discussion, the #OwnVoices movement suggests that stories about people from marginalized groups should be written by people from those groups (Rosenfield, 2019). McKinney (2020), author and originator of the hashtag #WhatWoCWritersHear, notes her experiences riding the wave of publishers looking to buy works by Black authors following numerous protests against the shooting deaths of unarmed Black individuals in recent years. She suggests that the publishing industry has not been interested in books that don't show a stereotypical negative Black experience. If we as information professionals want to support movements like #OwnVoices, we need to consider providing access to materials that address the entire experience of those voices.

In addition to looking to include titles about the struggles of diverse groups, libraries should strive to include titles about the joys and triumphs of these groups as well. Books where there is

representation of diversity and the lived experiences of diverse groups but is not the focus of the plot are important to include in a well-rounded collection. Allow readers to access stories in which they see themselves reflected in all facets of life, including highs, lows, and the mundane.

Hardison (2021) notes that while a number of anti-racist books became bestsellers in 2020 and their importance should not be undersold, there is perhaps a lack of the same kind of support for stories that showcase the other realities of the Black experience, including joy. Addressing non-Black readers, she asks “Are people comfortable reading books where Black people aren’t targeted or traumatized for being Black? Can non-Black people relate to books where the default is Black and they just exist?” (para. 3). Considering young Black readers, she notes their need for escapism and to be able to see themselves as the heroes or heroines of stories of all kinds, not just those that focus on pain. Reddin (2020) also notes that when stories about Black characters focus on racism and marginalization only, it allows non-Black readers to distance themselves from the current realities faced by Black people and suggests that positive contemporary stories about Black experiences instead force non-Black readers to engage with the whole Black experience.

As practitioners, we can support stories about all facets of life by making them available to our readers. This may mean looking for stories that don’t focus only on struggle and including them in displays and booklists. Some examples of user-created lists available online include Goodreads list “[POC YA Novels – NOT About “The Struggle,”](#)” blog entry “[I Want Diverse Books That Are Not About Being Diverse,](#)” Metro UK’s story “[Eight Books by Black Authors That Aren’t About Black Pain,](#)” Richland Library’s blog “[#OwnVoices: In Search of...Black Joy!](#)”

We should also work to feature diverse stories at all times, not just during designated periods. While it is important to feature Black authors during Black History Month, we need to ensure that we are also including Black authors in all our work, and not just because they are Black. We can celebrate

LGBTQ+ perspectives all year, not just during Pride. When we make displays or reading lists, we can try to find books that represent all kinds of identities and situations to better reflect the people we serve.

We can also ask our readers what, and who, they want to read. If you have noted that many of your readers are interested in thrillers or mysteries, seek out these types of stories with protagonists who may reflect the diversity of your community. When choosing new fantasy or romance materials, search broadly and see if you can find diverse characters. You may choose to survey your readers or leave a comment box or bulletin board asking what kinds of stories or characters they would like to see. You may find that readers want to read about people like themselves and gain a better understanding of your users as well.

Finally, search tools may help information professionals and our users to identify materials about all aspects of the lived experiences of different identities, not only those of their struggles. Non-profit organization We Need Diverse Books offers an app called [OurStory](#) that allows users to search by group, genre, reader level, and story element to find titles (We Need Diverse Books, 2021). The Cooperative Children's Book Centre (CCBC) at University Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education also collects statistics on diversity in books for children and teens. Including statistics from as early as 1985, they have, since 2018, started documenting the content included in diverse books as well as expanding to include diversity in abilities, gender, and sexual orientation. The [CCBC's Diversity Statistics Book Search](#) tool allows users to search by a number of story and character aspects (Cooperative Children's Book Center, n.d.). Finding and using tools like these can support the development of a collection that reflects all aspects of individual life experiences and can help readers find materials that resonate with them.

As information professionals, it is important for us to offer stories that reflect the communities we serve. While it is important to reflect the sometimes difficult experiences that people in diverse groups may face, it is equally important to consider the whole picture and reflect whole lives in the

resources we provide. By making stories of triumphs, joy, and everyday life available to reflect the diverse communities we serve, we can help to ensure that our patrons are represented and can see all the things they can be.

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