

ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

© **Rabia Khokhar**

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Naomi Norquay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'y' at the end.

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Dedication

To my family, specifically my parents and sister. I am humbled and grateful for your unwavering support.

To my Professors and Mentors over the years who have patiently guided me and have completely 'seen' all of me. I can't describe how much being 'seen' matters. How much it has impacted me positively. Thank you for your inspiration and dedication to social justice.

To Teachers committed to making a difference in ALL students' lives by teaching with a social justice lens. May we continue disrupting oppressive systems and create new spaces where all students see reflections of themselves and find belonging.

To my Niece, who symbolizes for me a new way forward, a potential for change. May you be so completely 'seen', 'heard', 'represented' and authentically included in your schooling experience. May you grow up to be proud and fearlessly yourself.

Abstract

My Major Research Paper is an analysis of representation in children's picture books with a social justice lens. I explore the categories of race, gender and religion which can be seen as social difference markers. I critically analyze 10-15 picture books in each category through content analysis and a critical checklist made through a social justice lens. The goal of my research is to ascertain the messages within the books to see how these social difference markers are represented. In an elementary classroom, picture books are a form of socialization and method of transmitting societal norms and values. My research analyzes and disrupts the idea of teaching as a neutral profession by demonstrating that teaching is political. It also provides insight into how social justice minded teachers can disrupt the managed curriculum when they critically think about the picture books they are sharing with their students.

Table of Contents

Part 1- Introduction, Literature Review and Terminology	Page 12
Part 2- Methodology	Page 20
Part 3- Data and Findings	Page 26
Part 4- Implications and Moving Forward	Page 47
Bibliography	Page 51
Appendix A	Page 57

Part 1: Introduction, Literature Review and Terminology

Introduction

I am an elementary school teacher in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and a current Long Term Occasional Teacher-Librarian. I see first-hand the important role children's picture books play in our classrooms. As a teacher firmly passionate about and committed to social justice, I believe that picture books are a teaching tool that can be used to carry out the goals of social justice. As a teacher, my commitment to social justice is informed by my own schooling experiences. As an immigrant, racialized and visibly Muslim student in the TDSB I scarcely ever saw representations of myself in the picture books that were shared. If there was representation it was often a misrepresentation which perpetuated stereotypes of Muslim women (oppressed, needing to be saved and uneducated). Not being represented and being misrepresented is incredibly troubling for a young person looking for belonging. My experiences of schooling often felt as though I was sitting on the sidelines. The stories I read in school were never based on my lived reality or my family's experiences. As an elementary school teacher, I want to counter and disrupt the experiences I personally had as a student which always left me feeling like I did not belong and was not truly welcomed in my learning spaces. I am using my positional power as a teacher to disrupt and expand the stories that we know by thinking critically about the picture books that I share with my students.

My Major Research Paper (MRP) is organized in the following way: Part 1 is a literature review and discussion of terminologies that ground my research. In Part 2 I discuss the methodology I used to analyze the picture books. Part 3 discusses the data and my findings after analyzing the picture books. In Part 4, I discuss the many implications of my data and how to use

it to move forward. Part 5 is my conclusion where I discuss the limitations of my research and the next steps to where this research can go.

Literature Review and Terminology

My research explores the important and impactful role children's literature plays in elementary school classrooms. It is informed by Thomas King's idea from his book, *The Truth About Stories* that "stories are wonderful. And they are dangerous" (King 2003, p 9). I specifically focus on exploring representation in children's literature in the context of markers and themes of social justice as are race, religion and gender, which can be seen as social difference markers. I critically examine about how stories engaging these themes have the potential to be 'wonderous' and 'dangerous' and the many implications of this.

In this work I use the definition of social justice put forward by the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario's (ETFO) 2011 document, *Social Justice Begins With Me*. I frame my understandings of social justice as discussed by Joseph Zajda (2006) in his article titled "Introduction: Education and Social Justice" (2006). Traditionally, ETFO (2011) claims: "social justice has ... been understood as referring to the way in which goods are distributed in society" (p. 2). The document expands on this definition by stating that it also "refer(s) to a family of concerns about how everyone should be treated in a society we believe to be good" (ETFO 2011, p.2). Social justice recognizes and affirms the "basic human rights that all people are entitled to regardless of economic disparity or of class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability or health" (Zajda, 2006, p.5). To deepen this definition of social justice, I also want to keep in mind the power structures and dynamics at play in these conversations because "certain groups in our society based for example, on race, class, gender, age, disability status and sexuality- have experienced both systemic barriers and attitudinal barriers" (Kelly, 2012, p.3).

One of the goals of social justice education is to recognize and affirm different identities and experiences. My focus specifically is on the social justice themes of race, religion and gender, because, often times, these themes are seen as being difficult to discuss since they are seen as being too personal, political and ‘inappropriate’ for elementary classroom discussions. Deborah Britzman describes ‘difficult knowledge’ as being knowledge that compels students to critically think and engage with issues related to “historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, and forms of social hatred and questions of equity, democracy and human rights” (Britzman et al., 2003, p.1). The three themes chosen for this MRP, are aspects of people’s identities which impact and shape the experiences people have historically, socially and politically.

I struggled with finding the right term for the themes I describe as ‘difficult knowledge’. During the MRP process, I previously used the words ‘weighty’, ‘tough’, ‘controversial’ and ‘equity’. I settled on ‘difficult knowledge’ because I felt aligned with the social justice definition I am using and the content I am engaging. These themes may be difficult to discuss with young children but it is imperative that we do so. Children’s literature provides a resource to do so because it serves as an accessible entry point and springboard. Stories are a way to help students feel a sense of safety as they learn about these different issues. Furthermore, Hill in her dissertation, *Critical Analysis of the Books Read Aloud by Kindergarten Teachers and Their Reasons For Book Selection* Hill discusses the connectedness and deep understanding students can develop from exploring different experiences in children’s literature. She states that the skills students gain from these experiences will help them develop into the “literate thinkers we need to shape the decisions for tomorrow” (Hill, 2004, p.13).

One of the reasons social justice themes are considered as ‘difficult knowledge’ is because of the idea that the school is supposed to be a neutral space. There is a dominant

discourse that the school is a neutral space free from the outside social, political and global contexts where all students are treated equally, a safe haven. Therefore, since the school is envisioned in this way any discussions that would disrupt this balance namely anything to do with the themes of race, religion and gender are seen as being inappropriate. Counter to this, the reality is that the school is actually a site for socialization (Wills, 2005, p.111) in which many “hierarchical arrangements ... are confirmed daily” (Wills, 2005, p.111). The school then is not a neutral institution, but a place that is influenced by the current political, social and global issues. It is a place where society’s values are transmitted to students which are based on the country’s dominant or master narrative. In ETFO Voice Magazine entitled “The Stories We Teach,” Lacasse (2017) states that the dominant narrative is the “collective story that we tell our children about our past, our present and our future” (p. 17). The goal of the school as an institution is to carry out the dominant narrative, stories that are from a particular lens and a perspective. The dominant narrative supports hierarchies of particular power structures and privileges some while disadvantaging others.

Similar to the discourse of schools, teachers are read in accordance to “the myth of the neutral professional” (Silin, 1995, p. 53). However, if schools are institutions where dominant narratives are transmitted, then teachers are part of this process as well. Teachers make choices everyday which either support or counter the master narrative. They must see themselves as ‘political beings,’ who understand that their teaching has sociopolitical effects (Greene, 2008, p. 20). Teachers must recognize that their role is a position of power in the classroom. Hill (2004) says, “teachers are gatekeepers of the classroom... through inclusion, omission, teachers are responsible for a great deal of what their students read and learn about” (Hill, 2004, p.16). Therefore, teachers can counter the dominant narrative which often privileges a certain story and

way of knowing by being critical in the ways they interpret the curriculum and the “images and messages” (Tschida et al., 2014, p.2) they send and bring to their classrooms and students.

Teachers can carry out the goals of social justice by working to counter the limiting discourses through the choices they make through their book selection. In this way they can truly become activists who “work for the eradication of injustices and disparities in society” (Zajda, 2006, p.5). Disrupting the one sided story that the dominant narrative often perpetuates is one of the goals of social justice education.

Another reason that the social justice themes of race, religion and gender are ‘difficult knowledge’ is the discourse that such topics are not developmentally and age appropriate for young students. This idea stems from the romanticized belief that childhood is innocent and children need to be protected and sheltered. In his book *Sex, Death and the Education of Children our passion for ignorance in the age of Aids* Jonathan Silin states that certain things in schools are spoken about and privileged whereas topics associated as being ‘difficult’ are seldom spoken about. Although, these topics do not take up space in schools the reality is that they do not disappear. Rather, students are still exposed to them through “the streets, on TV, and at home when school is over, and things both said and unsaid whisper in our minds” (Silin,1995, p.2). Silin (1995) urges teachers to recognize “teaching as a political practice” (Silin,1995, p. 39) and that students be exposed to these difficult topics in a school setting which can become a safe space to have these complex conversations.

According to Silin (1995), the school system often engages in teaching a ‘managed curriculum’ as opposed to a ‘socially relevant’ and developmentally based curriculum (p. 48).

The ‘managed curriculum’ is often times the sanitized version and focuses on:

endless round of activities that are linked by reference to the seasons or holidays but have little to do with socioeconomic contexts in which the school is embedded, the conflicted

emotional lives of young children or the existential dilemmas of adulthood (Silin, 1995, p 48).

This curriculum is not social justice based because it does not affirm or validate diverse lived realities nor does it take into mind power dynamics influenced by current social, political and global issues. The managed curriculum ignores the power dynamics that shape students' lives.

Silin (1995) argues for a 'socially relevant' and developmentally based curriculum which falls under the goals of social justice education that it takes into consideration various perspectives. This is a curriculum that is child centered, "emergent and negotiated" (Silin, 1995, p.48). This curriculum creates opportunities and spaces to have authentic, age appropriate conversations based on what can be classified as "difficult knowledge." This type of curriculum allows stories to become a springboard for deeper conversations and insights. A 'socially relevant' curriculum believes that children are "capable of understanding sophisticated and complex issues" (Hill, 2004, p.232) with scaffolding and support from their teachers.

Interestingly, an article by John Wills entitled 'Some people even died': Martin Luther King Jr, the Civil Rights movement and the politics of Remembrance in elementary classrooms" illustrates the limitations of the "managed curriculum" and the opportunities that are lost due to its regulation by teachers. The author mentions a case study in a primary class where the teachers were carrying out a Black History Month unit and focusing on non-violent protests as a way to counter the racism black people were facing. Selected stories that met this "managed" criteria were read aloud to students. Although students had ideas beyond the stories from their own real lives or things they had seen on TV, the teachers did not spend a lot of time answering students' questions, acknowledging or using students' ideas as a springboard to deeper discussions. They allowed the students to comment but always brought the conversation back to the 'managed',

regulated, non-violent side of the message they wanted to send (Wills 2005). This curriculum was already standardized and due to what they saw were ‘difficult’ topics they did not want to, as Silin (1995) says, have it be ‘socially relevant’ or negotiated by students. The stories they had chosen focused on a specific sanitized version of events.

The ‘managed curriculum’ views students as passive recipients (Wills 2005) whereas the ‘developmentally appropriate’ curriculum views the student as an individual capable of meaning making with support. Wills states that “schools and classrooms are important public sites for mnemonic socialization for children” (Wills, 2005, p.126), this means that if specific events are remembered in a particular way then it also mirrors the outside mainstream society because schools do not function in a vacuum.

Consequently, once again, what is reinforced is that the teacher is not neutral, the idea that teaching is not politically charged is a myth. Wills (2005) states a point that is really important for my research, he says

given the authority of the teacher over the “official” meaning-making activities that occur in classrooms...what are they emphasizing and what are they ignoring? What are they remembering, and what are they purposely not remembering? (p.111)

This point is very important because it emphasizes that teachers are responsible for what gets acknowledged, ignored and silenced in their classroom. It is important that teachers share “diverse stories and experiences that make up our collective past” (Wills, 2005, p.128) with their students. Children’s literature enacts a form of socialization and in the classroom it is used to “enculturate” (O’Sullivan et al., 2017, p. 7) and transmit society’s values to children. Therefore, to counter the one-sided master narrative which focuses on a single perspective, teachers must “make their book selections more critical and ethical” (Tschida et al., 2014, p.3). In any children’s literature selection teachers must consider the questions of “who is doing the telling,

and who gets left out” (Tschida et al., 2014, p.4). They must also keep in mind issues of representation and misrepresentation. Teachers must question if the stories they share with students are authentically accurate and can be considered ‘wonderous’ or are they misinformed, stereotypical and limiting, so ‘dangerous’?

In her article, “In Praise of a Scholarly Force: Rudine Sims Bishop,” Violet Harris references Rudine Sims Bishop’s concept and metaphor of Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Glass doors which reinforces the important role stories play. Harris quotes Rudine Sims Bishop:

books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (in Harris, 2007, p.5).

In picture books that are mirrors, the reader sees aspects of their lived realities reflected through the characters and storyline. Picture books that are windows, gives the reader a new perspective by showing and sharing a lived experience different from their own. The book provides new information in a safe manner that the reader can tuck away. In the “Sliding Glass Door” Books, the reader learns about the similarities and differences between themselves and the characters. They also have the opportunity to generate new ideas for deeper engagement and change.

This metaphor of the sliding glass door is very important because it is a strategy that teachers can use to ensure that the stories they share with their students are critically analyzed and respectful. Furthermore, it is a way to critically think about what societal culture we are “socializing” our students to be part of? Does this culture have a space for all students or is it one that reinforces the limiting dominant narrative?

To further position myself in this MRP, issues of representation are paramount for me. I am a racialized visible Muslim woman. I grew up in Toronto and was a student in the TDSB in the late 1990's. As a child, I did not remember having any "mirror" books that reflected my lived reality through a positive lens. I felt misrepresented often or invisible. Furthermore, I never saw reflections of myself or "people like me" in the school curriculum. I grew up feeling like "I did not belong" in the school system, my community and or even "this" country. Due to a lack of a positive representation, let alone any representation for a very long time I felt ashamed of the multiple aspects of my identity particularly my religious identity. I also felt like I could never strive to become a teacher. In my entire schooling experience, I had never seen a teacher "who looked like me". The irony in all of this is that Canada has been my own "real" home for most of my life. Therefore, I understand the need for students to have books that affirm the multiple facets of their identities and the importance of having books that authentically expose students to people and lives different than their own. It is also important to think about which students always have books that are "mirrors", and which students do not and the reasons for this. It is important to understand that stories matter but perhaps more importantly, "stories...they remind us that *we matter*" (Justice, (2018)). This MRP, in many ways, is also a personal form of healing, for too long having been invisible, misrepresented and stereotyped. I find meaning in Daniel Justice's (2018) book *Why Indigenous Literature Matters* where he states "for many, our lives are a process of restoring-re-storying" (p. 186) and it is through stories that we find meaning and healing.

The issue of representation in children's picture books has a history which is important to examine to ground the discussion in this MRP. Relying on Rudine Sims Bishop's book, *Shadows and Substance: Afro American Experiences in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (1982) and

Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors by Maria Jose Botelho and Masha Rudman (2009), the relevant aspects of the history of representation in children's literature will be discussed below. The important connection between the past and the present will be explored.

In *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature* Analysis of Children's Literature: *Mirrors, Windows, and Doors*, authors Maria Jose Botelho and Masha Rudman reference Nancy Larrick's 1965 ground breaking article titled, "The All White World of Children's Literature". This article was very important because it voiced what many already knew and believed about the world of children's literature, that it was 'all white' and to many degrees 'racist'. The authors state that Larrick's article was a

a survey of 5000 trade books published for children during 1962,1963 and 1964, found that only 6.7 percent of the books had one or more Black characters. Many of these characters were featured as backdrop or rendered as slaves, servants, share croppers, migrant or menial workers" (Botelho and Rudman 2009, p.74)

The ensuing discussion the article brought forward is considered to have sparked the 'official' creation of the field of Multicultural Literature. Many scholars noted that many racialized scholars had voiced similar concerns as Larrick, but since Larrick had privilege as a white woman and access to publishing companies, her voice was heard.

Rudine Sims Bishop created three category of books that were popular during this time period. In the beginning of its creation, Multicultural Literature dealt with issues of race and representation. It was highly influenced by and grounded in the American 1960's "civil rights movement" (Botelho and Rudman, 2009) and the Brown vs. Board of Education case which dealt with the desegregation of schools. Before this time period, African Americans were mostly invisible and if at all visible in children's literature they would only be caricatures and

stereotypes. Invisibility has its own consequences and damaging effects as do stereotypical representations. “Non portrayal,” Alexander finds, “is much like passing in front of a mirror and seeing only nothingness” (in Botelho and Rudman, 2009, p.106). There are long-lasting effects of being misrepresented and also completely ignored and silenced. It impacts one’s sense of self-worth and belonging in a space.

However, the political and historical events began to encourage and create opportunities for authors and the publishing market to respond to these social events since picture books are influenced by the broader social, political, historical and global contexts and this impacts the publishing market. However, even though there was a response to these events, the books were mostly written by white authors for a white audience.

Rudine Sims Bishop identifies three categories of books that emerged in the field. The first category of books emerging in the 1950s-early 1960s was titled melting pot books. In these books, “only the illustrations give any indication that the book is about black children” (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1982, p.7). The books only had surface equity which is a term that will be explored in the methods section. These books presented the black experience as monolithic and the authors were mostly whites writing about blacks for a white audience. The books tended to focus on white children who befriended a Black child or family or who led the community to a satisfactory solution to ‘the black problem’ (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1982, p.8). These books only focused on the physical differences and did not go beyond this.

The second category of books were labeled social conscience books. These books intended as Rudine Sims Bishops (1982) states, “to create a social conscious mainly in non-Afro-American readers, to encourage them to develop empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for Afro-American children and their problems” (p. 9). These books are similarly written using an

“ethnocentric” perspective and were loaded with stereotypes and stock characters who were one dimensional and not developed. Notably, these books emphasized was the “right way to deal with injustice (which was by) peaceful marches, demonstrations, or petitions” (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1982, p.20). These books were often built on stereotypes of the black family: “absent black fathers”, low income and an urban poor city lifestyle (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1982).

The third category of books was termed culturally conscious books. These books strived to “reflect, with varying degrees of success, the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up Black in the United States” (Rudine Sims Bishop, 1982, p.27). These books are currently still relevant and attempt to move beyond presenting a monolithic version of the black experience by having strong developed characters who are black beyond just the illustrations.

There were many organizations and movements that were supporting the critical analysis of children’s literature and paying close attention to issues of representation. During the late 1960’s and early 1970, the Council on Interracial Books for Children “was founded by a culturally diverse group of writers, librarians, teachers and parents to advocate for anti-racist children’s literature” (Botelho and Rudman 2009, p.75). Later on this collective worked to develop checklists to help critically analyze children’s literature with students. There was also the Cooperative Children’s Book Council (CCBC) that began in 1985 documenting representation in children’s literature particularly for African Americans (in Botelho and Rudman 2009). As previously mentioned, when issues of representation in children’s literature became a focus and the category of multicultural children’s literature began it was heavily focused on race particularly how black people were represented, misrepresented or made invisible. It was in the mid-1990’s that “the definition of multicultural literature expanded to

include other groups and issues such as gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, age, religion and geographic location” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009 p.76).

This historic information grounds the movements and conversations around children’s literature and representation that continue into the present day. Issues of representation still frame how we engage picture books in an educational context that is very diverse and multicultural and as such purports to commit to equity and social justice. Currently, alongside the two organizations working for authentic representation in children’s literature, a new non for profit organization called We Need Diverse Books is continuing to highlight and work for change in the industry. They are grounded in Rudine Sims Bishop’s mirrors, windows and doors metaphor and work for equitable representation of all peoples.

Although, there are a lot of improvements that are taking place within the industry of children’s picture books in the USA and Canada, the issue of respectful representation is still ongoing. A recent infographic put together by the CCBC in 2015 as seen below, found that representation in picture books is still an important issue that needs attention. The 2015 stats from the CCBC found that out of the 3,400 books the organization received, 108 of the books were by Black authors and 270 were about black experience. In 2017, out of the 3,700 books received at the center, 122 were by black authors and 340 dealt with black experience. Although, there are some changes that are happening the reality is that the world of picture books is still mostly white. The visual infographic created by the CCBC visually exemplifies this point. (CCBC website).

The infographic provides the following interesting information: 73.3 % of children’s literature in 2015 still had a white main character while 12.5 % of books were about animals or trucks which is more than other identity groupings. 7.6% of books had African American

characters, 3.3% with Asian Pacific characters, 2.4% with Latino characters and 0.9% with Indigenous characters. Although, there are changes taking place, the reality still is that there are more books with animals and trucks than other identity groupings. This is concerning and once again exemplifies that representation in picture books is still an important topic and issue.

In my research, I examine the social justice themes of race, religion and gender because I think that these are relevant topics in a 21st century urban classroom. In his book *Life at the Intersection: Community, Class and Schooling*, Carl James mentions his work with inner city schools and the stereotypes these communities face as being ‘troubled’ and ‘high needs’. Most often these urban schools and communities are characterized by “low-income housing, poverty and high proportion of racial and/ or ethnic minority members” (James, 2012, p.14). Yet, for this research I expand on this definition of urban classrooms. I position “urban” as a common situation across the city-in rich and poor neighbourhoods, in homogenous and culturally diverse neighbourhoods. I want all teachers and students to read books that are mirrors, windows and doors. By focusing on these three relevant social justice themes the goal is to critically think about how teachers can contribute to the creation of a more equitable, respectful, and just society for everyone (Zajda 2006).

Part 2: Methodology: What I did and How I did it

For this research, I chose to critically analyze picture books addressing the social justice themes of race, religion and gender for issues of representation for students in kindergarten to grade 6 urban classrooms. I read between 10-15 books in each category to look for patterns and gaps in these themes. I used a critical checklist I made in an Independent study course taken with Professor Naomi Norquay in Winter 2017 to critically assess the content of each of the books as used in the method of content analysis. In the article “Exploring the ‘Critical’ in Critical Content Analysis of Children’s Literature: Mirrors, Windows and Doors,” by Richard Beach et al. (2005), the authors state that content analysis is “a...method for analyzing texts and describing and interpreting the written artifacts of society”. It is a way to “critically engage with texts” while “understanding what a text is about, (by) considering content from a particular theoretical perspective” (Beach et al., 2005, p.1-2). See the checklist below.

Critical Checklist for Assessing Children’s literature for the Classroom:

1. Read the entire book first:

-Quick analysis (read it, take a look at the pictures, storyline, characters etc.)

2. Check the background of the author:

-All authors write out of a cultural and personal context, what is the perspective they are writing from? (insider or outsider?)

-Is there a bias present?

-Is the author from the group they are writing about? If not how are they writing about that group of people?

-Are there omissions and distortions in the story?

-Who is speaking for whom?

-Check and analyze the biographical information on the back jacket

3. Check the storyline:

-Whose point of view is the story from? Whose is missing?

-Is the “white” person seen as the “savior” or “helper”?

-Are people of colour seen as the problem?

-Are there stereotypical notions or tokenism?

-Is the story simplistic? Or a misrepresentation?

-Who is the hero?

- How are gender and gender boundaries portrayed?
- Are there issues of class?
- Are there issues of Race?
- Is it a single story narrative?

4. Examine the Settings:

- What settings are the characters included in?
- Is the setting based on stereotypical and limited understandings?
- Are there diverse people present in the surroundings?
- Are racial and cultural groups positioned in a limited, stereotypical and 'same' setting eg. Are certain racial and cultural groups in inner cities and neighbourhoods considered to be in the 'ghetto'?)

4. Check the illustrations:

- Check the background of the illustrator
- Are the pictures captivating and beautiful?
- What do the pictures convey?
- Who is doing what in the pictures?
- Who is the "hero" and who needs to be "saved"?
- Is there a relationship between the illustrations and the story?
- Are there stereotypes and tokenism in the illustrations?

5. Is it an age appropriate story and can it be connected to the curriculum?

- Is the story captivating, engaging and interesting for students?
- Can it be relevant for students? Are there entry points for students?
- How can the story be connected to the curriculum? (Thinking beyond Black History Month)

My critical checklist is based on and informed by the theoretical goals of social justice as discussed above, critical theory, critical race theory, ideas around gender maintenance, disrupting the single and deficit views of Muslims and critical multiculturalism.

Critical theory "is above all else, a way to ask questions about power. Who has it? How did they get it? How do they keep it? What are they doing with it? How do their actions affect the less powerful? How might things be otherwise?" (Hinchey, 2010, p.17). The checklist urges teachers to question each text and think about how power comes into play. The specific questions outlined in the checklist help teachers understand the apparent and subtle ways power may be present. For example; teachers might ask: who is the author of the text? Are they an insider or an

outsider of the lived reality discussed? Does this impact the storyline or how the characters are perceived? Does this impact the depictions in the story? Is power equally distributed in the illustrations? If not how does that impact the storyline? Does it affect how the characters are viewed? All of these specific questions are based on the root idea of power and for this research critical theory gets us to understand that “a critical education (is) based on constant questioning” (Hinchey, 2010, p.72) for teachers and students.

Through the method of questioning, critical theory also reinforces the idea that “multiple realities... actually exist in the world” (Hinchey, 2010, p.66). This is when Critical Race Theory (CRT) also becomes a lens that was used to make the critical checklist. CRT “places race at the center of social analysis and values the everyday experiences of people of colour” (Rolon-Dow, 2011, p.3). As teachers, we must recognize that race impacts all of the other multiple identities our students bring to the classroom. Therefore, the checklist encourages teachers to really pay attention to the storyline and illustrations of the books they are sharing with their students and how people are depicted within them. For example: whose point of view is the story from? Is this a story that counters hegemonic stereotypes or continues them? Does the story go beyond superficial multiculturalism? This is a term that means does the story extend beyond simply focusing on physical and visual differences in the illustrations? Does it show an authentic and well-rounded experience with fully developed characters?

Bronwyn Davies in her books *Gender in Japanese Preschools: Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales in Japan* (2004) and *Shards of Glass Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities* (2003) puts forward the idea of “category-maintenance work” (Davies, 2004, p.10) which in this research I refer to as “boundary maintenance work” and “gender order”. She critically thinks about how children are socialized to be either male or female and how then the

children themselves regulate these oppositional dichotomies. The stories we read to students can impact their socialization. Connecting to the checklist, this framework helped me critically think about how the characters are presented. Who is the one with power in the story? Who is the hero? Does the story go beyond stereotypical gender roles?

To think about the theme of religion, specifically Islam and how Muslims are portrayed in picture books, I used the following two articles “Save the Muslim Girl” by Ozelm Sensory et al., and “Rethinking Islamophobia: combating bigotry by raising the voices of Black Muslims” by Alison Kysia. These articles helped me think about how to disrupt the single story and deficit view of Muslims. While critically assessing picture books that dealt with Muslims, I wanted to pay close attention to the storyline, illustrations and who is writing the stories. Did they present Muslim women as victims who need to be saved? Did the stories go beyond simply teaching readers about Islam and religious literacy? Who is the author of the stories? Is it an ‘insider’ to the religion or an ‘outsider’?

A critical multiculturalism lens followed all of the other frameworks. Critical multiculturalism helped me think about the power dynamics that shaped the historical, political and societal reasons for why someone in the story was represented, misrepresented and or invisible (Botelho et al., 2009). To critically think about multiculturalism, I also relied on James Banks’s ideas around the contribution and additive approach which is often known as the “heroes and holidays approach”. This approach is built on the Eurocentric version of events and racialized people’s perspectives are simply just added throughout. This approach is problematic because most of the time it only celebrates holidays and continues to “other” those who are not white. It reinforces stereotypes and single stories of cultures and communities (Banks, 1998, p. 1).

Although, originally I wanted to do a compare and contrast study of how the stories were taking up these categories, in my research I did do a compare and contrast study but I also started to group books together that spoke to similar patterns and gaps in each category. Originally what I set out to do was to compare and contrast the books within and across the themes. My goal was to read books and see if they ‘passed’ my checklist. However, as my research developed what I found was that I became less focused on if the books ‘passed’ the checklist and became focused on grouping books into patterns and or gaps that I was finding. The checklist helped me organize data and critically think about the patterns and gaps within the chosen themes.

The goal was to check if the books represent the category (and lived experience) respectfully and completely or if they continue to perpetuate stereotypes. The critical checklist was created based on using the following two articles, “10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s books for Racism and Sexism” (1998) from the *Rethinking Schooling Magazine* and “Curricular Landscapes: Preservice Teacher’s Perceptions of Place and Identity in Canadian Multicultural Picture Books” by Mary Clare Courtland et al.(2009). Originally my goal was to read around 20-25 books in total and have a total of 9 social justice themes. In the process of researching, I decided to focus on race, religion and gender to make my research more focused and specific. Since I was focusing on three specific themes, I decided to read between 10-15 stories in each category to think critically and speak to the patterns and gaps in representation that I observed. I also saw a lot of interconnections between all of the themes so I chose to keep the themes of social class, family structure and LGBTQ as additional lenses that I carried with me as I critically assessed the books. As well, specifically speaking to the theme of gender, it was also important to critically think about what my own personal beliefs and biases. Upon consultation with my supervisor, Naomi Norquay she helped me broaden my definition of gender and to

critically think about who I was including in gender and who I was leaving out. Therefore, in my analysis of the three main categories I decided to assess, I also kept in mind intersecting lenses and tried to look for the interconnectedness between them all.

Since my personal connection to this research allows me the privilege to have access to many picture books, there came a point where it became hard to choose which books I would choose for each theme and category. The books being critically assessed for this research were selected in the following ways: though visiting various classrooms, displays and school libraries as an Occasional Teacher with the Toronto District School board (TDSB), personal interest in children's literature explored at various bookstores (A Different Booklist, Another Story Bookshop, Indigo etc.), the Toronto Public Libraries, online research of picture books (eg. diversebookfinder.org, various Google searches on book themes), through social media links, books researched in the Independent Study Course in Winter 2017 and the Elementary Teacher's Federation Voice Magazine (reviews of books).

Appendix A is a list of the books chosen for each the three categories of social justice, race, religion and gender. They are organized alphabetically by category.

Part 3: Data/Findings

The following section will be divided by the three social justice categories of race, religion and gender. First, there will be a definition and synopsis of each category and then a discussion of patterns and gaps found in each category based the on content analysis I undertook.

Race:

Race is a social justice category that I chose to focus on because of its relevance in classrooms. Many times race is a very “difficult” topic for teachers and schools to engage in due to the fear that one may be called a racist or upset the fine balance that favours white people in the dominant narrative. Although, racial categories are sociopolitical and do not have any biological basis, the reality is that they continue to have effects on racialized people’s lives (Pollock, 2008). Historically, the categories of race have their roots in colonialism and these categories justified the oppression of people who were “different” from white Europeans. This is important to remember for this research because historical legacies continue to have ramifications in our present day. Furthermore, as mentioned previously due to the historical legacies some groups of people, namely racialized people continue to experience barriers in society and schools. One of the ways to counter these ideas that have become the dominant narrative and discourse is to critically think about and assess the stories that are available dealing with race. I wanted to focus on the stories that are written about black people because I think part of carrying out social justice is to ensure that those who have been historically marginalized and misrepresented the most due to colonialism and slavery have their diverse lived realities inserted back into the dominant narrative authentically, respectfully and realistically.

I started the content analysis with the following question, “How are black people represented in picture books?” During, this analysis I used content analysis and the checklist created and I wanted to pay specific attention to author/illustrator background, copyright date, illustrations and the storyline particularly to the representation of characters and the setting.

In the 15 books I analyzed for the theme of race, I noticed that the books could be organized into four categories and patterns which will be further discussed below.

The first category of books I examined focused on poverty and a saviour complex. Two books that fit into this category were *Something Beautiful* (Sharon Dennis Wyeth, 1998) and *My Name is Blessing* (Eric Walters, 2013). Through a google search I found that *Something Beautiful* was written by a black author and illustrated by a person with a South Korean background. It was published in 1998. *My Name is Blessing* is written by a white author and illustrated by a white illustrator. It is important to know the author’s backgrounds because to some degree it shows their positionality to the story and if they are an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ to the story and lived experience they are writing about. Both of these books have a black main character and in both stories there is the idea of an absent father figure lingering in the background as both stories only touch upon maternal figures in their lives. In both stories, one of the first things we are faced with as readers is the apparent poverty in which the characters live.

In the ETFO Voice article “A Black character does not a good book make: Choosing black-focused books to support culturally relevant teaching,” Natasha Henry (2018) asks, “what settings are the Black characters included in? Do they reflect current and varied life situations or limited assumptions about black life” (p. 36). In the two books mentioned above both of the characters are in a poor, urban or rural setting. In *Something Beautiful*, the setting is in a stereotypically urban community that is marked with poverty as depicted by homeless people,

inappropriate words scrawled on broken building walls, lack of flowers and greenery and a dark and dirty alley. Similarly, in *My Name is Blessing* the story is set in rural Kenya. Poverty is the first thing we see; it shows up in the characters' ripped clothes, the small 'hut' they live in, and the scarcity of food that has to be split into many portions.

In *Something Beautiful*, there is an onus on the individual character to 'clean up' her surroundings which she ends up doing. Here the 'saviour complex' works differently because the focus is on the individual fixing their surroundings. Her urban environment, which is often a code word for 'race' and 'poverty' is presented through a deficit lens. In *My Name is Blessing*, the concept of the 'white saviour' is more present and frames the story in many ways. This story is based on real events that happened in an organization called The Creation of Hope that set up the orphanage where the main character lives. This information frames the wider events that take place. The main character has a physical disability which is presented through a deficit lens and the only positivity that frames the story is when the boy becomes part of the orphanage. The boy receives help from outside Eurocentric sources and I see this as problematic because his community is thereby seen as being resource-less.

The second category of books about race focused on the slave narrative and the Underground Railroad story. The two books that fit into this category were, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (Hopkinson, 1993) and *Going North: The Story of Geraldine's Great - Great Grandfather* (de Matteis, 2007). The first story is written by a white woman and illustrated by a black illustrator in 1993. The second story, published in 2007, is written and illustrated by a black identified biracial woman.

Both stories are focused on the narrative of slavery and the Underground Railroad. Both stories have black main characters who are fully developed, they are not one dimensional or

‘stock’ characters. The historical time period depicting slavery and the Underground Railroad are the backdrops in these stories but they frame and impact all aspects of the story so are very significant. In *Sweet Home Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, the following words show how slavery marks the main character’s life: “big house”, “missus”, “runaway” and “underground railway”. The story focuses on the main character making a quilt that is a map to freedom. The illustrations in this book are beautiful, authentic and very detailed. The illustrations show a well-dressed black girl living in a clean house with various aunts and uncles who are part of her life. Interestingly, what stands out most is her very authentic and life like facial features and the careful detail and attention paid to representing her hair.

But the backdrop of slavery is the terrifying focus of the story and we do not learn of the other aspects of the main character’s life nor are the other characters in her life developed. Black people in this story were positioned only in the past whereas the second story made the connection between the past and present which will be explored below.

In *Going North: The Story of Geraldine’s Great - Great Grandfather*, the story starts off being set in the present day but quickly connects to the family’s history with slavery. The illustrations are beautiful and once again very detailed. The addition of real photographs through-out the story add a realistic element. The main character is a mixed race child and her setting is in a beautiful house owned by her grandparents. The story starts with the main character helping her grandfather with chores, a ‘father’ figure is very much present in the story and this shifts the narrative of the ‘absent father’ often associated with stories with black characters. However, the focus is once again heavy on slavery and this is enhanced by real photographs and news articles from the time period being represented. These add almost a horrifying touch by showing the brutality of slavery. This book is special because the author is

writing about a personal history and this is important in picture books because it centers and gives a face to the bigger conversation. People are also humanized when they tell their own stories because readers are able to see the many intersectional dimensions that shape people's lives.

The third category of books I found focused on the civil rights time period and non-violent protests. They were the following books: *I am Rosa Parks* (Meltzer 2014), *If a Bus Could Talk* (Ringgold 1999), *Meet Viola Desmond* (MacLeod, 2018), *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles 1995), *The Youngest Marcher* (Levinson 2017), *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001) and *The Other Side* (Woodson 2001). The following four were written and illustrated by White people: *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, *Meet Viola Desmond*, *The Youngest Marcher*, *I am Rosa Parks*. *If a Bus could talk*, *The Other Side* were written and illustrated by black people. *Freedom Summer* was written by a white author and a black illustrator in 2001. Most of these texts are in some ways recent and contemporary but all deal with the civil rights historic time period.

Some of the books had female main characters who exemplify what a non-violent protest looks like. The dominant narrative focuses on commonly known non-violent protesters like Rosa Parks, Viola Desmond, Ruby Bridges and Audrey Faye Hendricks. All stories have the Civil Rights historic period (the 1950s and '60s) as a backdrop. The characters are well rounded and developed and this is shown through the pictures and setting. These stories are well done because positioning the characters in the historic time period helps the reader critically understand their story. The only negative aspect is that they tend to position Blacks (in these stories, African Americans and African Canadians) as people of the past and solely focus on this time period. Out of the 15 books I read for the theme of race, civil rights had the most number of books.

Another set of books focused on the friendship between black and white characters. *Freedom Summer* and *The Other Side* both exemplified this as both were set in the civil rights time period. *Freedom Summer* follows the friendship of two boys, one black and one white who are best friends. Racism starts out as subtle in the background but becomes a fierce part of their friendship as they learn that there are particular places they can't play together. The important aspect of this story is that the black character has a name, family and has agency which is seen when he speaks and has money to buy his own treat and does not need to rely on his white friend. There isn't a saviour complex but the historical backstory is the law of desegregation coming into being and people's reaction. The white boy in this story is an ally and takes a stand to make things more fair. *The Other Side* is a very similar story, both characters in this book are fully developed and illustrated authentically. What stands out is that the black character has her own room, toys and is the one telling the story. Using Rudine Sims Bishop's framework (1982), these books would most likely be labeled as being "socially conscious books". The intended audience for socially conscious books is white children and the main goal is to teach white children how to understand and make friends with people who are black. The purpose is to humanize and normalize black experiences but what often ends up happening is the reinforcing of the single story. The single story only shows people as being one way, it is an incomplete depiction. Often times those in positions of power control the single story about others.

This takes us into the fourth category of books which shift the previously discussed narratives to 'everyday stories.' In 'everyday stories' people and their experiences are represented completely. Social difference markers such as race, gender and religion are just one part of the story and not the entire story. They deal with universal experiences such as friendship, family, loss etc. The 'everyday experiences' expand the stories we know about Blacks and are

respectful mirrors and authentic windows. They go beyond the stories of poverty, the Underground Railroad and slavery and civil rights time period and shift the narrative of how African Americans are represented. These stories are intended for all audiences not simply white children. The four stories that fit this category were: *All Aboard Elijah McCoy's Steam Engine* (Kulling, 2013), *Back Home* (Pinkey, 1999), *The True Story of Albert Jackson Toronto's* (Dickie, 2013) and *The Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* (Best, 2018).

All Aboard Elijah McCoy's Steam Engine and *My Three Friends and Me, Zulay* are written and illustrated by white people. *The True Story of Albert Jackson* was created by a grade one class in Downtown Toronto in 2013 and *Back Home* was written and illustrated by an African American author in 1992.

Three of these stories do have a historic backdrop of slavery, racism and the civil rights period. However, this is not the complete focus of the stories and this is the aspect that makes these stories successful since they expand the stories we know of Blacks. The characters are well rounded and fully developed and the detailed illustrations add to the experience. The setting of where these characters live and work is expanded and not only limited to the urban setting. They are also stories with universal and diverse experiences. These picture books are powerful because they use well-rounded and fully developed characters who have dreams and lives beyond just struggle.

The True Story of Albert Jackson follows the first black postal worker in Toronto. He experiences racism and his family has experienced slavery but this is not the only focus of the story. The story of what black people did and can be is expanded because the main character went to school, had a job, had a family and bought a home. He impacted Toronto's early community and was a pioneer. This expands the dominant narratives that only positions white

bodies as “pioneers”. The story like that of Elijah McCoy positions black people differently, it broadens the roles blacks can have in children’s literature. Although, slavery and racism are part of Elijah McCoy’s life, they are not the only things since he is an inventor. Both stories position black people in positions of power, as complete and authentic characters who have assets. They move beyond a deficit narrative associated with black people.

Back Home and *My Three Best Friends and Me*, *Zulay* are also both successful books. They present complete and fully developed characters who have dreams and pastimes beyond just struggle. The illustrations are very interesting and expand how Black females are presented. It is an asset-based approach where Black characters are not placed in urban settings and not seen as having deficits. The main character in *Back Home* has her own room, her own fancy clothes and toys. The story does not mention the historical and political issues but rather focuses on a fun week in her extended family’s farm house and the fun she has. Similarly, *Zulay* is a complete character who all her friends like, she has a lot of things she is good at, like math and never giving up. Later on in the story we learn that she is blind. Her blindness is not read as a deficit as a physical disability was in the story *My Name is Blessing*. These stories broaden the ideas around Black experience represented in picture books.

Gender:

Gender is another social justice theme that I chose to focus on because of its relevance in schooling. School in many aspects is thought of and set up in gendered terms. Often in classrooms students are addressed as ‘boys and girls’, there are gendered washrooms, gender-based groupings and picture books that reinforce gender stereotypes. Resenbrink (2001) reminds us “we learn how we are expected to behave depending on our gender, class, race and or ability as students” (p.12).

Although, our society relies on the dichotomies of masculinity and femininity, gender is a social construct. As a social construct like race, it is a socially bound identity and impacts the way one is treated and the experiences one has in different spaces. Going into researching this category, I too struggled with how to define 'gender' and in the beginning stages of this research, I had many different categories that were actually speaking to gender which illustrates a connectedness. Initially, I was categorizing gender in the context of family structure, LGBTQ families and social class. These categories are gendered ones because they focused on traditional stereotypical gender boundaries and family structure or countered these. For example, did the story show that a family only has a mother and a father? Or did it counter and expand the ideas around family and gender? In doing more research, specifically reading Bronwyn Davies books *Shards of Glass* and *Gender in Japanese Preschools*, I recognized that the categories that I had originally separated actually belonged in the same one namely, gender.

In the 14 books I analyzed for the theme of gender, I started with a similar question as that of race, "How is gender represented in children's literature?", "How is maleness and femaleness carried out?" During my analysis, I paid close attention to the storyline, characters and their roles, who the hero of the story is, how maleness and femaleness is carried out and the copyright date. I found that the 14 books could be organized into the following three categories: stories that push the binary categories of masculinity and femininity; stories that show a diverse way to be a family and: stories with female main characters.

The first category of books were stories that showed that there are different ways to be a 'male' and they pushed the gender binary. Within in this category, I observed that there were books that focused on boys playing and dressing up like what is stereotypically associated with 'femininity' and facing a lot of gender maintenance by the other children in the story. As well,

there were picture books that showed the diversity of gender and challenged the notion of gender maintenance.

In the first category the following books fit: *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2011) and *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman, 2014). Respectively, all three of these stories had a common element which was that the main character, who was a male, was disrupting the often “invisible border between masculinity and femininity” (Davies 2004, p 39). They were doing this by their choices of outfits and toys. These stories usually had an adult helper who encouraged them and support their choices. All three stories showed the diverse ways to be a “male”.

In *William's Doll* and *Jacob's New Dress*, the main characters are white boys. In *William's Doll*, the main character wants his own doll to cradle and hug and in *Jacob's New Dress*, the main character designs his own purple dress. *My Princess Boy*, the main character is a black boy. All the boys participate in what Bronwyn Davies calls “gender maintenance work” and “border work” (Davies, 2004, p.10) because children in general have very oppositional and distinct views of gender and do not approve of choices that do not respect these boundaries. These types of characters are the ones who uphold the gender discourse. William gets made fun of and is called a “creep” and a “sissy” by his older very athletic brothers because he wants a doll. Although set in the 1970's and a product of its time (evident, for example in word choices on pages 10 and 11 such as ‘creep’ and ‘sissy’), this story challenges the definition of what it means to be a male. The two characters, William and Jacob specifically get made fun of for wearing dresses and a tiara. The three stories show that the boys like ‘traditional male’ activities but this does not take away from them wanting to play with a doll or make their own purple dresses. This is an important point that shifts and disrupts the sometimes invisible and unspoken

markers of gender binaries because it shows that one can be ‘both’ and that they are not distinct categories.

Another aspect in all of these three stories is an adult who supports, encourages and helps them navigate their choices. In all three stories, it is a female figure who does this: a grandmother, a teacher and a mother. *My Princess boy*, really has a call to action at the end for people to change the stories around gender, the author says “If you see a Princess boy will you laugh at him? Will you call him names? Will you play with him? Will you like him for who he is?” These last sentences really plead with readers to disrupt the border work that tends to happen in learning spaces and expand the stories we tell about gender. All characters are ultimately the hero of their own stories.

Another observation made was that there were books that exemplified the diversity of gender and in them very little to no gender maintenance or regulation occurs. These books really illustrated what it means to resist the binary gender boundaries. The following books fit into this sub category: *Teddy’s Favourite Toy* (Trimmer, 2018) and *Pink is for Boys* (Pearlman, 2018). Respectively I noticed that recently published books are really pushing, resisting and creating new types of stories about gender.

The following two books are more of a celebration of the gender diversity. *Pink is for boys* shifts the gender binary from the first page by stating “Pink is for boys” and having illustrations of racialized kids. In this book I noticed the intersection of race and gender. The story ends with a positive message “all the colours are for everyone. Girls and boys”. Similarly, in *Teddy’s favourite Toy*, Teddy is the racialized main character and hero of the story. The story starts by telling us that he has a lot of cool toys, it shows an illustration of a truck and then shares his favourite toy which is a pink doll. His mom accidently throws it out because she thinks it is

broken but finds it for him at the end. The story has a positive feel because never is there any conversation about Teddy not being ‘male’ enough and his choices are not questioned. This is a story that really exemplifies and answers my question of “what does gender look like in children’s literature?” This book would answer that gender looks diverse and is not based on binaries but has a space for all.

As I examined the books for gender, the second pattern I saw emerge was stories that showed diverse ways to be a family, specifically these stories shifted the stereotype of gender roles in the household and the narrative around how to be a father. The books that fit into this category were: *My Dad’s Beard* (Main, 2014), *Stella Brings the Family* (Schiffer, 2015), *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson, 2005), *Franny’s Father is a Feminist* (Leet, 2018), *Tough Guys Have Feelings Too* (Negley, 2015) and *Jabari Jumps* (Cornwall, 2017). What I noticed about these books were that they are all more or less recent publications. An interesting observation I made was that these books focused on what I am calling ‘healthy masculinity’ and engaged their readers into thinking about the role of the father and traditional gender roles in the household.

Stereotypically masculinity is associated with the following attributes “skill, courage, dominance, determination” (Hourihan, 1997, p.96) and self-confidence, extroversion, aggression” (Hourihan, 1997, p.156). Yet, *Franny’s Father is a Feminist*, *Tough Guys Have Feelings Too*, *Jabari Jumps* and *My Dad’s Beard* change the ideas around masculinity and fatherhood. In *Tough Guys Have Feelings Too* the story shows many different superheroes and that even though superheroes are tough they have feelings and it is okay to show those feelings. This story counters the stereotypical ideas around men around aggression and shows a realistic

and gentle way of being male. In *Jabari Jumps* and *My Dad's Beard* the two father figures are racialized men, one is racialized black and the other is racialized south Asian Muslim.

I had a hard time putting these books into categories because of the interconnections, but I decided to focus on the gender aspect of these stories. In *Jabari Jumps*, the father is a black man and it counters the absent father stereotype which was discussed in the race category. Jabari's father is present, gentle, calm and supportive as Jabari learns how to swim. He shows courage and determination but not in a negative and traditional way. It changes the story around fatherhood, and in particular, for racialized fathers. For example, in *My Dad's Beard*, the father is a south Asian Muslim, who is humanized, dynamic and loving which is different from the stereotypical story that we know about Muslim men in the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative positions Muslim men as aggressive, violent, misogynistic and cruel. Yet, these picture books are all successful because they humanize men and present fatherhood as dynamic and gentle.

Picture books in this category also disrupted the traditionally held stereotypical views of women as only 'in' the household and men as 'outside'. They also countered the view that if "women are to be nurturing then men must be tough" (Rensenbrink 2001, p.12). I was critically thinking of the question, who has power in the household and who occupies the most space and is present? In *Franny's Father is a Feminist*, a white economically upper class family is raising a feminist daughter. A heterosexual couple, a mom and a dad are part of the family. The mother is a computer programmer and her father stays at home. When Franny asks "whose job is most important?" they confirm that both of their jobs are important. The story also explores the father 'tearing up' during movies they watch together and this exemplifies 'healthy masculinity' which shows that men do not have to be aggressive and emotionless. Both parents share equal time in

the story and are equally present. Similarly, in *Stella Brings the Family*, the white upper class family, through illustrations, shows how both parents, two dads share household chores lovingly. *And Tango Makes Three*, follows a similar pattern and it is an interesting story based on real events. Two male penguins become a family and when a zookeeper gives them an egg, they take turns taking care of it, only for it to hatch and them to become a family with “two daddies”. They both take turns sitting on the egg for it to hatch and share the responsibility. These stories as well shift the narrative about what gender means and can look like in picture books and in life.

The third category was picture books with female main characters or a lack thereof. I noticed there seemed to be more books exploring boys and masculinity. The following two picture books helped me thinking critically about female characters: *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) and *Malala’s Magic Pencil* (2017). Both stories had female lead characters. *The Paper Bag Princess* is a Cinderella story but a different type. In the story, Elizabeth is described with the traditional and stereotypical characteristics associated with beauty (blond, blue eyed and rich). However, she “participates in her own rescue” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009) and she is not obedient nor passive but smart and fierce. She is the one who rescues the prince in this story and when he does not find her fitting his expectations (namely his gender expectations) she decides to be independent and continues to take charge of her life. Although this counters the traditional Cinderella fairy tale and can be read as Cinderella being empowered, it is equally important to be conscious that this is what empowerment may look like for some people, but it is not for all. To another, empowerment may be being dependent on family members or a male partner. To critically think about and understand empowerment we must be cognizant of the intersectional elements of one’s identity. We must recognize empowerment as a spectrum and that what may be empowering for one may not be for another and vice versa.

Malala's Magic Pencil features Malala Yousafzai, the children's rights activist.

Although, in many ways this story expands the stories we know about Muslim girls because she is the hero of the story, in many ways it continues to project a particular view of femininity that represents empowerment, namely one that mirrors the traditional femininity associated with the West as stated in the book: "And even about how when I am older, I would be expected to cook and clean for my brothers, because where I came from, many girls weren't allowed to become what they dreamed of". In this story, gender and Islamophobia are interconnected and it can be especially seen in the illustrations with Muslim women having to cover themselves in blue burqas. Although, this may be a reality in the country she is writing in, it presents a narrow vision of femininity which shows that to be free one must be aspire to be like Western women. Furthermore, Malala's father's masculinity is positioned and read in a different way than of other Muslim men, he is positioned as being liberal and a feminist because he believes and supports the education of his daughter. Stereotypically Muslim men are seen as being oppressive and conservative to the women in their families. This theme will be explored more in the religion section but these patterns once again reinforce the interconnectedness of the themes.

Religion:

Religion is another social justice theme that I chose to focus on because of its relevance in classrooms. Perhaps the reasoning for choosing this social justice theme is biased, I am a racialized visible Muslim woman. I chose to wear the hijab a marker of my faith at the age of 14. Although, religion does not have biological roots and is different from race and gender in terms of social constructs, the experiences of being 'visible', in terms of religion do lead to various experiences in the school system. The political rhetoric based on the dominant narrative impacts the way visible Muslims are treated and the Islamophobia they experience. In this category, I

wanted to critically think about, how are Muslims represented in picture books? Who is considered a Muslim? I wanted to critically think about the author of these stories and their role as insider outsider, the setting, illustrations and character development. Like the other two themes, sometimes the topic of religion is seen as being too controversial and difficult for a classroom since the dominant discourse is that classrooms are secular and neutral spaces. The civil rights movement impacted how racial/racialized people ‘minorities’ were portrayed (Furman, 2014, 29). This is important because it influenced and paved the way for conversations around religious minorities such as Muslim people in children’s picture books.

I analyzed 15 stories with the theme of religion with a focus on Islam and how Muslims were represented. I noticed three themes and patterns emerged as I analyzed the books: stories were about religious literacy; the stories that perpetuated a single narrative of Muslims; and stories that challenged the story of Muslims particularly in what they were doing and their settings.

For the first category, 6 out of the 15 stories I analyzed were focused on “religious literacy” which is a term discussed by Alison Kysia in her *Rethinking Schools* article, “Rethinking Islamophobia: Combating bigotry by raising the voices of Black Muslims”. Religious literacy according to her is “increasing our knowledge of religious texts, beliefs and rituals” (Kysia, 2018, p.331). The following stories fit into this category, *My First Ramadan*, *Under the Ramadan Moon*, *Rashad’s Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr*, *Yaffa and Fatima*, *A Moon for Mo and Mo*. I noticed that in this category the picture books were focused on religious literacy and the friendship between Muslim and Jewish children based on shared aspects of their faiths.

The first category that has to do with ‘religious literacy’ highlights important Muslim events namely Ramadan and Eid-al Fitr. Importantly, all are written by ‘outsiders’ who are not

Muslims themselves. In *My First Ramadan* (Katz, 2007) and *Under the Ramadan Moon* (Whitman, 2008) the illustrations shows Muslims as being Middle Eastern and this reinforces how Muslims are usually positioned. In her article, “An Analysis of the Portrayals of Arabs and/or Muslims in America” Furman (2014) states: “most people believe that all Arabs are Muslims and that all Muslims are Arabs” (p.16). To some degree, these stories reinforce that Muslims are interchangeable with Arabs and that Islam is the only religion in the Middle East. These books focused on religious literacy can be classified as “holiday books.” In a similar yet different light, *Rashad’ Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr*, shows diverse Muslim families, black, brown and white. It changes the ideas around who can be Muslim

Interestingly the following two books: *Yaffa and Fatima and Shalom, Salaam* (Gilani-Williams, 2017) and *a Moon for Mo and Mo* (Zalben, 2018) depict friendship and relationship between Muslim and Jewish character and are written by a Muslim and Jewish author.. Both stories focus on the friendship and relationship between a Muslim character and a Jewish character. Both books are visually beautiful and represent the two religions respectfully by the intentional care that has gone in focusing on similarities. The critical connection I made was that these books are functioning in a similar manner to what Rudine Sims Bishop described as socially conscious books which many times focused on the friendship between a black and white character and it was done to normalize and/or humanize the black character. In a similar way, I questioned the audience for these intended books and thought if this was deliberately done as a way to respond to the dominant discourse around Muslims and Jews. The dominant discourse is based on the contentious colonial history of Israel and Palestine which positions Muslims and Jews as opposing opposites adversarial enemies.

The second category of books that I analyzed for the theme of religion perpetuated the single story narrative for Muslims which positions them as backwards, uneducated and outsiders in the West with differing values. The observations I made in these books was that Muslims are always positioned as outside of the ‘West’ and only as newcomers and immigrants. As well, that there is a single story around Muslim women that they need to be saved by Western forces.

In the following picture books, Muslims are positioned as ‘outsiders’ to the West and only as newcomers and immigrants: *The Colour of Home* (Hoffman, 1992), *From Far Away* (Munsch, 2017), *Layla’s Headscarf* (Cohen, 2009) and *Ayeeyo’s Golden Rule* (Mohamed, 2017). All three of the books are about Muslim children who have come from “somewhere else” whether that is Somalia, Syria, South Asia etc. These books reinforce that “Islam (and) Muslims...are from somewhere else rather than here” (Kysia, 2018, p 333) and this labels and stereotypes the Muslim identity as an ‘outsider’ to the West. *The Colour of Home* and *From Far Away* focus on the main characters coming to the ‘West’ due to the civil wars in Somalia and Syria, respectively. The problem with this discourse is that it only shows and reaffirms that Muslims are ‘outsiders’. *Layla’s Head Scarf* and *Ayeeyo’s Golden Rule* do focus somewhat on the character’s coming from ‘somewhere else’ but what they also focus on the bullying that the girls go through because of their head scarves, and this becomes the focus of the story. These stories continue to affirm the idea that Muslims are from ‘somewhere else’ and incredibly ‘different’ from others in the West.

Another key observation made was that many picture books with Muslim female characters position them as needing to be saved by ‘outsiders’. These picture books can be called “save the Muslim girl stories” (Sensoy,2016, p 1). The two books that fit into this category were *For the Right to Learn: Maala Yousafzai’s Story* (Langston-George, 2016) and *Tilt Your Head*,

Rosie the Red (McCarney, 2015), both stories are written by cultural outsiders and this impacts their telling of the story and positionality (Sands-O'Connor, 2014, p.199).

For the Right to Learn: Malala Yousafzai's Story is a story written about Malala Yousafzai, the children's rights activist targeted by the Taliban for standing up for women's rights. This story is written by a white woman who uses Malala's experience to represent the experience of many Muslim girls. Sensoy (2016) finds these books reproduce "longstanding ideas associated with Islam: backwardness, oppression and cultural decay" (p.2). These books tend to have an imperialistic lens which can be seen through the illustrations which show women in burqas and aggressive looking stereotypical Muslim men. It also gives this message in the following parts of the story "in her home country, a female could be beaten for public speaking" and "not all Pakistani children had Malala's opportunities". These words make generalizations about all Muslim women and paint Islam as being violent and misogynistic. Furthermore, the following sentence, "Malala's own mother didn't learn to read and write when she was young. But Malala's father believed girls deserved the same education as boys", continues to influence islamophobia by reiterating that Muslim men do not believe that women should be educated and that Malala's dad is different, he is the good civilized liberal man unlike the other uncivilized bad men. It is important to recognize who is telling the story and in what ways their positionality is creating a limited view of Muslims. This story perpetuates the victim narrative influential in the dominant narrative.

Similarly, in *Tilt your Head, Rosie the Red* a Muslim girl, Fadimata is getting teased for wearing a hijab and Rosie a white girl decides to stand up and 'save' her. The Muslim girl does not talk that much in the story but rather she is 'talked for' by Rosie. In this story, Fadimata is the stereotypical Muslim girl: she does not really have a voice, she is an outsider, it is hinted that

she is new to the country and she is visibly different from everyone else. This is the image of Muslim women that is marketed to a Western audience. This also perpetuates the victim narrative where Muslim women need to be saved by a ‘white savior’ who will speak on their behalf and help them adopt ‘Western liberal ideals’. Both of these stories are post 9/11 and add to a particular narrative and context about Muslims (Sensoy, 2016, p.1). The 9/11 context created the dichotomy of us/them. Muslims were the ‘them’, the ‘other’, violent and unlike people in the West who symbolized liberalism and peace.

The 9/11 context’s remnants continue to impact the narrative around how Muslims are viewed and treated. As an elementary school student at the time of the 9/11 attacks, I remember not really understanding completely what had happened. The only thing I knew was that something terrible had happened and the adults around me said “things had changed forever”. As I reflect, I remember feeling very confused about everything that was happening but also slowly becoming hyper aware of my own religious identity. I began to feel incredibly embarrassed and did all I could to hide my religious identity. I wanted to be anything but a Muslim! This continued for many years, the need to pretend I was not Muslim. It was in high school that I started to critically think about my identity and began the process of reclaiming it. As I reclaimed my identity, I started releasing all the embarrassment that had consumed me. Researching and learning about the “everyday stories” of Muslims helped in my healing journey.

The third category of picture books that I noticed can be labeled as “everyday stories”. These picture books expanded the stories we know about Muslims, shattered stereotypes and normalized different Muslim experiences. The following books fit into this category, *Muhiima’s Quest* (Rodaah, 2017), *Mommy’s Khimar* (Thompkins-Bigelow, 2018), *Big Red Lollipop* (Khan, 2010) and *King for a Day* (Khan, 2014). All four stories have been written by Muslim authors.

The first 3 books listed have diverse Muslim female protagonists who are the hero of their own story. They are complete and well-rounded characters who expand the ideas around what it is like to be Muslim and who can be Muslim. In *Muhiima's Quest*, *Big Red Lollipop* and *King for a Day*, religion functions as a backdrop. It is a part of the story but not the complete story. We learn the characters' religion by the illustrations as some of their family members wear hijabs or have beards. Another important element that we see in the illustrations is the setting is broad and dynamic: Muslim characters are not restricted to specific settings but in all three of the stories there is interconnections between race, religion and socioeconomic status. Muhiima has her own room and her own toys and her father owns a big bookstore. These books show how diverse characters depict what is like to be Muslim.

Another important element is that these books portray 'everyday stories', they are every day universal experiences of children: such as not wanting to take a smaller sister to a birthday party (as in *Big Red Lollipop*) or outsmarting a neighbourhood bully (as in *King for a Day*). All children want their 'every day' experiences portrayed where they are represented positively and the stories move beyond needing to be saved or reading Muslim identity with a deficit lens. These 'everyday stories' normalize Muslims but more importantly, illustrate different ways to be Muslim. *King for a Day* really does this by positioning a Muslim male protagonist in a wheelchair as the main character and hero of the story who outsmarts a bully. In *Mommy's Khimar*, religion is less of a backdrop as the main character a black Muslim girl explores the different ways and reasons her mom wears a 'khimar' or a hijab. This story really extends the story about Muslims by describing the interfaith members in the family.

Part 4: Implications/Moving forward and Conclusion

After analyzing children's literature in the themes of race, gender and religion, although, significant changes have happened since the beginning of the 'official' Multicultural literature category era/period there are still gaps. There are fewer 'melting pot books' but there are still missing mirrors and missed opportunities for authentic and respectful windows and doors. Most of the books in the category of race still treat black children through a deficit view and only position them in an urban setting. The problem with this is that similar to the "victim narratives" associated with stories with Muslim characters especially Muslim women they present these lived experiences as monolithic and in doing so promote the single story.

Daniel Justice (2018) in his book, *Why Indigenous Literature Matters* references Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story":

Euro-Western literature as a particularly insidious purveyor of corrosive singular stories about all kinds of people...presumes that there is only one narrative that represents a thousand cultures and millions of people...the expression of the single story is inherently an expression of power...power is the ability to not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definite story of that person...single stories are shallow but easily mobilized to support inequality, bigotry and self-interest. (p.37)

The single story is an expression of power and limits and hides the diverse lived experiences of people. Interestingly, many authors writing for all of the social justice themes are white and cultural outsiders. This is significant because the question critical multiculturalism emphasizes is, "who is writing about whom and how"? It can be concluded that the authors writing about these themes are doing so mostly based on the single stories that are already part of the dominant narrative. They are just adding to that.

Lingering Questions

In the categories of race and religion, men are portrayed in often limiting ways. Black men are in many unspoken ways positioned as ‘absent fathers’ while Muslim men are seen as being aggressive and wanting to limit women’s empowerment. Since these single stories become the ‘only’ stories that many of our students’ encounter, one can understand the problematic impact they can have. If these stories were one part of a wide spectrum of diverse experiences it would be less concerning but since these stories make up the ‘whole’ and ‘only’ story of these lived experiences, they are incredibly concerning. On top of that these books are often the “go-to” books in public and school libraries.

Although, many of the books chosen for race were written by current and contemporary writers they all focus on past events specifically on the civil rights period. It further makes me question, why these single stories become the ‘only’ story for black people? How are these stories used to position black people in the past? Why are so many white authors choosing to write stories of black people in the past? Who are they writing for?

To answer my own last question, in all of the themes, it can be seen that books are being written for a white audience, namely white upper-class children. This can be concluded because most books still fall in line with Rudine Sims Bishop’s social conscious book category and are written to teach and make white children more comfortable and knowledgeable of those different from them.

These stories still continue position white children at the center and when ‘others’ are written about it is mostly done so to ‘teach’ the white children about them. This became particularly obvious when I examined the books about religion and a vast majority of them were about religious literacy, focusing on teaching aspects of the faith.

From this analysis, it can be seen that there needs to be more ‘everyday stories’ in all of the social justice themes. Stories that normalize and show a spectrum of diverse experiences. The everyday stories must be through an intersectional lens, they must show that there are many facets of one’s identity and this impacts one’s experiences in school and the world. In most of the picture books analyzed and specifically those centering on gender, the idea of intersectionality is missing. The focus is predominantly on white boys and their families. I wonder why there has been more progress with books dealing with gender and not the other categories? Does the political climate allow and impact this?

I still have the following questions for further research. These are also questions I also implore all teachers to critically and consciously think about whenever they are sharing stories with their students. What stories are we sharing that are “dangerous” and how can we shatter and disrupt them? What stories are we sharing that are “wonderous” that will continue to help us raise healthy, critical and empathetic students? Who is writing these stories? Does the insider outsider positionality matter? Who are the stories being written for?

Thomas King in his book, *The Truth About Stories* states, that “if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (King, 2003, p.153). In my analysis of representation in children’s literature of the social justice themes of race, gender and religion, I found that even though things have changed in terms of representation and we are moving towards respectful mirrors, windows and doors, what is stopping us from successfully achieving this is the limitation of the single story narratives that repeatedly present a monolithic representation.

I take King’s message as a call to action for teachers to critically think about the stories they share and bring into their classrooms. It is imperative that we are providing our students

with a spectrum of stories that show diversity of experiences and move away from monolithic representations and instead provide intersectional realities. Stories matter, as King (2003) says, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2). If stories are such an important cornerstone of our society, we must be critical and careful of the stories we tell.

As I complete this part of my research, I am compelled to revisit the elementary school student I was and my role as a teacher now. As I reflect, most of my schooling experience has left me feeling like I was sitting on the sidelines. I was never really included in the curriculum content, my religious and cultural identity was never positioned as an asset but rather seen through a deficit lens. Even after all of these years, the overwhelming feeling that continues to stand out is feeling like I did not belong or matter in my learning spaces. I am compelled to critically think about my own positional power as a teacher and the changes I can make. How can I center diverse lived realities? How can I create a space where all students will feel represented and have a sense of belonging? I think of my current role as a Teacher-Librarian and the impact I can have by curating a space through a lens of social justice where students feel ‘seen’. I have to believe in the power of stories, the seeds of understanding they can plant and the impact they can have. I believe this is one way I can honor the child I was and the teacher I will always strive to be.

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Zalben, J. (2018). *A Moon for Mo and Mo*. Massachusetts: Charlesbridge.

Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's Doll*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers

Appendix A

Social Justice Themes and Book titles Arranged Alphabetically:

Race:

- Best, C. (2018). *My three best friends and me, Zulay*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority, Library.
- Coles, R. (1995). *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. New York: Scholastic.
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Gender:

- Cornwall, G. (2017). *Jabari Jumps*. Massachusetts: Candlewick Press.
- Hall, M. (2015). *Red*. New York: Harper Collins Children's Books.
- Hoffman, S. et al., (2014). *Jacob's New Dress*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company.
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Religion:

- Bullard, L. (2012). *Rashad's Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr*. Minneapolis: Millbrook Press
- Cohen, M. (2009). *Layla's Head Scarf*. New York: Star Bright Book.
- Gilani-Williams. (2017). *Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group
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