

## **Multicultural children’s books at the French Canadian public library: Where can I find them?**

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**Abstract:** This article presents the results of a content analysis of 1,132 picture books published by French Canadian editors from 2003 to 2012. We took into account the representations of members of visible minorities, as well as the cultural origins of the authors and illustrators. Results show important gaps between the Canadian demographic reality and the representation of visible minorities in picture books. Consequences of the scarcity of multicultural picture books on children’s development are discussed. A few strategies that public libraries can use to alleviate the situation are presented.

**Keywords:** Multicultural literature – Children’s literature – Canadian literature – Public libraries

### **1. Introduction**

During the last thirty years, the demographics of the French Canadian population have been through tremendous changes due in great part to immigration from all around the world. But despite the increasing diversity that came to enrich the cultural mosaic of Canada, little is known about the availability of French Canadian children’s literature. Multicultural literature “refers to books about specific cultural groups considered to be outside of the dominant sociopolitical culture” (Yoon, Simpson & Haag, 2010, 110). In the present study, we refer more specifically to picture books in which there are representations of people who are part of visible minorities. Those picture books can be the work of authors and illustrators who are themselves representatives of a visible minority or of the mainstream culture (Ritcher, 2011).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) sustain that the ideologies of the society are embedded in children’s literature. Hence, through their exposure to multicultural picture books, youngsters can be exposed to ideologies concerning

multiculturalism which may have a marking influence on their developing mind. Being exposed to cultural diversity, even through picture books, can bring children to reassess their opinions, doubts or fears towards those who are different from them (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Moreover, exposure to multicultural children's literature has been shown to bolster the self-esteem and cultural identity of children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Louie, 2006). As for children who are natives, representations embedded in stories and illustrations of multicultural picture books can help define their beliefs and attitudes regarding people of diverse backgrounds (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). Therefore, it is important for all children to have access to multicultural picture books not only at home or at school, but also at their local library. But actually, we don't know much about the availability of French Canadian multicultural children's literature that can be found on the shelves of Canadian libraries. This research aims to inform us about that.

## **2. Context**

Since the 1980's, French Canadian children's literature has seen an unprecedented growth with more and more editors showing an interest in this part of the literary market. This period coincides with a growing awareness of the multicultural composition of Canadian society and the rapid demographic change that has occurred in Canada. According to Statistic Canada (2009), an important influx of migration from Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the Caribbean and the Oceania has taken place since the last three decades. With respect to linguistic diversity, Canada has two official languages – French and English. Even if the English language is predominant, some newcomers are joining the francophone communities to live their lives. As for its ideology of multiculturalism, Canada prides itself at home and abroad as a country made up of a cultural mosaic. The mosaic metaphor is based on the belief that Canada as a whole becomes stronger by having immigrants bring with them their cultural diversity for all Canadians to learn from (Levine & Serbeh-Dunn, 1999). This ideology is a guiding light for many Canadian public institutions such as the libraries. One way for libraries to align themselves with this ideology is to expand their collections of multicultural children's literature.

If children's literature is a reflexion of society, it is not surprising that some researchers have found that the French Canadian children's literature of the past decades has been influenced by the new realities regarding Canada's cultural diversity. Altogether, these studies sustain that there is an increasing representation of immigrants in French Canadian children's literature and that those protagonists are most often represented in positive manners. However, those conclusions have been drawn from only a few studies that were conducted with samples of novels for the intermediate or adolescent readers (Pouliot, 1994; Romney, 2005; Sorin, 2004). Therefore, they are offering an optimistic, but incomplete portrait of multicultural representations in French Canadian children's literature.

On the other hand, picture books that are usually intended to youngsters also convey ideologies regarding multiculturalism (McNair & Brooks, 2012). In fact, picture books are considered to be important social tools at a time when attitudes and stereotypes towards others begin to take form in the developing minds of young children. It has been shown that they are particularly influenced by implicit ideologies that can be found in the texts and images of picture books (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Moreover, multicultural literature has been found to be an important factor to consider for the success of minorities' children who are learning to read (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010).

The present study aims to analyse picture books published by French Canadian editors between 2003 and 2012 to quantitatively evaluate the importance of the representations of people from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. More specifically, it aims to answer the following questions: 1) What percentage of picture books published by French Canadian editors from 2003 to 2012 features people from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds? What individual groups are represented and to what extent? 2) For all these picture books, what is the racial or ethnic background of the authors and illustrators?

### **3. Methodology**

A content analysis was used for the methodology. The unit of analysis was the individual picture book. From a quarterly journal dedicated to reviewing all the French children's books published in Canada, we were able to make a list of most of the picture books published by French Canadian editors between 2003 and 2012. In each journal, a special section is dedicated to the review of picture books. As much as 1 132 entries were found. In regards to the first question of the study, only the 794 picture books in which human being were represented were included. After obtaining each of those picture books from a local public library, they were examined by two assistants and the researcher in order to record the following information: race or ethnicity of the characters, race or ethnicity of the authors and the illustrators (mostly obtained by online research) as well as bibliographic information. Following a classification developed by Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010), picture books were then classified into categories in order to get some quantitative data regarding the representations of different races and ethnicities.

### **4. Results**

The first questions of the research aimed to determine the proportion of picture books in which there were representations of visible minorities. Data that are presented in Table 1 are showing that in the 794 picture books in which there were human beings, people of visible minorities were only represented in 43 (5.4 %) picture books altogether. The details regarding the distribution of those 43 picture books between different racial or ethnic backgrounds appear in the table. We can see that White people were present in 756 (95.21 %) picture books that were analysed. For 20 (2.52 %) picture books, we were unable to identify which racial or ethnic groups were represented.

Table 1  
Racial / Ethnic groups represented

Racial or ethnic group	Number of picture books (N=794)	
	n	(%)
Black	11	(1.39)
Hispanic	2	(0.25)
Maghrebi	4	(0.50)
Japanese	2	(0.25)
Chinese	4	(0.50)
Philippino	5	(0.63)
South-East Asian	4	(0.50)
West Asian	4	(0.50)
South Asian	0	(0.00)
Koreans	0	(0.00)
Multiples representations	7	(0.88)
White	731	(92.01)
Unknown	20	(2.52)

The data that are presented in Table 2 are answering our question regarding racial or ethnic background of the authors and illustrators. For this question, data were computed from the 1 132 picture books that were identified, which allowed us to take into account the work of most of the creators involved in the production of French Canadian picture books. We can see that only 16 (1.41 %) picture books were written by authors that are part of a visible minority group and that 30 (2.65 %) of them were illustrated by a member of a visible minority. On the other hand, 1 087 (96 %) of those picture books were written by a White author and 1 060 (93.6 %) were illustrated by a White illustrator.

Table 2  
Racial or ethnic origins of authors and illustrators

Racial or ethnic group	Author N=1 132	Illustrator N=1 132
	n (%)	n (%)
Chinese	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
South Asian	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
Philippino	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
South-East Asian	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
West Asian	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
Korean	0 (0,00)	0 (0,00)
Japanese	1 (0,09)	2 (0,18)
Black	3 (0,27)	1 (0,09)
Hispanic	4 (0,35)	7 (0,62)
Maghrebi	8 (0,71)	20 (1,77)
White	1 086 (95,94)	1 060 (93,64)
Unknown	30 (2,65)	42(3,71)

## **5. Discussion**

By conducting this research, we wanted to know if the Canadian multicultural mosaic was reflected in children's picture books that were published in the French language from 2003 to 2012. We took into account the representativeness of the visible minorities in those picture books as well as the cultural origins of their authors and illustrators. In Canada, people that are part of a visible minority are representing 20 % of the population. Since only 5.4 % of the picture books are showing people from visible minorities, it can be said that there is an important gap between Canada's demographic reality and the representativeness of diversity in the French Canadian picture books. To answer the question in the title of this article, we can say that it can be difficult to find multicultural picture books on the shelves of French Canadian public libraries.

Romney (2005) sustained that in the 1990's it was possible to witness a growing representation of people from visible minorities in children's literature. As for Sorin (2004), she underlined that many books for the youth that were written by authors from various cultural background were published by French Canadian editors. We can rejoice to the fact that those studies, conducted on novel for intermediate and adolescent readers, could underline the multicultural spirit of the French Canadian children's literature. However, the cultural mosaic of Canada does not seem to express itself with as much emphasis in picture books that were edited between 2003 and 2012. In fact, our results sustain that chances are slim for French Canadian youngsters who are part of the visible minorities to come across a French Canadian picture book in which their cultural origins are celebrated; in short, a picture book in which they can recognize themselves.

Results of this study are showing a scarcity of authors and illustrators that are themselves part of minority groups. As stated by McNair & Brook (2012) cultural background of the author and the illustrator is an important factor to consider in view of the quality of picture books, since it can influence the cultural authenticity of their work. For this reason, it seems sensible to encourage editors to publish more works from multicultural authors and illustrators. Nevertheless, mainstream authors and illustrators who are conscientious about authentic representations of multiculturalism are also able to produce high-quality multicultural picture books, as long as their work is grounded in well documented research (Louie, 2006).

Our findings bring us to underline the need to heighten public awareness, in particular for parents, educators and librarians, of the important impact that under representations of the visible minorities can have on children. The effects are not only related to their developing ideologies about multiculturalism, but also to the success of minorities' children who are learning to read.

*Influences of multicultural literature on minorities' children's reading abilities*

The role of the motivation in learning to read has been demonstrated many times (e.i. Guthrie, Klauda & Ho, 2013). In this regards, it is well known that readers are more interested in texts that are reflecting their personal experiences. Hence, reading could be considered as an irrelevant activity for students that are rarely able to relate to the characters, as it could be the case for the French Canadian youngsters that are members of visible minorities. It is possible to see disengagement from literacy activities in these students if they never have the chance to recognize themselves in picture books that are presented to them. On the other hand, when picture books are showing characters that look like them and whose stories are reflecting their own culture or personal experiences, they can relate to reading as a reflection of their own life, which could be a motivational factor in learning to read. Multicultural literature has also been shown to be related to children's reading comprehension. As any other reader, to understand a text, minorities' children have to be able to establish some links between what they are reading and their prior knowledge. In fact, Gangi (2008) has shown that when they interact with texts that are reflecting their cultural experiences, reading performance of minorities' children improve significantly.

Given the influences of multicultural literature on children, we can only wish for more high-quality multicultural picture books in the French language. In the mean time, it is important to consider what can be done in the public libraries to compensate for the paucity that is observed in that area. What follows are a few strategies that public libraries could implant in order to alleviate the consequences that are brought up by the shortage of multicultural picture books that are available for the youngest French Canadian librarian users.

#### *Strategies for developing a multicultural library*

Celano and Neuman (2001) have demonstrated the important role of the public libraries in fostering literacy for preschool and elementary school children. They sustained that libraries are well-positioned to expose children to a wide variety of high-quality books that are reflecting the multicultural nature of society. However, given the scarcity of multicultural picture books in the French language, it could be challenging for French Canadian librarians to respond to the expectation. However, this situation should not prevent them from developing a multicultural library. In that matter, they could consider the following strategies.

To expand the collection of multicultural picture books available in the French language, librarians might consider including picture books that are produced in other francophone countries. They could also consider multicultural picture books that are being translated in French. In Canada, it is not rare to come upon books that have been translated from English to French. Multicultural picture books in foreign languages that are being translated in French should also be looked at. Librarians might also consider developing their multicultural collection by including picture books that are published in a variety of

languages that are relevant to the members of their community. In all cases, the overall quality of all the picture books that are added to the multicultural collection should be taken into account to make sure that they are suitable to the needs of the young patrons.

Agosto (2007) suggests that the following characteristics should always be considered when selecting multicultural materials: accuracy, expertise, respect, purpose and quality. Examples of accuracy would be picture books that are correctly presenting historical facts and cultural elements. They are also portraying differences among people of the same group, for no culture is monolithic. An indication of expertise criterion could be the cultural origins of the creators or their firsthand experience with the featured culture, which brings some authenticity to their work. As for the respect criterion, it could be detected by the tone that makes a minority group perceived as being equal and not a lower class, or by the avoidance of stereotypical images of characters. The purpose criterion refers to the significance of the cultural connections throughout the material. The cultural setting should add to the meaning of the story, not simply tacked on to make it seem more interesting. At last, the quality criteria refer to aspects such as storyline, plots, characters, settings, as well as the quality of illustrations, which have to be of interest for the young readers.

Welch (2011) offers some ideas that can contribute to build a dynamic multicultural library for youngsters. She suggests activities such as Book Talks or Literature circle to help them learn about different cultures and gain an insight into the lives of members of visible minority groups. Read-aloud, story-retellings, book buddies and other reading response projects are other possible activities to try with youngsters to bring them to interact with multicultural literature. According to Agosto (2007), picture books are a sensible choice for such activities since they provide visual clues that can help children who are learning a new language to decipher unfamiliar words, phrases, and concepts.

## **6. Conclusion**

With parents and educators, French Canadian public librarians have to be advocates on behalf of the children in demanding for more multicultural children's literature in the French language. By providing an access to multicultural literature, libraries are helping minorities' children to succeed both socially and educationally. In the spirit of the cultural mosaic of Canada, they also help them feel included and valued in the Canadian society. Also, all Canadian children are enriched by having access to a multicultural literature. However, awareness of these matters seems to be lacking in the part of French Canadians editors that are publishing children's picture books.

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