

## The Emperor Has No Race: Willful Blindness as Response to Children's Literature

Although it has been 52 years since Nancy Larrick wrote "The All-White World of Children's Literature" (1965), we continue to live in a very white world of children's literature. One only needs to ask readers from under- and mis-represented groups about their own reading experiences. For those who need hard data, there are several sources, including the CCBC publishing statistics (1985-present), Lee & Low's "Diversity Gap in Children's Publishing" (Low, 2016), American Library Association's "Diversity Counts" (2012), as well as the US Department of Education's "State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce" (2016).

As a white, cisgender, straight woman who studies and teaches children's literature in this white world, it is necessary for me to consider my own whiteness as I respond and analyze texts. At the very same time I am aware of my own whiteness, I must actively decenter it in order to fully engage with problematic and absent representations. Teaching children's literature in this white world is amplified in my scholarly home of teacher education, where 73% of undergraduate education majors are white. These teacher candidates bring with them values absorbed from their own school experiences, including the belief that children's literature is in schools to either "teach a lesson or moral" or "for fun and entertainment" (McIlhagga, p. 21, 2016).

When asked to critically consider representations of race in texts like *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder or Dr. Seuss books, common responses are fond childhood memories and denial or erasure of the racist representations. The defence of these books often includes "But children don't see race" or "This will be upsetting, and we need to protect the innocence of children as long as possible." This paper describes and explores teacher candidates' responses of to issues of representation in children's literature. Specifically, I show how willful blindness is used in order to explicitly disengage with connections between race, children's literature, and individual identity under the guise of protecting children.

### References

- American Library Association (2012). Diversity counts. Retrieved October 1, 2017, from <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/2009-2010update>
- Cooperative Children's Book Center (n.d.). Publishing statistics on children's books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators. Retrieved October 1, 2017, from <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>
- Larrick, N. (1965). The all-white world of children's books. In O.Osa (Ed.), *The All-White world of children's books and African American children's literature 1-12* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Low, Jason. (2016, January 26). Where is the diversity in publishing? The 2015 diversity baseline survey results. Retrieved October 1, 2017, from <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/>
- McIlhagga, K. (2016). *Children's literature in elementary teacher education curricula: A Repertoire for teacher as coach, critic, and curator* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (No. 10075020)
- U.S. Department of Education (2016). State of racial diversity in the educator workforce. Retrieved October 1, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf>