

“Exposing” Children to Diverse Books: Three Rationales for Teaching Multicultural Literature

The call for diverse books for children has become more widespread in the last decade with scholars, educators, librarians, parents and other caretakers becoming increasingly vocal about the benefits of multicultural literature. Many rely on Rudine Sims Bishop’s well-known metaphors of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to explain how books can function for readers. Mingshui Cai distinguishes between multicultural books and reading multiculturally and argues that both can be valuable ways of helping children think critically about the texts they encounter. Less attention has been paid to the reasons adults give for promoting diverse books.

In this paper, I examine one of these reasons for creating, acquiring, and reading multicultural books with children: exposure. Taking seriously the basic premise of Lakoff and Johnson’s classic *Metaphors We Live By*, I examine several of the main metaphors at play when we use the word “exposure.” Considering the word’s varying associations with disease, photography, and nakedness, I discuss different underlying attitudes educators and other caretakers can have about the role of multicultural literature for children.

To flesh out these metaphorical implications, I consider how Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson’s award-winning *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015) could be viewed from each of the three viewpoints. For some educators, this book is seen as part of a broader effort to “inoculate” children against prejudice and bigotry. For others, it can be seen as a way to “bring to light” a particularly crafted picture of the world. For others still, it can be an opening to vulnerability and risk for child readers. I explore the affordances and limitations of each approach as I attempt to offer a theoretical framework to distinguish between various pedagogical rationales for the use of multicultural books. In better understanding the reasons for teaching and reading multicultural books in general, we can better teach better books.