

Article

Unjust: Publishing Black and African American Children's Books and School Availability

Karen Bowlding * and Kathy Anderson *

Independent Scholar, Upper Marlboro, MD 20772, USA

* Correspondence: karenbowlding@gmail.com (K.B.); kathy.anderson.author@gmail.com (K.A.)

Abstract: Traditional book publishing has a pronounced and unjust deficiency of Black and African American voices. White culture, thoughts, and rules are the standard in traditional publishing. Black and African American authors are not typically picked up by white-dominated publishing companies. In traditional publishing, mostly white literary agents are gatekeepers and acquisition editors shut the doors too frequently to non-white authors. Aspiring Black authors then resort to hybrid or vanity press companies that often use unscrupulous practices, charge exorbitant fees, accomplish little or low-quality work, and deny authors' agency and full rights in the final disposition of a book. Because a majority of traditionally published children's books featuring Black or African American stories or characters are written by or illustrated by non-Black people, the wide possibilities of adventure, celebrations, discovery, and friendship stories are not published for Black children. Instead, publishers favor stories about slavery, the civil rights movement, famous Black people, and hair tales as well as racially ambiguous characters. Regrettably, Black and African American culturally relevant stories written and illustrated by Black or African Americans are not readily available to children in school and library settings consistent with schools' community or student demographics. This article shares research findings and viewpoints of Kathy Anderson and Karen Bowlding, two Black children's book writers and publishing consultants who are also parents. Black and African American students encounter education and cultural injustice because of the practices of traditional publishing companies, educators, and librarians. Parents and guardians can ameliorate these issues with discernment and action. Foremost, publishing company decision-makers must acknowledge their own racial biases that deny representation and authenticity to all children in our US classrooms.



Citation: Bowlding, Karen, and Kathy Anderson. 2024. Unjust: Publishing Black and African American Children's Books and School Availability. *Humanities* 13: 120. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13050120>

Received: 23 July 2024

Revised: 27 August 2024

Accepted: 2 September 2024

Published: 18 September 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: children's books; Black and African American children; bias in publishing; self-publishing; diversity; representation

1. Obstacles and Hurdles

Despite the attention to and investment in diversity initiatives, Black and African American authors face significant challenges in publishing and distributing their books. They are not getting their children's books picked up by the five big publishing companies—Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, Hachette Book Group, and Macmillan—under the established traditional publishing system (Pen America 2022). These five companies control over 80% of the trade publishing market, and their decisions support white authors and their values and beliefs. These white-dominated companies rarely acquire books and extend contracts to untried and little-known writers, let alone Black authors. Such is the unspoken but real injustice in the children's book publishing industry.

Traditional publishing starts with immediate gatekeeping. The initial requirement is that authors must have literary agents. According to *WordsRated*, the agent industry is 83.1% white and 4.1% Black as of 2023, and agents select only three to six new authors per year (Curcic 2023). *Lee & Low Books* produced "The Diversity Baseline Survey" to capture the composition of the publishing workforce and to establish statistics for diversity trends in the industry. According to the *Lee & Low Books' 2023* publishing diversity baseline survey

results, 72.5% of respondents identified as white, and 5.3% identified as Black/African American/Afro-Caribbean (Lee & Low Books 2023). Agents comfortably represent what is familiar to them and what is of interest to them and others who look like and think as they do.

The next obstacle for Black and African American authors at publishing houses involves acquisition editors charged with finding and acquiring manuscripts or proposals. At 85% white, they determine which proposals have market potential for a publishing house based on criteria developed by white people. Given the lack of Black and African American acquisition staff at the large traditional publishing houses, potential Black and African American books are not published due to insufficient decision-making authority of these specialists. According to *The New York Times* article, “A Conflicted Cultural Force: What It’s Like to Be Black in Publishing,” Black publishing professionals shared their experiences and frustration with issues surrounding Blackness in the workplace (de León et al. 2021). Tracy Sherrod, the editorial director of Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins, admits: “Sometimes there are proposals that come along, and you know in your heart that this is an important book on an important subject, but because the editorial room is all white, you may not be able to acquire it, so the only really painful thing about racism in publishing is the books that are not around, the books that didn’t get to be published” (de León et al. 2021).

It is a public secret that traditional publishers do not invest in Black and African American producers because they know that the USA as a whole will not support Black writers or support Black writers to the extent that they will support and market white children’s book authors. Whiteness, as in society, is standardized in the publishing industry. Stories outside of the norm must be extra special to get through the multiple layers of decision-making at publishing houses. Black celebrity-written or ghost-written stories, books about sports superstars, famous singers, or political agenda-driven topics get published, especially if championed through by a white staff. Still, a small percentage of books written by Black and African American authors published by traditional houses exist. Some of these books are culturally disrespectful in story and illustrations. For instance, too many of these big agency children’s stories center the narrative that Black folks only exist aggrieved in enslavement survival, move up from poverty, fight for civil rights, or overcome extreme hurdles to become famous—stories that favor the exceptionalism rather than the everyday joys of Black people’s lives.

There should be no books depicting Black children with bulging eyes, dark brown palms, pink lips, pointy noses, pickaninny hairdos, or Black or African American child characters added for the sake of diversity, as tokens. Yet, these portrayals still occur when illustrators inexperienced with drawing Black and African American characters are selected to visualize characters in a story. In our view, the following books are examples many written or illustrated by non-Black creators: *Right This Very Minute: A Table-to-Farm Book About Food and Farming* (2019) by Lisl H. Detlefsen; *Plants Feed Me* (2014) by Lizzy Rockwell; *Lola Reads* series by Anna McQuinn, *King & Kayla* series (2017) by Dori Hillestad Butler; *Ten, Nine, Eight* (1982) by Molly Bang; *I Can Do It Too!* (1989) by Karin Baicker; *I Know a Lot!* (2013) by Stephen Krensky; *The Camping Trip* (2020) by Jennifer K. Mann; *Saturdays at Harlem Grown: How One Big Idea Transformed a Neighborhood* (2020) by Tony Hillery; *Catch That Chicken!* (2020) by Atinuke; *My Hair* (2019) by Hannah Lee; *Rapping Princess* (2021) by Hannah Lee; *Little Red and the Very Hungry Lion* (2015) by Alex T. Smith; and *The Big Bed* (2018) by Bunmi Laditan (Colours of Us 2017) Quite a few traditionally published books prove the limited influence Black and African American writers have over the disposition of their stories as evident in the lack of books both written and illustrated by both Black and African American people.

2. Inside the Industry

In 2020, the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag generated by L.L. McKinney, a young adult fiction writer, started a conversation about the lack of attention paid to Black authors in

comparison to white authors (Grady 2020). They posited: “The trend shows that beloved black authors with well-established fanbases earn comparatively small advances that grow only slowly and over time. Virtually unknown white authors, meanwhile, report getting astronomical advances on debut novels, with no track record to speak of” (Grady 2020). Award-winning Black authors received dismal advances while Chip Cheek, a white first-time author, received an \$800,000 advance (Grady 2020).

Once a Black children’s book is produced, the publishing house determines the investment in that book. According to Constance Grady, “. . . black authors don’t always receive support from publishers that matches the appetite readers are showing for their work” (Grady 2020). Often, marketing capital and promotional support are limited or non-existent. Publishers push the high-cost books to recoup their upfront costs from large advancements to authors based on proven sales potential. An author cannot prove sales without financial and marketing team support, and denying them such support adds to the reasons publishers use to avoid Black authors. About 25% of books out-earn advances, yet white authors meet advantages not provided to non-white authors (MacGregor 2016). Disconcertingly, a huge percentage of traditionally published books, around 95% or more written by white authors, is never sold and returned to publishers each year with the standard being about 30% of books within six months of publication (Warner 2016). Thus, it is not hard to surmise that traditional publishers are satisfied with losing money on white authors while denying financial support for books by Black and African American authors. The industry does not seem bent on addressing this discordance. L.L. McKinney states, “What they’re paid. What the marketing is. How their books are treated. How one black book not reaching its parameters casts a shadow on all black books and all black authors, and that’s not the same for our white counterparts” (Grady 2020).

That authors may obtain reversion rights or gain permission to purchase unsold inventory from their publisher is not well known, and these considerations are not advertised outside certain networks in the publishing industry (Authors Alliance 2019). Black and African American authors are disadvantaged in industry connectivity and are not likely to learn of additional monetary opportunities offered to white authors. Generally, Black and African American authors with access to less influential agents receive minimal or no advances, earn lower royalty rates, and have no control over editing, cover design, artist selection, and publishing-based rights through traditional publishing.

In 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd, a call to action on addressing systemic racism resonated within the business industry. Traditional publishing sector employee demographic statistics were revealed, and Black publishing professionals were interviewed with their concerns published (Grady 2020). Each shared their story about challenges working within the industry and obstacles encountered getting Black stories published and books sold (Grady 2020). Across the interviews, the issue seemed to be publishers’ interest when there were racial discussions in political circles and lack of interest when race was not a hot-button issue that could be a profit opportunity for white publishers (Grady 2020). The paradigm does not exist for white people in publishing occupations or white authors. Based on the discussion, white people are not penalized for lackluster performance and are unaffected by being a barrier to Black success. In the end, publishing is a business, and Black creativity do not matter unless there is a substantial monetary gain for the publisher, which often translates to excluding many Black creatives.

The upswing in Black characters and Black authors in the children’s book publishing world’s best sellers proves Black pain profitable for white people. As soon as a particular grievous event dies down in the media, interest in Black life fades. *WordsRated* reported a “23% Decrease in Black Characters in Children’s Bestsellers as BLM Bounce Fades” (McLoughlin 2022). Key findings pulled from an assessment of *The New York Times* Best Sellers List and *School Library Journal* Best Picture Books demonstrated that between 2020 and 2021, the percentage of Black characters in children’s best seller books declined by 23%, and there was a 31% drop in the number of bestseller children’s books published and written by Black authors (McLoughlin 2022). During the same period, white authors

experienced the largest bump (17%) in published children's books best sellers over the last ten years (McLoughlin 2022).

3. Self-Publishing: An Insider's Perspective

Faced with the challenges created by the traditional publishing industry workforce, many Black authors resort to or choose to self-publish. Kathy Anderson and Karen Bowlding acknowledge that traditional publishing is also difficult for white authors; however, they do not face racism as step one, as evidenced by data showing that 95% of traditionally published authors are white (So and Wezerek 2020). Self-publishing can be accomplished as do-it-yourself with print-on-demand services, utilizing hybrid or vanity press outfits, or hiring service providers for each step in the process. New authors often use vanity or hybrid press businesses that charge upfront fees to cover the costs of publishing a book. The amount and quality of work done varies from minimal editing, poor art, and bad printing to a high-quality book produced for several thousand dollars and sometimes well over ten thousand dollars. These types of companies often charge a low fee for editing to hook the author, and once a contract is signed, they pressure authors to add additional services with exorbitant fees. Because authors are excited about their book project and not always aware of the holistic publishing process, they fall for the sham and expend excessive funds on a frustrating experience. In Karen Bowlding's history as a publishing consultant, several hybrid press-published authors and would-be authors have contacted her about their sub-standard children's books and shared tales about the expense, deceptions, and betrayal. Common issues included that their book was not sufficiently edited, illustrations were not provided, or when so, Black characters looked like white people with unkempt hair—harkening back to racist stereotypes by mostly white authors in years past. Overall, these books were of poor caliber, and printed on low-quality paper without the copyright notification and book identifier numbers. Many times, these authors were given less than twenty-five copies for self-sales and had to pay additional fees to order more books. Marketing, promoting, and participating in costly sale opportunities became an absolute financial loss when considering the return on investment and that the average self-published book sells two hundred and fifty copies (Rizzo 2023). This statement is not to discourage aspiring authors, since quite a few self-published authors have earned \$25,000 to \$100,000 in a year, meanwhile, traditionally published books sell on average about one thousand copies (Rizzo 2023).

Bowlding hired a press company to produce her first book; however, she was misled by a marketing scheme and a large book printing at the outset. She was convinced that all the hybrid companies were the same. After the publication of that book, she taught herself the entire publishing process and used her editing and design skills to publish all of her subsequent books and Anderson's second through current children's books. Since then, Bowlding has gained clients, over 95% Black, African American, or African, through word-of-mouth and client successive books. In a sense, Bowlding has become a Black author and illustrator social justice warrior, ensuring that Black authors have quality culturally relevant illustrated picture books that include artwork of non-white illustrators unless a client selects the illustrator prior to working with this author. She has also helped her clients calm high expectations of traditional publishing and avoid the predacious hybrid or vanity presses. Further, Bowlding rescued a few authors from predatory contracts as well as re-edited, designed, and produced high-quality replacement books. Nineteen years after that first lesson, she still recommends self-publishing for new and experienced Black authors to ensure their Black author voice authenticity and vision are manifested in the final book.

Once Bowlding's client's book is completed, she provides additional guidance for authors. She explains that distribution companies charge high fees for storage and shipping and that authors may get locked into long-term contracts that benefit the distributor, even while the books are not being sold. She suggests that authors order a manageable number of books from the printer, market, and sell the books themselves by reaching out to bookstores,

retail venues, and news outlets. Authors must also push their books on social media and find local vending opportunities. Bowlding's advice for authors is this: Trust and believe in yourself. Your writing has high value and is worth your caring effort to get the books in many deserving hands. If you write a great story and include beautiful culturally meaningful illustrations, you will sell your books.

Kathy Anderson and Karen Bowlding's children's books feature Black American characters and stories with themes of encouragement, food, farming, foraging, gardening, and outdoor adventures. We avoid online marketplaces, bookstores, and retail outlets since a good chunk of a book's price is taken for shelf or screen space. We sell our books on our own with 100% profit once we make enough sales to cover illustrations, registrations, and printing, which usually occurs within a few months of a book's release. Our books are purchased by various audiences: Africans, Asians, Europeans, Hispanics, Latinx, and others, including non-English speakers. Our colorful illustrated covers are eye-catching and has conversation-generating power. The books are unique, and people desire books featuring Brown-skinned children and even children unlike their own. These diverse buyers recognize the value in diverse stories and welcome learning about different cultures. Simply put, they see a good book for a child and make a purchase. Black and African American buyers see our books and seem to be overcome with joy. They smile and show their children the books and speak with excitement. We witness similar reactions from people who buy books for Black or biracial children in their families or the children of their Black friends. We are proof that books written and illustrated by Black Americans are popular with more people than those traditionally assumed mainstream readers.

Too many gatekeepers in the traditional publishing industry do not understand or care to provide books for wider audiences unless they can monetize a trend. The publishing industry is willing to suffer financially, wastepaper and ink, and anger open-minded people to ensure that white people earn a profit. Publishers ignoring the desires and needs of Black and African children is a huge loss of revenue, creativity, and enrichment, yet here we are, about 384 years after European colonizers started book printing in what was to become the United States, without the book needs of this demographic met. Black and African Americans must start their own publishing companies which include illustrated children's books, independent of university presses and traditional publishers, with financial standards for workers, writers, and illustrators that pay creators their value. Such book-justice companies would make a substantial difference for Black and African American authors and illustrators, editors and designers, and associated workers in the publishing operation. Until such time, there is limited cultural influence on the industry. Black and African American authors are stuck with vulture capitalistic options to get their books to market, and Black folks will continue to struggle to find critical culture reading material for all young readers.

4. Broader Implications

A child's introduction to creative language occurs through verbal storytelling subject to the choices, animation, and interpretation of the storyteller. In their early life, a child hears stories and books read by family members and guardians within their culture, sometimes with a Black cultural twist on white storybooks. With formal education and reading instruction, Black and African American students encounter education and cultural injustices. Illustrated reading assignments and beginning readers featuring white cultural norms and character depictions in all levels of private and public instruction are consistent and ubiquitous. In many education systems, few, if any, reading materials include representations of non-white characters or their lived authentic experiences. Book choices are limited due to the cultural and other biases of the decision-makers. Note that scholastic publishers are most often not Black or from African American communities.

Common to the US traditional mainstream publishing industry is a children's book featuring a Brown skinned child with European features written by a white woman, illustrated by a white man, and published by a white company with all eyes on the product sharing the

same perspective. The author, illustrator, and publisher's diversity range and experiences imprint on the setting and characters in a book and those notions often do not align with the actual personality and environs of a character different from their life accounts. These interconnected limitations are evident in the public school system literature offerings.

Black and African American children's choices are limited by the lack of availability of books that validate and reflect their lived experiences. Children can be empowered to select their own books; however, this Black child self-determination is restricted by decisions made by librarians, teachers, and school system personnel. Keep in mind that 80% of all public-school teachers and administrators are white even if their students served and serviced are more racially and ethnically diverse ([National Center for Education Statistics 2020](#)). Indeed, the dearth of Black and African American professionals in the library and school systems is a large part of the story, although, with increased numbers, the influence of these professionals might be still limited by long-term holistic and systemic biases against Black and African Americans socially, historically, and politically. According to the *Department for Professional Employees AFL-CIO's "Library Professionals: Facts & Figures, 2024 Fact Sheet,"* 7% of librarians identified as Black or African American in 2023 ([Department of Professional Employees 2024](#)). According to the *National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) "Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students" (2020)*, a representative sample from the 2017–2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey data indicated 7% of Black identified teachers and 79% white teachers ([Department of Professional Employees 2024](#)). The NCES noted, "The majority of teachers were White in schools where a majority of students were Hispanic (54%), Black (54%), Asian (60%), or American Indian/Alaska Native (61%). That is, a larger percentage of teachers were white than of the same race/ethnicity as the majority of students" ([National Center for Education Statistics 2020](#)). Too few Black people interact with students below the leadership levels either in the classroom or libraries, underscoring a deeply systemic issue also connected with what is and is not published, what is and is not read, what is and is not made accessible to all students.

Our research of school systems is based on books at the second-grade level because the age range is seven to eight years old when children have learned basic reading, know more complex words, and are developing literacy skills, including reading comprehension. At these ages, children are more independent thinkers and better able to articulate their thoughts. This time is also when children develop advanced ideas, interests, and preferences, and these preferences are often dictated by what is introduced to them. Online book lists for schools and families with young children are comprised of an astounding disproportionate majority of resources for white children while the list producers claim that these books are for all children.

We examined each book on every list shown during our online search. We scrutinized author and illustrator articles, photographs, professional and social websites, and other online information to determine the country of origin, culture, ethnicity, or race based on how the creators self-identified and in accordance with names and socially constructed and perceptible physical traits common among people of shared descent. We looked at book covers and available interior pages of each book reviewed for this research and followed the same strategy in considering the character depictions, setting, story, themes, and topics in characters' sociopolitical appraisals. Scholastic serves more than 90% of the K–12 schools in the United States ([Scholastic n.d.a](#)). Scholastic's "Credo and Editorial Platform," which has not changed much since 1970, includes these statements: "Help build a society free of prejudice and hate, and dedicated to the highest quality of life in community and nation" and "Respect for the diverse groups in our multicultural society" ([Scholastic n.d.b](#)). However, reading lists for second graders lack representation of Black child characters, authors, and illustrators. Of the sixteen books in the Scholastic listing "16 Books to Engage Second Grade Readers," one is about a Black American baseball player and written and illustrated by white people ([Scholastic 2024a](#)). One book has one Black

character, with the majority of his face drawn scratch-lined shadowed, unlike the white characters. The remainder of the books are about white people or animals.

The “Ultimate Summer Reading Book List for 1st to 2nd Grade” (2020) includes twenty books for second graders: one written by a biracial celebrity and illustrated by a Black person; one written by a white person and illustrated by a Black person, one written by a Black child and illustrated by an Asian artist; one featuring a Black child written and illustrated by a white person; one book with multiracial characters featuring a Black child on the cover (the same book being sold featuring multiracial children on the cover) written and illustrated by white people; one written and illustrated by a Black person; and one featuring a variety of family situations written by white people and illustrated by a Portuguese person (Scholastic 2024b). Thus, only one book is about a Black child and is written and illustrated by the same Black illustrator who illustrated a featured book written by a white author.

Time website “100 Best Children’s Books Of All Times” for 2015 includes only four books with Black people on the cover, two of which were written and illustrated by the same white male (D’Addario et al. n.d.). The other two books were authored and illustrated by Black men (D’Addario et al. n.d.). *Reader’s Digest’s* “106 Best Children’s Books of All Time” for 2023 described its review of bestseller lists and ask librarians, teachers, and parents to name books which they listed as the best children’s books of all time (Pennington 2023). This listing of 106 books includes 25 books featuring a Black main character, and of those, only eight are both written and illustrated by Black, African American, Caribbean, or African authors (Pennington 2023). The *Reader’s Digest* list of diverse books features eleven books with Black, African American, African, or Caribbean authors, and of these, three are illustrated by Black or African artists (Moreno 2023).

Bored Teachers has lists as well. The “50 Must-Read Books for Second Graders from Bored Teachers” caveats the listing with text that consists of the following:

Any book list or classroom library worth its salt includes books featuring LGBTQIA+ characters, racially diverse characters, characters with disabilities, characters in the foster care system, characters from a wide variety of socioeconomic and religious backgrounds, and so on. Importantly, the diversity of the characters doesn’t always need to be the focus of the literature—in other words, a book featuring a black character or gay character doesn’t need to be about those individuals exploring their blackness or their gayness; those characters can have kid problems that apply to all children regardless of their race or sexual orientation (Amy 2024).

Despite this progressive sentiment, the books on the website are more likely to immediately appeal to white audiences. The book about Negro League baseball is the only book written and illustrated by a Black American. Five books have at least one Black-presenting character, and they are all written and illustrated by white people. Only one book about a Black girl acting out white-themed events and characters is written and illustrated by white people (Amy 2024).

Librarians in schools have a responsibility to provide age-appropriate books consistent with school curricula to complement learning. Although the language in the education domain has been written to describe a will to be culturally responsible, based on the demographics of the student body in diversely populated geographic areas, choices have not been made to support that resolution.

For the 2023–2024 school-system student demographics of Prince Georges County, Maryland—the second wealthiest majority-Black American county in the nation—the population data show: American Black or African American (52.23%), Hispanic/Latinx of any race (39.32%), Asian (2.73%), and white (3.82%) (Prince George’s County Public Schools n.d.). The “Prince Georges County Memorial Library System 2023–2024 Second Grade Book List” includes a listing of sixty-two books (Prince George’s County Memorial Library System 2024). Out of sixty-two books, one series features a Black female character with the author and illustrator white; one series features mostly white characters and two Brown characters with white features; one book features a formerly enslaved Black American

who does not learn to read until age 116, and one book features a Black American and a host of diverse characters ([Prince George's County Memorial Library System 2024](#)). The creators of these books include one biracial illustrator, one Nigerian illustrator, and one Black American author. The remaining creators are majority white authors and illustrators. If these statistics hold across the system grade levels, 3.82% of the student demographic see themselves represented in some way in about 92% of the books. Only one book is created by both a Black American and a Nigerian, and that book about a woman who cannot read or write is published by a white traditional publisher.

Data in the Texas public school system report, "Enrollment in Texas Public Schools, 2022–23" shows the student demographics as Hispanic (52.9%), white (25.7%), African American (12.8%), and Asian (5.1%) ([Texas Education Agency 2023](#)). The *Texas Library Association's* "Current List of Recommended Books for Children Ages Two to Grade Two" features twenty books, one about a Black child written and illustrated by a person of Indian-Caribbean and Black American heritage, four books with multi-cultural characters with one highlighting a Black character, all written and illustrated by white people ([Texas Library Association 2024](#)). The remainder of the books feature white characters and animals, the majority of which are written and illustrated by white people ([Texas Library Association 2024](#)).

According to the "Georgia Department of Education Enrollment by Ethnicity/Race, Gender, and Grade Level," information for Atlanta Public Schools, the October 2023 enrollment by ethnicity/race comprised 70% Black students ([Georgia Department of Education n.d.](#)). According to the *Atlanta Public School's* 2024 Summer Reading List, of eight books, there are no Black character storybooks and not a single Black author or illustrator ([Atlanta Public Schools 2024](#)). One book features a biracial child and it is written by a white person and illustrated by a Mexican artist ([Atlanta Public Schools 2024](#)).

The student body at the schools served by *Jackson Public School's* District is 94.6% Black, 2.7% Hispanic/Latino, 1.3% White, and 0.1% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander ([U.S. News 2024 Jackson Public School District n.d.](#)). The *Jackson Public School* District's "Elementary School Division (Grades Pre-K—5) Summer Reading List" has eleven books listed for second graders ([Jackson Public School District 2024](#)). One book features a Black child written and illustrated by a Honduran creator, one book written by a Black celebrity and illustrated by a Black artist, and two books written and illustrated by Black people ([Jackson Public School District 2024](#)). Thus, 36% of the second-grade books in a school system with 94.6% Black student enrollment have Black representation while the Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and white student populations are each represented in 18% of the books.

Even reading lists developed for Black people limit discussion of books for young readers. The *Center for Black Literature* Reading List focuses on adult literature ([Center for Black Literature n.d.](#)). The list includes three picture books and one graphic novel out of 130 books. The *List Challenges* article "100 Must-Read African American Books" for 2024 does not list illustrated children's books ([List Challenges n.d.](#)). 2022 *The New York Times* "Children's Books by Black Authors: A Reading List" acknowledges the difficulty of finding Black children's literature yet lists older books adults may find more interesting than children ([Fielder 2022](#)).

5. What Does This Mean?

Parents understand the importance of diverse children seeing their non-stereotypical identities and experiences expressed in literary works. Outside of the classroom, the lack of Black and African American representation in children's book offerings in bookstores, libraries, and marketplaces is persistent. When available, these books are limited to white-accepted themes related to US antebellum enslavement, the civil rights movement figures, sports icons, well-known inventors, or hair tales. Black and African American children's books do not need to have an expressed diversity or activist focus for a child to relate. Too many of these didactic books miss the excitement and joy of Black adventure, fantasy,

friendship, or outdoor activity. Reading diverse books featuring culturally responsive storylines and characters are opportunities to introduce young readers to a wide range of varied ideas and tales that reflect different viewpoints, experiences, and backgrounds; both their own and those of others with a certain level of comfort. This Black American child or that African American child can dream out an adventure because they see something of themselves in the story.

The dearth of story representation, character portrayal, and creation by Black and African American people in children's book literature is alarming. The decision-makers in US education and library systems tolerate the underrepresentation for Black children while wholly supporting overrepresentation of Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and white children. "Black children are five times as likely as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity", according to the *Economic Policy Institute* (2020 (García 2020)). In schools, Black and African American children are required to read and learn about Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and white people while not being provided culturally significant stories about themselves that are both written by and illustrated by people within their demographic. School systems with a majority Black student enrollment can, and must, review and select from the lists of books on Black children's book resource websites and seek out independent Black and African American authors and illustrators and purchase the books of these creators to strengthen the self-esteem, literacy, and cultural satisfaction of Black children.

There are resources for finding traditionally published Black children's literature. A good list for Black-themed books is provided by The *African American Literature Book Club* (2023) which features the African American Literature Book Club's "Top 117 African American Children's Books for 2023" (African American Literature Book Club 2023). The website identifies books for various ages written and illustrated by Black creators, including stories about adventures, courage, family, hair, historical figures, music, sports, and more. The *FindMyKids* Blog lists (Bourque 2022) and The *I Am Unique* (I Am Unique 2020) website capture themes such as race/anti-racism, biographies, self-esteem, Caribbean/African diaspora, family, arts, and STEM. *Essence* has a list of books penned by Black celebrities and renowned authors through traditional publishing (Boone 2020). Quite a few are illustrated by non-Black artists. Nonetheless, there is fun and interesting reading for Black children. *SheKnows* has a list of books by Black authors and illustrators that are not common to some of the other book listings (McCovey et al. 2024). The list of "28 Brilliant Black Children's Book Authors We Love" from *We Are Teachers* has a varied Black cultural list of uplifting teacher favorites (Moore 2023). *Reading Middle Grade* (2024) offers "Best Children's Books by Black Authors" from early readers through late teen bookworms with a variety of diverse characters and topics (Reading Middle Grade 2024). For a child interested in Black artists and photographers, a short list of books, "Black Art History: Ten Children's Books Illuminate the Lives of Important African American Artists and Photographer" can be found at *Culture Type*, a website dedicated to visual art from a Black perspective. Black and African American children deserve to read stories that reflect them, and non-Black children can benefit as well.

While these seem like a lot of relevant lists, the books are a sliver of the number of published children's books. Per 2022 data, *Scholastic* alone publishes over 750 children's books each year (Talbot 2022). Yet, over the last six years, about 11% to 15% of children's books featuring Black/African characters were received by the *Cooperative Children's Books Center* (Cooperative Children's Book Center School of Education University of Wisconsin-Madison n.d.). School system personnel must not only select representative characters but also obtain books with diverse themes for Black and African American children similar to books for white children, such as splashing in the rain, playing with cars, being a superhero, dreaming of a woodland adventure, or growing up on a farm without mentioning sharecropper or enslaved ancestors.

Good storytelling involves proficiency in a particular topic, understanding a Black and African American child audience, and demonstrating care about the topic. Black and

African American authors and illustrators are in the marketplace; however, they are not often featured in traditional publishing, media, on prominent bookshelves, or in libraries. Some books for Black and African American children are written and/or illustrated by both Black and African Americans; however, most are produced by white publishers with full control over content, design, distribution, and rights. Those publishers often pair a Black or African American author or illustrator with a white person or creator of another ethnicity. It takes research and due diligence to find books created by both Black and African American authors and illustrators that have control over their work via the self-publishing process. The creators and their books are at local author book signings, farmers markets, childcare and club events, and book fairs hosted by entrepreneurs, local government agencies, and non-governmental entities.

Parents and guardians of Black and African American children must be vigilant in holding schools and libraries accountable for the lack of culturally appropriate resources for their children while paying tax dollars to support an overabundance of literacy assets for other children. They must also hold themselves responsible for providing books in a variety of genres with meaningful Black and African American images and storylines that instill in Black self-love, impart knowledge, and entertain with creative adventures. Some of these books are found in the homes of elder family and friends. On a recent visit with our friend, "Auntie," we were introduced to *Bright Eyes, Brown Skin* (1990), by Cheryl Willis Hudson and Bernette G. Ford and illustrated by George Ford; *The Other Side* (2001) written by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by E.B. Lewis; and *Little Cliff and the Porch People* (1999) by Clifton L. Taulbert and illustrated by E.B. Lewis. Each of these books is written and illustrated by Black creatives. One may also find children's books written by author Eloise Greenfield who wrote 40 books including biographies, chapter books, picture books, and poetry.

Black and African American authors are witness to educators' reactions to seeing their books with stunned, surprised, teary celebratory expressions. Children's eyes light up and mouths are agape with pleaded looks to their parents. Imagine the excitement, squeals, laughs, and hugs expressed by children when they are handed an autographed book from an author who looks like them with stories and art reflecting their experiences and cultures! As Black authors and Black author allies, we must take cultural literacy justice into our own hands. Purchase books by Black and African American authors and illustrators, encourage others to do the same and write one's own Black and African American culturally meaningful children's book.

Author Contributions: K.B. and K.A. have equally contributed to the conceptualization, research, and writing of this article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data was created.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- African American Literature Book Club. 2023. Top 117 African-American Children's Books for 2023. Available online: <https://aalbc.com/books/children.php> (accessed on 14 July 2023).
- Amy. 2024. 50 Must-Read Books for Second Graders. *Bored Teachers*. Available online: <https://www.boredteachers.com/post/50-must-read-books-for-second-graders> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Atlanta Public Schools. 2024. 2024 Summer Reading List. Available online: <https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/Page/70371> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Authors Alliance. 2019. My Publisher Agreed to Revert Rights: Now What? Available online: <https://www.authorsalliance.org/2019/07/23/my-publisher-agreed-to-revert-rights-now-what/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Boone, Keyaira. 2020. Here Are the 50 Must-Read Black Children's and Young Adult Books of the Last 50 Years. *Essence*. Available online: <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/50-black-childrens-young-adult-books/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Bourque, Crystal. 2022. 20 Must-Read Children's Books By Black Authors. *FindMyKids Blog*. Available online: <https://findmykids.org/blog/en/childrens-books-by-black-authors> (accessed on 14 July 2024).

- Center for Black Literature. n.d. CBL List of Recommended Books by Black Authors. Available online: <https://centerforblackliterature.org/recommended-reading-list/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Colours of Us. 2017. 25 Multicultural Children’s Books Teaching Kindness & Empathy. Available online: <https://coloursopus.com/19-multicultural-childrens-books-teaching-kindness-empathy/> (accessed on 20 August 2024).
- Cooperative Children’s Book Center School of Education University of Wisconsin-Madison. n.d. Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color (All Years). Available online: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Curcic, Dimitrije. 2023. Literary Agent Statistics. *Wordsrated*. Available online: <https://wordsrated.com/literary-agent-statistics/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- D’Addario, Daniel, Giri Nathan, and Noah Rayman. n.d. The 100 Best Children’s Books of All Time. *Time*. Available online: <https://time.com/100-best-childrens-books/> (accessed on 8 July 2024).
- de León, Concepción, Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris, and Joumana Khatib. 2021. ‘A Conflicted Cultural Force’: What It’s Like to Be Black in Publishing. *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/books/book-publishing-black.html> (accessed on 29 May 2024).
- Department of Professional Employees. 2024. Library Professionals: Facts & Figures. Available online: <https://www.dpeafclcio.org/factsheets/library-professionals-facts-and-figures> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Fielder, Brigitte. 2022. Give the Children the Poems and Stories of Their Own People. *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/childrens-books-black-authors.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- García, Emma. 2020. Schools Are Still Segregated, and Black Children Are Paying a Price. Economic Policy Institute. Available online: <https://www.epi.org/publication/schools-are-still-segregated-and-black-children-are-paying-a-price/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Georgia Department of Education. n.d. Enrollment by Ethnicity/Race. Gender and Grade Level (PK-12). Available online: https://app3.doe.k12.ga.us/ows-bin/owa/fte_pack_ethnicsex.entry_form (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Grady, Constance. 2020. Black Authors Are on All the Bestseller Lists Right Now. But Publishing Doesn’t Pay Them Enough. Available online: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/6/17/21285316/publishing-paid-me-diversity-black-authors-systemic-bias> (accessed on 20 August 2024).
- I Am Unique. 2020. 100 Children’s Books Featuring Black Characters Written by Black Authors. Available online: <https://www.iamuniquebook.com/blog/2020/6/12/100-childrens-books-featuring-black-characters-written-by-black-authors> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Jackson Public School District. 2024. Elementary School Division (Grades Pre-K-5). Required Title and Choice List.pdf. Available online: <https://www.jackson.k12.ms.us/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Lee & Low Books. 2023. The Diversity Baseline Survey. Available online: <https://www.leeandlow.com/about-us/the-diversity-baseline-survey> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- List Challenges. n.d. 100 Must-Read African-American Books. Available online: <https://www.listchallenges.com/100-must-read-african-american-books> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- MacGregor, Chip. 2016. Ask The Agent: What If My Book Doesn’t Earn Out? MacGregor and Luedeke. Available online: <https://www.macgregorandluedeke.com/blog/ask-agent-book-doesnt-earn/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- McCovey, Sherri, Sabrina Rojas Weiss, and Kweli Wright. 2024. Beautiful & Brilliant Children’s Books by Black Authors & Artists. Available online: <https://www.sheknows.com/parenting/slideshow/2270733/childrens-books-black-authors/> (accessed on 10 June 2024).
- McLoughlin, Danny. 2022. 23% Decrease in Black Characters in Children’s Bestsellers as BLM Bounce Fades. *Wordsrated*. Available online: <https://wordsrated.com/representation-childrens-literature/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Moore, Tamara. 2023. 28 Brilliant Black Children’s Book Authors We Love. *We Are Teachers*. February 8. Available online: <https://www.weareteachers.com/black-childrens-book-authors/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Moreno, Robyn. 2023. 36 Children’s Books About Diversity to Read to Your Kids”. *Reader’s Digest*. Available online: <https://www.rd.com/list/childrens-books-about-diversity/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2020. Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students. Available online: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Pen America. 2022. Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing. Available online: <https://pen.org/report/reading-between-the-lines/> (accessed on 9 September 2024).
- Pennington, Molly. 2023. 106 Best Children’s Books of All Time. *Reader’s Digest*. Available online: <https://www.rd.com/list/the-best-childrens-books-ever-written/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Prince George’s County Memorial Library System. 2024. 2023–2024 Second Grade Book List. Available online: <https://www.pgcmpls.info/book-lists> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Prince George’s County Public Schools. n.d. Facts and Figures. Available online: <https://www.pgcps.org/facts-and-figures/> (accessed on 9 September 2024).
- Reading Middle Grade. 2024. Best Children’s Books by Black Authors. Available online: <https://readingmiddlegrade.com/childrens-books-by-black-authors/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).

- Rizzo, Nicholas. 2023. Self-published Books & Authors Sales Statistics [2023]. *Wordsrated*. Available online: <https://wordsrated.com/self-published-book-sales-statistics/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Scholastic. 2024a. 16 Books to Engage Second Grade Readers. Available online: <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/teaching-tools/book-lists/16-books-to-engage-second-grade-readers.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Scholastic. 2024b. The Ultimate Summer Reading Book List for 1st to 2nd Grade. Available online: <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/teaching-tools/book-lists/ultimate-summer-reading-for-1st-to-2nd-grade.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Scholastic. n.d.a Available online: <https://education.scholastic.com/education/home.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Scholastic. n.d.b Scholastic Credo and Editorial Platform. Available online: <https://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/credo/> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- So, Richard, and Gus Wezerek. 2020. Just How White Is the Book Industry? *The New York Times*. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Talbot, Dean. 2022. Scholastic Statistics. *Wordsrated*. Available online: <https://wordsrated.com/scholastic-statistics/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Texas Education Agency. 2023. Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2022–2023. Available online: <https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/school-performance/accountability-research/enroll-2022-23.pdf> (accessed on 1 July 2024).
- Texas Library Association. 2024. Current List. Available online: <https://txla.org/tools-resources/reading-lists/2x2/current-list/> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- U.S. News 2024 Jackson Public School District. n.d. *U.S. News Education*. Available online: <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/mississippi/districts/jackson-public-school-district-111805> (accessed on 14 July 2024).
- Warner, Brooke. 2016. Returns 101: What New Authors Need to Know. *Publishers Weekly*. Available online: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/71886-returns-101-what-new-authors-need-to-know.html> (accessed on 1 July 2024).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.