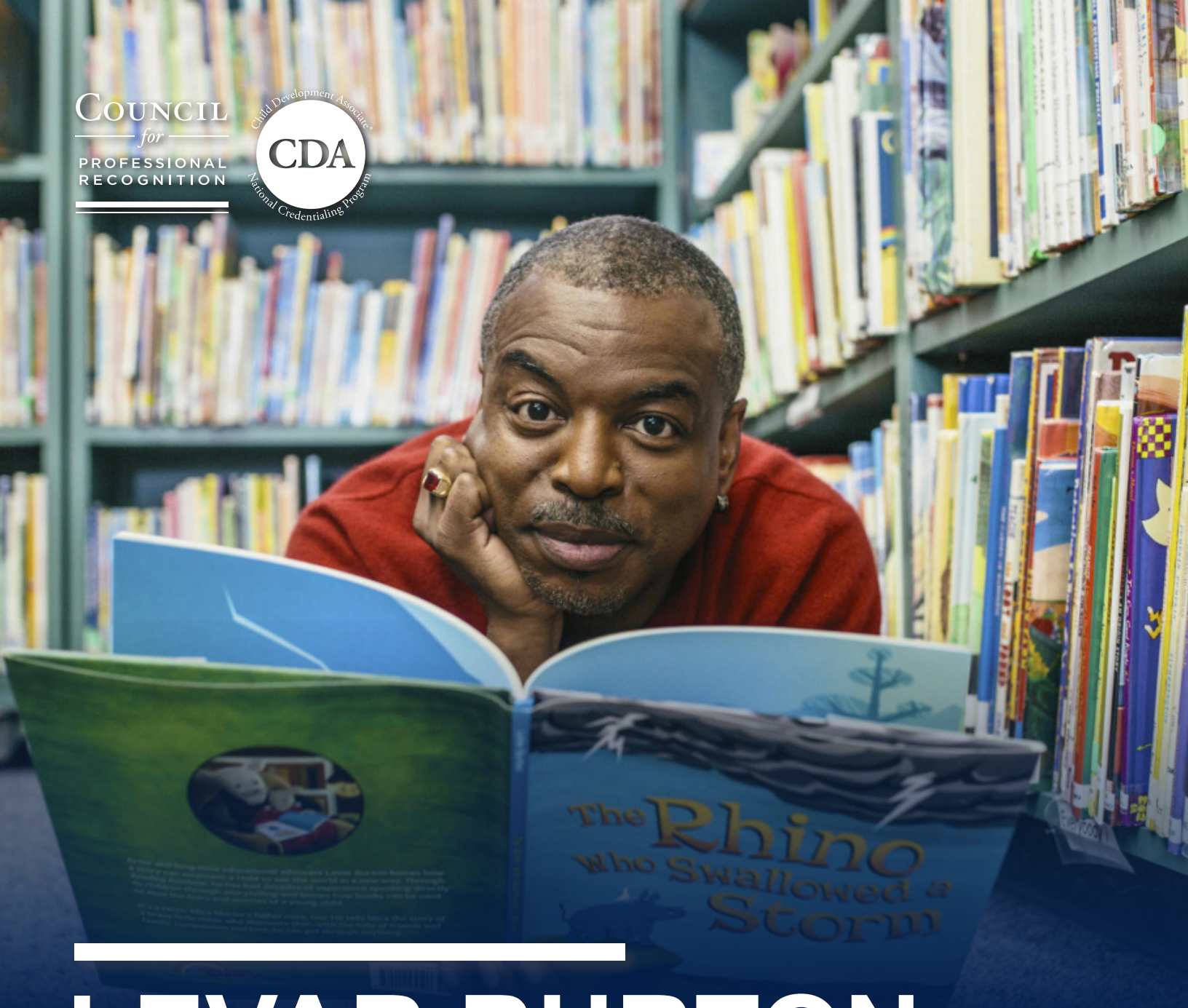

Council for Professional Recognition

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LEVAR BURTON TALKS CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

Race, Representation and Reading

Being Black and blind shouldn't stop you from going boldly where no one has gone before, as millions of Trekkies know. "When the first *Star Trek* series aired in the 60s, it meant an "enormous amount to me," said LeVar Burton, who raised Americans' awareness in 1977 as African captive Kunta Kinte in *Roots*, an acclaimed miniseries that told the story of slavery in our nation. In the 1980s and 90s, he would go on to play Commander Geordi La Forge, the sightless—and stellar—chief engineer on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Burton was drawn to the role, he recalled, because "*Star Trek* was a real, positive portrayal of people of color in the future."[1]

REACHING CHILDREN THROUGH READING RAINBOW

"I'm a science fiction fan, but it was exciting and fairly uncommon for me to encounter heroes in the pages of the science fiction novels I read who looked like me," Burton explained. "Gene Roddenberry, who created, wrote and produced the series, had a different vision of the future. Seeing Michelle Nichols, the Black actress who played Lieutenant Uhuru on the bridge of the original Enterprise, meant the world to me. As a storyteller, Gene Roddenberry was saying, 'When the future comes, there's a place for you.' It was a representation of the future that I could project myself onto."[2]

Besides fiddling with the starboard power coupling and warp drive of a starship, Burton has been deeply involved with the national discourse on racism and promoted reading for children. As producer and host of *Reading Rainbow*, he spent 26 years delivering books and a love of learning to children via TV. It gave him a chance to share some of his favorite books, ranging from anything by Dr. Seuss to *Enemy Pie*, a moving lesson on the rewards of making new friends, and *Amazing Grace*, about a young Black girl who wants to be Peter Pan in a school play.[3] As a storyteller and star, he knows the power of seeing someone in the media you can identify with—especially for children. "Absent examples of oneself in the popular culture," he said, "a dangerous message is sent to a child—a message that says, 'You are not important, and you don't matter in this world.' Representation is so important in the media we consume."[4]

MIRRORS, WINDOWS AND SLIDING GLASS DOORS

Reading books with a diverse cast of characters is one of the best ways to teach children the value of equity and inclusion as they explore their place in the world, relationships with others, and stops along the way in their trek through life. Books can serve as mirrors that reflect a child's experience, include characters that resemble them, build self-confidence and self-respect. So, it's important for early childhood teachers to select books that "represent the children they serve," according to Erin Johnson, an assistant director of literacy at Springboard Collaborative, a nonprofit devoted to closing gaps in reading. And she has encouraged

teachers to “pick books that give kids a voice, where kids can say this person looks like me, so I feel valued.”[5]

Diversity also needs to go both ways, and books can sometimes be windows that give children a chance to view things beyond their daily existence. Windows are important because they help young children explore communities outside their own, give them a map of where they can go and spark their imaginations. Windows, in turn, can serve as sliding glass doors that transport readers into fantastic worlds like those that the Enterprise crew once explored.[6] “The more that you read, the more you will learn. The more that you learn the more places you’ll go,” Dr. Seuss urged young fans in a whimsical paean to the amazing power of books.[7]

READING CHANGES US ALL FOR THE BETTER

Books can beam children into new realms of experience by introducing them to different cultures and the lives of peers from around the world. Multicultural literature embraces the entire scope of the human condition—depicting a variety of races, genders, languages, ethnicities, social classes, and religions—so it opens young readers’ eyes to ways of life that differ from their own. Books that feature characters from diverse backgrounds help children recognize that others aren’t so different from themselves, empathize with them, and see the importance of inclusion.[8] “Reading changes us all for the better,” as Burton has pointed out, “by bridging the divide between the races.”[9]

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For children to get the message, authors must communicate the characters and plots in a way that children can identify with. A well-written children’s book has fully fleshed-out characters who change in response to life events and a well-structured plot with enough conflict and suspense to hold children’s interest. Books like this can have a positive impact on children’s viewpoints by explaining why others behave the way they do and by treating all types of people with respect.[10] Sadly, this has too long been the exception, not the norm. Recent decades point to the prevalence of entrenched racial and social stereotypes in children’s books, as some of our educators have recalled.

BIAS AND BANDITS

There are too few children’s books that celebrate diversity, said Gerard Visco, a white preschool teacher who’s married to a Nigerian doctor. “The first time I saw an interracial couple portrayed in any piece of media was during my first year of teaching when I found a beat-up copy of Arnold Adoff’s *Black is Brown is Tan*, published in 1973. I took to the book instantly because

of its loving portrayal of an interracial family. As a preschool teacher, I teach a unit on families each year, and while I was happy to see my own reality reflected in the book, I know there are families that are too often ignored in picture books. When was the last time you opened a book for children that portrayed a happy, loving Egyptian-American family? A modern Cheyenne family? A family with a trans parent? A family with two moms? Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of children's books still feature white protagonists and the publishing industry, itself, has long shown a startling lack of diversity."[11]

Also disturbing are the racial stereotypes that appear in many children's books, complained Lindsay Pérez Huber, a professor of education in California. "Ten years ago," she recalled, "I sat down with my 8-year-old daughter to read a book before bedtime. The book was sort of a modern day 'boy who cried wolf' story, only it was about a little girl named Lucy who had a bad habit of telling lies. In the story, Lucy borrowed her friend Paul's bike and crashed it. Lucy lied to Paul, telling him a 'bandit' jumped in her path and caused the crash. I saw the image and stopped reading. I was stunned. The image on the page was the racist stereotype of the 'Mexican bandit' wearing a serape, sombrero and sandals."[12]

THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Huber's effort to help her daughter understand what they were seeing in the book made her aware of the apartheid in children's literature. It confines characters of color to the occasional books that focus on the legacies of slavery and civil rights. Sure, the mission statements of major publishers are littered with good intentions and commitments to multiculturalism that fuels children's imaginations and belief they can make an impact on the world. For years, editors and publishers have promoted one or another program that demonstrates their company's dedication to diversity. With so much reassurance, it's hard to point fingers, but the reality stands in stark contrast to all the rhetoric and hot air. The business of children' s literature has enjoyed ever more success, sparking multiple movie franchises and crossover readership, even as representations of young people of color became harder and harder to find.[13]

WE NEED DIVERSE BOOKS

In 2014, the University of Wisconsin at Madison's School of Education found that less than three percent of newly published children's books were about Black people. For a group of minority authors and publishing insiders, it was high time to confront the unbearable whiteness of being in their field.[14] It's no coincidence that books for young readers have become more diverse in the past few years since there's been an organized push for change About six years ago, children's author Ellen Oh tweeted her frustration about an all-white-male panel at an upcoming book convention. The outrage that followed led to the hashtag #WeNeedDiverse Books and a successful social media campaign.[15]

"It's kind of like *Horton Hears a Who*, (one of Burton's favorite books as an avid fan of Dr. Seuss). We were finally able to be

In 2018, the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Cooperative Children's Book Center reported that 27 percent of children's books published were about animals, trucks and other objects and that 50 percent were based around white characters.

heard outside our little ball of fluff," said Oh, who is Korean American and had many conversations with other authors, illustrators and industry professionals whose identities were not well represented in children's publishing. They wanted more than words and started the nonprofit We Need Diverse Books with the aim to shake the industry up. It did with a wide range of programs: grants to unpublished illustrators and writers from diverse backgrounds, awards for authors and independent booksellers, a mentorship program and a donation of about 20,000 books to public schools. In the past few years, the organization's focus has broadened because Oh is convinced that "diversity has to be for every kid. Otherwise, we will never learn empathy and we will never grow."[16]

There's still work ahead to root out racism in children's books, according to the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Cooperative Children's Book Center. In 2018, the center reported that 27 percent of children's books published were about animals, trucks and other objects and that 50 percent were based around white characters. This left room for only a feeble 1 percent of published books to focus on Native Americans, 5 percent on Latinx, 7 percent on Asian Americans and 10 percent on African American characters.[17]

These are disturbing numbers since books make up the cornerstone of our children's early education. Young children learn through what they see and what their families and teachers read to them. Children need exposure to multicultural literature, and their educators need to know how to make the right use of diverse books in the classroom.[18] Children perceive race and teachers should acknowledge this as they challenge bias through books.

That was one of the goals of *Reading Rainbow*, Burton has said in the talks he gives to packed crowds on role models, representation in storytelling and its impact on the young.[19] "We definitely have a lot of work to do in that respect. There are a lot of things that divide us in the world that don't need to. Race is one of them. Color is another. Sexual orientation. Religion. There is a laundry list of things that we use as wedges of divisiveness between us that are arbitrary—and it's a long list."[20]

DISCUSSING DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Educators can play a role in whittling it down as Burton knows because he comes from a family of teachers. "My mother was an English teacher," he once recalled. "My sister is in education, so is my son as are my two nieces. If you are a Burton, you are in the education business. I'm in the family business from this other branch called entertainment. But I have so much love and respect for what you do." Unfortunately, "this country does not value the contributions you make on a daily basis," Burton said as he considered the low wages teachers make and the challenges they face. "We have spent too much money on war and the machineries of war. As a consequence, we are leaving our children in the dust. And that, to me, is not okay."[21]

Showing children that we see and value all aspects of them—including aspects related to culture and race—is a critical first step in making them feel welcome and connected to their teachers and peers.

It's also not okay to Ms. Jenkins, an early childhood teacher in South Carolina who knows how to read her way to a culturally responsive classroom. One morning, she sits in front of 18 children holding *The Colors of Us*, in which a young girl sees the beauty in all shades of skin. Ms. Jenkins begins by asking the children to observe their skin color and keep thinking about the color they believe themselves to be. Some of the children close their eyes tightly as Ms. Jenkins explains that she wants them to think about their color or race as she reads the story. Afterward, she tells the children that no one is white or Black. We're all just different shades of brown, as the story shows. Then she has the children turn and talk to their classmates about the color they think is like their own. It's the start of a lively discussion about diversity in the early childhood classroom.[22]

Or take another case of effective race-related practice in an early childhood setting. It begins when four-year-old Yasmin, who is Black, walks into the dramatic play area as the beads in her braids click to the rhythm of her steps. Her teacher Ms. Cindy, who is white, and her friend Alexis, who is Black, are sitting on the floor braiding the dolls' hair and choosing beads to put in the braids. Later, Ms. Cindy reads aloud *I Love My Hair*, about a young Black girl who learns to take pride in her hair though it hurts sometimes when her mother combs it. Then she talks about the things different adults do to help children take care of their hair. As the students share their own experiences, Ms.

Cindy repeats that children have different types of hair and there are different ways adults care for children's hair—but all these actions show love.[23]

Showing children that we see and value all aspects of them—including aspects related to culture and race—is a critical first step in making them feel welcome and connected to their teachers and peers. When Ms. Cindy joined in the children's play and then followed up with a book about it, she sent a message to Yasmin and her peers that the classroom is a place where all children—no matter their ethnicity and race—can be proud of their background and feel good about themselves. These feelings of comfort and trust also set the stage for Yasmin to engage eagerly in learning and exploration.[24]

WHAT CHILDREN READ MATTERS EVERY DAY

Using multicultural books helps because it gets young learners more excited about reading.[25] A recent example of a book that touched many lives and hearts is *Black is a Rainbow Color*, in which a child reflects on the notion of "Black," noting its place in the spectrum of colors and world as a whole.[26] It was published last year as activists nationwide released a resounding plea: "Black Lives Matter." And early childhood teachers need to look for more books like this because what children read matters every day.

Teachers who'd like guidance in choosing books can turn to the *Essentials for Working with Young Children*, published by the Council for Professional Recognition, a global nonprofit committed to equity in early childhood education. The *Essentials* provides a concise but complete list of ways to examine children's books for bias:

- Check the illustrations and text for stereotypes of various ethnic/racial groups. Determine whether characters of a particular ethnic or racial group have exaggerated features and be wary of "token" illustrations in which all African Americans and Hispanics appear as dark-skinned people with Caucasian facial features.
- Check the plot and determine the characters' roles. Are men active and women helpless? Do white characters help resolve the non-white characters' problems? Do people with special needs appear helpless?
- Look at the characters' lifestyles. Do people of color live only in ghettos, barrios or migrant camps? Are some people always wearing traditional clothing? Are families only headed by a mother or father?
- Consider the relationships among the characters. Do only the white characters possess power and show leadership? Do only men take charge and solve family problems?
- Note the heroes and heroines. Do non-white heroes exhibit the same positive qualities as white heroes? Are they admired for the same attributes? Are there powerful female heroes?
- Consider the effects on a child's self-image. Are there positive characters with whom minorities, girls, children with nontraditional families and people with special needs can identify?[27]

GOING BOLDLY INTO THE FUTURE THROUGH BOOKS

As a blind, Black engineer on a starship, Burton served as a role model who defied some of these biases. And as host of *Reading Rainbow*, he urged children to break down the barriers they faced by becoming lifelong readers. "I think what we're trying to do is enrich the lives of kids," he said a few years back. "I believe that the more kids we can get to with our message, who are making the decision whether they'll be readers for life or not, the more we can get them to tip the scales in favor of 'You know what, I love reading!' It will increase and improve their chance to reach their fullest potential in life. And I believe that means being the best person they can in every respect."[28]

We need more diverse books that encourage our children to remember their roots—while they also reach for the stars. And as early childhood teachers, we should be enterprising when we select texts. We should look for books that are mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors, those that can open a world of new adventures to young children. We should choose books that introduce children to new people and ideas, allow them to imagine themselves in the story and prepare to launch into the future. The right books will give them the confidence to go boldly to places they never expected to go before.

We need more diverse books that encourage our children to remember their roots—while they also reach for the stars.

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