



The Diversity Audit as a Tool for Accountability and Inclusivity

By Megan Dowd Lambert



1 The Author with Three Books from the MERGE for Equality Children's Book Campaign

I hold a lot of privilege in our society. I am a White, cisgender, bisexual woman of French-Canadian and Irish descent. I'm in my forties, neurotypical, and I'm not disabled. Although I no longer formally practice a religion, I was raised Catholic and still feel some connection to that faith heritage. I grew up the eldest of three siblings in a middle-class family (Mom was an LPN, and Dad was a public school administrator), and I think that's probably the best class descriptor for my family now, though economic insecurity nips at my heels as the primary breadwinner in a large, blended, adoptive, multiracial family that includes seven children ages 0-21.

I share this personal information because I know that a majority of the people in the broad field of children's literature are also White, cisgender women, and I'm committed to resisting the complacent comfort that could arise from that reality of my professional life. The status quo is exclusive and untenable, and so I must ask myself if I'm really walking the walk or just talking the talk of inclusivity as a Senior Lecturer in Children's Literature at Simmons College, and as a reviewer and author, too. When Grace Lin invited me to write a post for #KidLitWomen, I wondered what I could contribute that would be helpful to readers also striving for inclusivity, no matter what they

may or may not have in common with me, and I turned to an invaluable tool in my own self-reflective practice: the diversity audit.



*2 Some Syllabus Prep Reading from Summer 2016
Prompted by a Diversity Audit*

For the past several years I've informally conducted diversity audits of my syllabi each semester at Simmons. Informed by [CCBC's](#) annual report of publishing statistics, I go through assigned scholarly and literary readings to center race and track how many

are by BIPOC authors (and in the case of picture books and other illustrated literature, illustrators, too) and how many are by White people. I do some content analysis of the readings, too, but that's not the focus for this post. I conduct most of this work longhand, and my records are messy, but this process has helped me avoid tokenism and exclusion while enriching the literary and scholarly readings I assign. This isn't merely a process of checking off boxes, but of reflecting on where I see gaps in representation and perspective and why I think they are present. I do attend to other aspects of identity, and pretty much always end up feeling like I have more work to do. So, I'm open with my students about the gaps I see and am eager for their feedback. By making this part of my teaching transparent, I strive to model the work required to stay current, break habits, confront biases, and interrogate entrenched, exclusive notions of canon and scholarship.

In order to model this work on a smaller scale for this post, I'll highlight a project for which I served as a consultant last year. [MERGE for Equality](#) is a nonprofit organization based in Western Massachusetts that seeks to "engage people and communities in transforming masculinity to advance gender equality." In 2017 they launched a Children's Book Campaign with the goal of "promoting literacy and adult-child connection through children's books which highlight themes of positive masculinity and gender equality." They asked me to select a longlist of twenty or so picture books to consider for inclusion in the campaign, and they also asked me to help convene a diverse group of people to discuss those books and decide which to include. We agreed that the picture books should be: in-print, and preferably available in paperback or board book editions; about contemporary, human characters; and diverse in terms of both authorship and characters.



When the group (pictured here) met last summer, I gave a brief overview of my [Whole Book Approach](#) work to help everyone assess picture book art and design, and I also introduced a diversity audit grid as a tool to guide our consideration. Looking back, I can now populate the grid with data from the longlist, and with that from other titles we added later as the project continued:

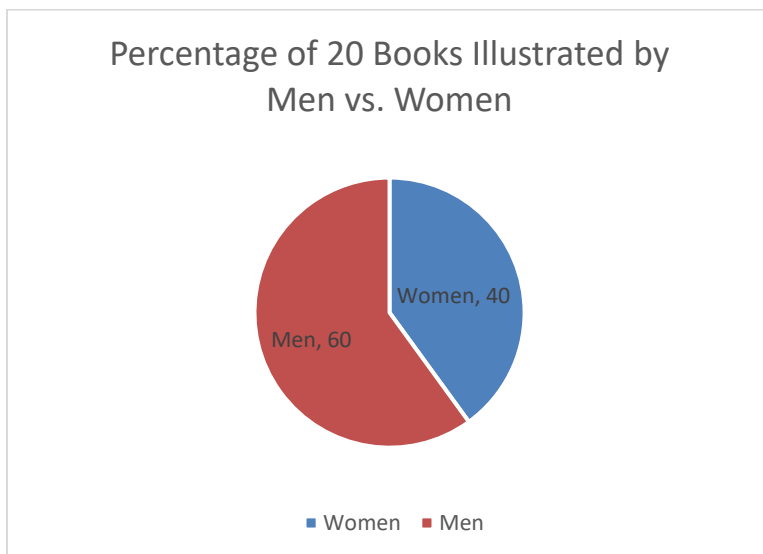
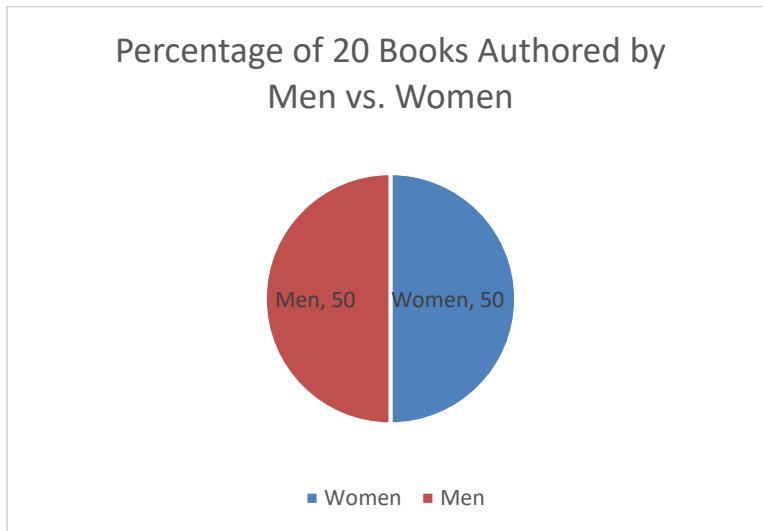
3 MERGE for Equality Children's Book Campaign Roundtable Members

TITLE	Character Race	Character Gender	Other Notes on Diversity Character	Author Race and name	Author Gender	Other Notes on Diversity Author	Illustrator Race and name	Illustrator Gender	Other Notes on Diversity Illustrator	Notes on Content/Own Voices?
Clive board book series	Unspecified, but many in our group read Clive as Asian	Boy	Multiracial ensemble of secondary characters	Jessica Spanyol, White	Woman	British	Jessica Spanyol, White	Woman		Highlighted matter-of-fact inclusion of disabled kids in illustrations.
Clothesline Clues to Jobs People Do	Multiracial ensemble, no protagonist	Men and Women		Kathryn Heling & Deborah Hembrook, White	Women		Andy Robert Davies, White	Man	British	
Little You	Illustrations indicate contemporary Native/First Nations people, nation unspecified	Most read unnamed protagonist baby as a boy with his mom & dad		Richard Van Camp, First Nations	Man	Dogrib Tlicho	Julie Flett, First Nations	Woman	Cree-Metis	Own Voices
Rain!	Unsure, many read protagonist as Black	Boy	Multiracial ensemble of secondary characters	Linda Ashman, White	Woman		Christian Robinson, Black	Man		
Real Cowboys	No protagonist, but mostly White-appearing people	Mostly men	Brief nods to women & multiracial rep but...	Kate Hoefler, White	Woman		Jonathan Bean, White	Man		...concerns about Latinx rep; tokenism, especially w regard to women
The Boys	White	Some read protagonist as a boy, others as a girl. They can be read as nonbinary	Multiracial ensemble of secondary characters; elder men, children	Jeff Newman, White	Man		Jeff Newman, White	Man		Great discussion on gender ambiguity of protagonist
Tough Boris	White	Boy		Mem Fox, White	Woman	Australian	Kathryn Brown, White	Woman		
We Sang You Home	Illustrations indicate contemporary Native/First Nations people, nation unspecified	Most read unnamed protagonist baby as a boy with his mom & dad		Richard Van Camp, First Nations	Man	Dogrib Tlicho	Julie Flett, First Nations	Woman	Cree-Metis	Own Voices

<i>Sparkle Boy</i>	Most read central family as White	Boy, nonbinary in gender performance	Multiracial background characters	Lesléa Newman, White	Woman	Jewish	Maria Mola, White	Woman	Spanish immigrant	Debate about “whose story is this?” Some think it centers sister more than her “sparkle boy” brother
<i>Daddy's Busy Day</i>	Asian	Boy with dad		Miriam Cohen, White	Woman		Ying Hwa-Hu, Asian	Woman		Own Voices illustrator
<i>be boy buzz</i>	Black	Boy		bell hooks, Black	Woman		Chris Raschka, White	Man		
<i>Big Bob, Little Bob</i>	White	Boys	A White girl appears as a secondary character	James Howe, White	Man		Laura Ellen Anderson, White	Woman		
<i>Drum Dream Girl</i>	Multiracial Chinese-African-Cuban	Girl		Margarita Engle, Latinx	Woman		Rafael López, Latinx	Man		Own Voices Latinx
<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i>	Black	Boy and Woman	Multiracial cast of secondary characters; depictions of blind person, person using a wheelchair, too.	Matt de la Peña, Latinx	Man		Christian Robinson, Black	Man		Own Voices illustrator;
<i>Max Found Two Sticks</i>	Black	Boy	Multiracial cast of secondary characters	Brian Pinkney, Black	Man		Brian Pinkney, Black	Man		Own Voices
<i>Charlie and Mouse</i>	Biracial Asian/White	Boys		Laurel Snyder, White	Woman		Emily Hughes, White	Woman		
<i>Wings</i>	Black	Girl narrator, Boy title character		Christopher Myers, Black	Man		Christopher Myers, Black	Man		Fantasy element, so not contemporary realism
<i>Mother Bruce</i>	Anthropomorphic animals	Adult, male bear		Ryan T. Higgins, White	Man		Ryan Higgins, White	Man		Discussion about the dearth of diverse books about contemporary, human characters.
<i>Worm Loves Worm</i>	Anthropomorphic animals	Nonbinary gender, worms		JJ Austrian, White	Man		Mike Curato, Asian	Man		“
<i>Chester's Way</i>	Anthropomorphic animals	Boy mice		Kevin Henkes, White	Man		Kevin Henkes, White	Man		“

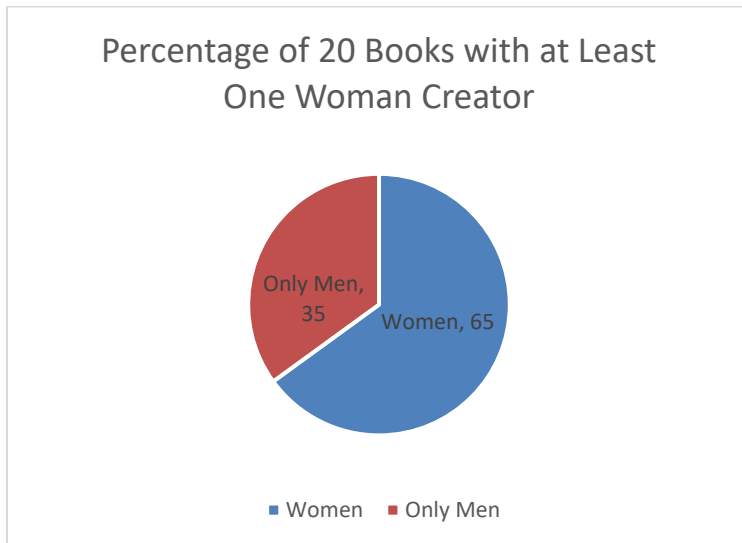
I should note that in naming race and gender on the grid, I've strived to use correct terminology based on how I've seen the people named above describe themselves on their own websites, in other media, or in person. Any errors are my own, and I apologize for them and welcome corrections. Furthermore, I've chosen not to name authors and illustrators' sexuality in this public post since I am unsure if the queer people listed are all out, and since I do not know how many people identify.

If I now take this data for the twenty books on the MERGE list and break it out into pie charts in order to better understand what I'm working, here's what the diversity audit grid reveals:



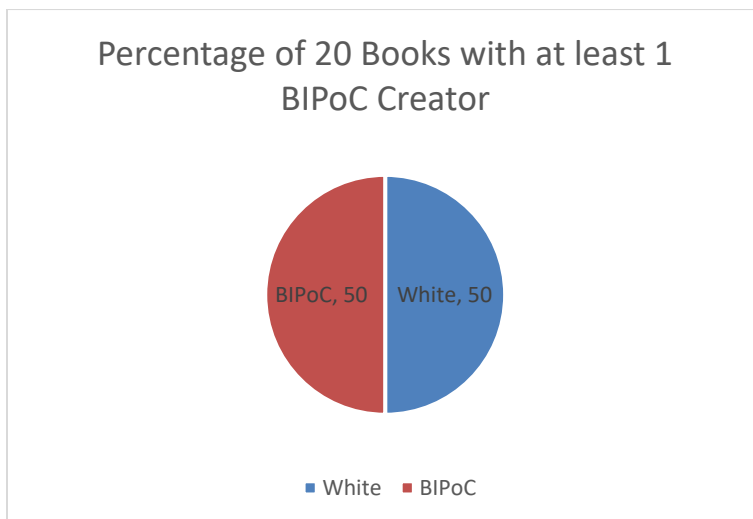
I'm pretty happy with these results, though **I recognize the need to continue to seek out and highlight books illustrated by women** as the MERGE Children's Book Campaign continues. And, I must note that **none of the books were written or illustrated by trans, nonbinary, or genderqueer people**, and I'd like this to change.

Now, if I collapse the categories of author and illustrator, how many of the 20 books on the list have at least one creator who is a woman?



I continue to be pleased to see that women's creative contributions are integral to this book list.

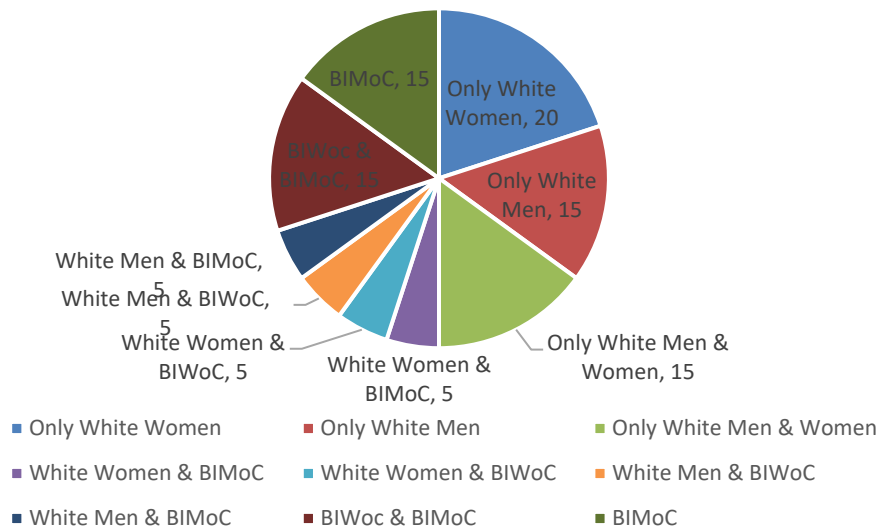
If I shift gears to look at diversity data, how many of the twenty books on the longlist have at least one BIPOC creator?



This is heartening to see.

But now, I'll borrow a term coined by Black feminist legal scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) and examine the [intersections](#) of race and gender in this book list:

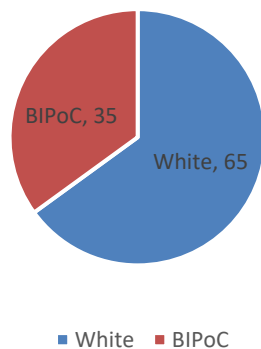
Percentage of 20 Books with Diverse Creators

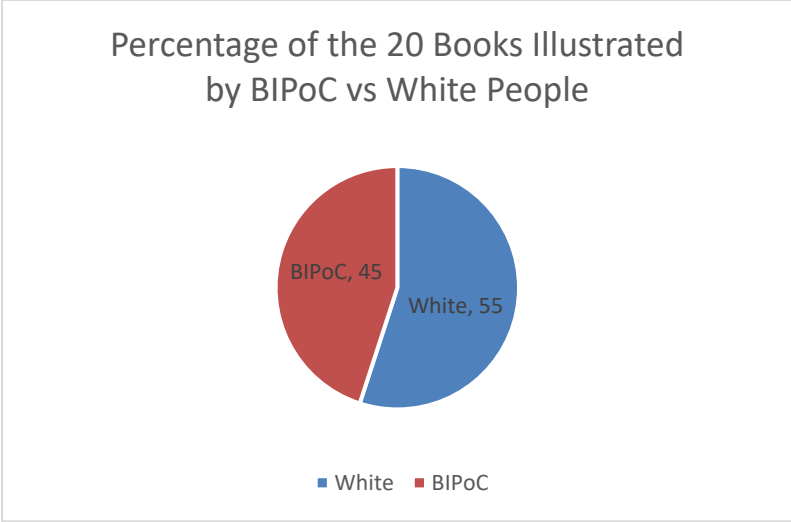


This pie chart looks nice and colorful, suggesting a real diversity of creative voices—but before I pat myself on the back too hard, I should look at the data in other ways to recognize that **only 30% of the 20 books on the list are the sole creations of BIPOC authors and illustrators**, and **none are the sole creations of BIWoC**. Put another way, White creators dominate the list in that they were involved in the creation of 70% of its books, sometimes as collaborators with BIPOC, and there are no books that exclusively center the creative work of BIWoC.

Now, I want to re-impose the division between writing and illustration.

Percentage of the 20 Books Authored by BIPoc vs White People

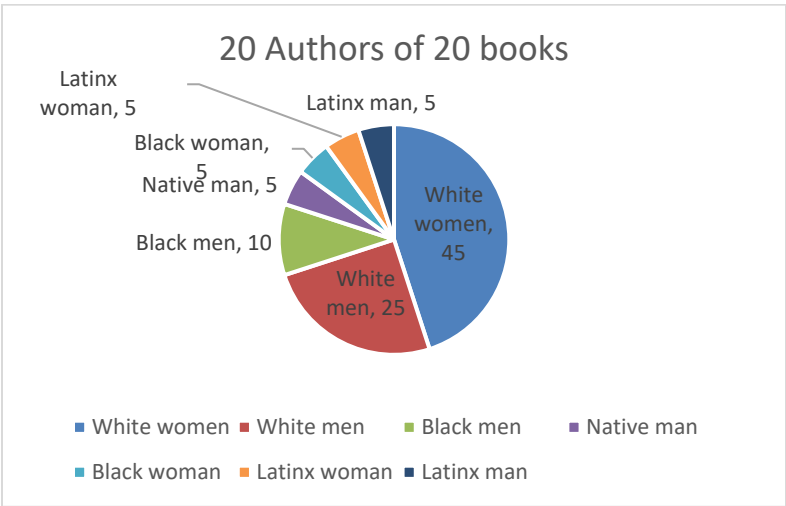




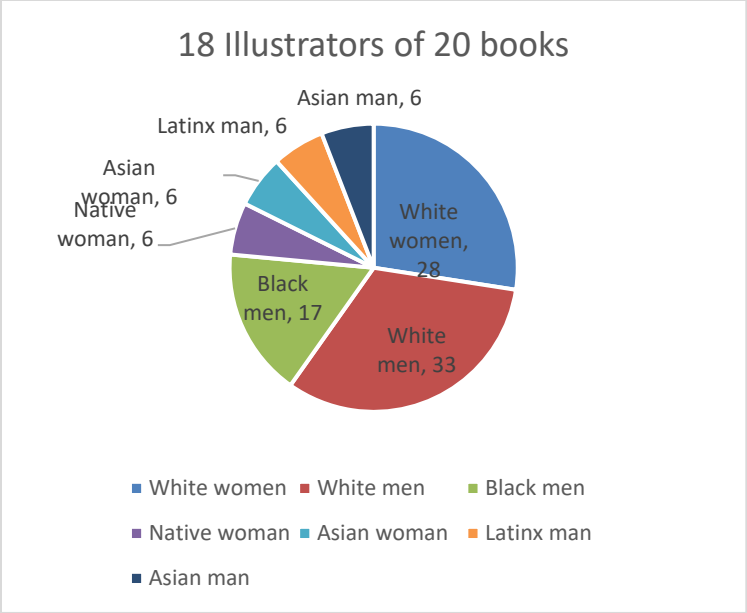
The data shows me that this list does a better job of including books illustrated by BIPOC illustrators than it does those written by BIPOC authors. **Moving forward, I want to include more books written by BIPOC authors.**

Now I can shift away from describing the books in terms of their creators to instead look at creators themselves and what the diversity audit notes about them. Some authors and illustrators (Richard VanCamp, Julie Flett, and Christian Robinson) appear more than once on the list, but I count them only once as I make pie charts.

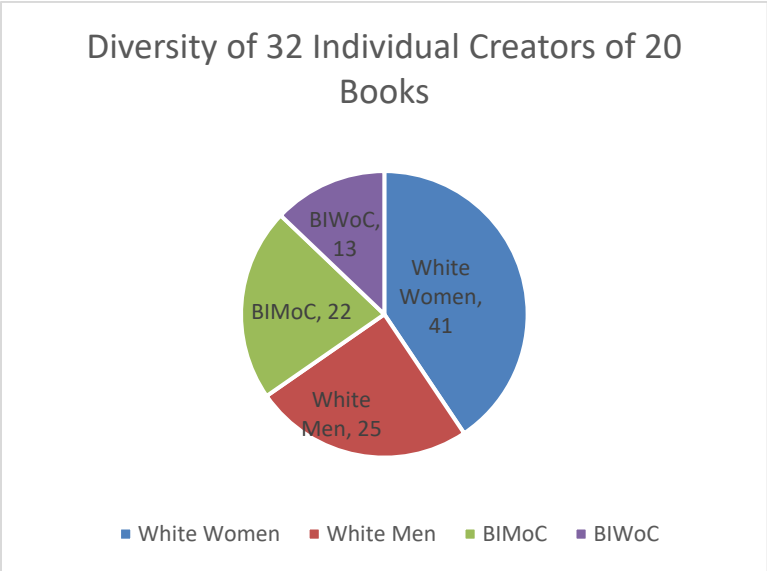
First, an intersectional view of authorship reveals that of the 20 individual authors named on the list 70% are White people and 30% are BIPOC.



The numbers are a bit more equitable for illustrators, showing 61% of them are White people, while 39% are BIPOC.



If I collapse the categories of author and illustrator, I count people who both write and illustrate only once, and I find the following data regarding the 32 individual creators of the 20 books on the list.



I look at this chart and see that 66% of the individual creators are White people. This makes want to **find more books by individual BIPoC creators, instead of repeatedly returning to the same BIPoC authors and illustrators.**

As of the writing of this post, so far, MERGE has chosen the following four books for the campaign:

- [*Made by Raffi*](#) by Craig Pomranz, illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain (a title they chose before my consultancy, which is why it's not named on the grid above)
- [*be boy buzz*](#) by bell hooks, illustrated by Chris Raschka
- [*Sparkle Boy*](#) by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Maria Mola
- [*Drum Dream Girl*](#) by Margarita Engle, illustrated by Rafael López

Funding permitting, they will add to this list of books that they distribute to early childhood educators and other partners, while also using them in trainings, and highlighting them on their website with discussion guides.

For my part, I'm a word person, not a number person, and I admit that looking at all of these pie-charts and examining data from one angle, and then another, and another, can make me feel a bit muddled. I've checked and rechecked the charts I made for this small sample of picture books, but I still wouldn't be surprised if readers found errors. But, even if a few errors in quantifying books are present, the process of working with the data points me to clear goals for ongoing work on the campaign:

- **Seek out more books illustrated by women**
- **Seek out more books written by BIPOC**
- **Seek out books written and/or illustrated by trans, nonbinary, genderqueer people**
- **Strive to include books that are the sole creations of BIPOC authors and illustrators, particularly those are the sole creations of BIWoC**
- **Include more books by individual BIPOC creators, instead of repeatedly returning to the same authors and illustrators**

When I work from my own book lists or syllabi and see diversity audit results that contradict my inclusive ideal, I'm humbled, and I'm motivated to do more and do better. I hope that as part of #KidLitWomen readers' ongoing work toward gender equity, more people will start doing diversity audits of their own and using the data to hold themselves accountable. So I'd like to pose a few challenges to you: Can you conduct a diversity audit to track your storytime selections for a month and see how you do in terms of including work by and about BIPOC? What about your book displays, for a week? Or a book list you develop? Or your personal reading log? Or a syllabus? Or a random selection of books pulled from your classroom library? When you complete your audit, what goals can you set for yourself as you continue to work toward inclusivity as a precursor to equity? And would you post about this work somewhere and let me know about it? Maybe we can start tagging such work #KidLitDiversityAudit to check in with each other as time goes on, because we simply can't let the momentum of the #KidLitWomen effort we've all been following peter out when April Fool's Day is upon us.

I'm convinced that if we share diversity audits and the goals they inspire publically, our self-reflective practice can send signals to the marketplace and to diverse creators, too, that we want our field to be

inclusive and that we are taking action to make it so. Because the simple truth is: we can't achieve equity without inclusivity. We know this. So let's act on it.

[Megan Dowd Lambert](#), Senior Lecturer in Children's Literature at Simmons College, is the author of *Reading Picture Books with Children: How to Shake Up Storytime and Get Kids Talking About What They See* (Charlesbridge 2015), which introduces the Whole Book Approach to storytime that she developed in association with The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. She received a 2016 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor for her first picture book *A Crow of His Own* (Charlesbridge 2015) illustrated by David Hyde Costello, and *Real Sisters Pretend* (Tilbury House 2016) illustrated by Nicole Tadgell, was named a 2017 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People. The mother of seven children ages 0-21, Megan writes and reviews for *Kirkus* and *The Horn Book* and lives with her family in Massachusetts.