"The Expectations That We Be Educators": The Views of Australian Authors of Young Adult Fiction on Their OwnVoices Novels as Windows for Learning about Marginalized Experiences

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Abstract

This paper discusses empirical research conducted in 2016 with seven Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction who publicly identified as one or more of the following: Indigenous Australian, a person of colour, or a member of queer or disabled communities. Interview data was analyzed using critical discourse analysis to understand authors' professional journeys as publicly identifying marginalized creators within the Australian publishing industry and wider literary community. The study found that all seven authors directly or indirectly invoked the concept of education or learning through their books, with their books functioning as a "window" to readers from communities different from their own, per Bishop's 1990 metaphor. Five authors positively acknowledged this educational potential, while two did from a negative perspective. This research contributes to our understanding of the additional pressures and expectations placed on authors from marginalized communities, while inserting the voices of Australian authors into broader discussions about equity in children's and young adult fiction.

Introduction

Emerging throughout the twentieth century, young adult fiction has been recognized as a category of literature dedicated to serving the entertainment and informational needs of

teenagers.[i] Contemporary diversity advocacy has further solidified the criticisms and encouragement from landmark scholars such as Larrick for the literature to become more inclusive of marginalized voices.[ii] Groups such as We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) have made tangible industry progress by promoting the inclusion of people from marginalized communities among character casts, author communities, and other publishing industry roles.[iii] Amidst this, the label "OwnVoices" was coined by young adult fiction author Corinne Duyvis on September 6, 2015, to refer to fiction written by *and* about people from the same marginalized community, with the unspoken understanding that this personal connection will lead to more authentic depictions of the identities and experiences represented.[iv]

With Australian authors of young adult fiction increasingly being published and distributed in the U.S. market too, these U.S.-centric discussions about diversity and representation have become increasingly relevant to the Australian literary landscape. However, due to different cultural and historical contexts in the two countries, not all of the discussions about diversity and representation are comparable. Additionally, due to a dearth of local research, the perspectives of Australian authors on current global diversity advocacy priorities, such as those championed by WNDB, remain unknown.

This paper presents the findings of original qualitative research, as well as empirical evidence from participant authors' own experience based on their awareness of the conversations taking place in adjacent literary spaces such as libraries, schools, advocacy movements, and global publishing industries. Through the discussion of data from a series of interviews with seven Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, this article contributes to an understanding of their perspectives of their own books as "windows" for learning about marginalized identities, communities, and experiences. More broadly, it provides insight into the values assigned to diverse and inclusive fiction for children and young adults, both for insiders and outsiders to the different marginalized communities. Through these contributions, it introduces the perspectives of marginalized Australian authors into prominent global discussions surrounding literature, inclusion, and youth advocacy.

Literature Review

Rudine Sims Bishop's famed metaphor of literature as a window, mirror, and sliding glass door has had a profound impact on the way representations of marginalized communities are

discussed and understood. It promoted a now-common "language of visibility," through which the importance of such representation is articulated with the use of sight- or vision-related language.[v] This language stresses that literature by *and* about people from marginalized communities has a value inherent to its existence, due to the homogeneity of mainstream literary markets, and it is frequently invoked by marginalized creators and consumers in relation to their own experience with books.[vi] As a result, the focus of related conversations and advocacy for inclusive literature is on the book as a "mirror," to reflect and allow young readers from marginalized communities to see themselves in what they read.

However, while the mirror metaphor may be of foremost interest to marginalized writers and diversity advocates, many audiences approach inclusive literature with expectations that more frequently align with the idea that books are windows. As a window that "offer[s] views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange," the book that explores a marginalized identity or experience becomes an opportunity for readers who are outsiders to that community to gain insight into a life different from their own, with characters who are influenced by the structures of society in distinctive ways.[vii] Within the context of children's and young adult fiction, this perspective of inclusive fiction as educational for non-marginalized students is amplified, due to the widespread belief that "by altering perceptions [of marginalized and non-marginalized communities] for both audiences, stories could change realities" for young people and promote greater social cohesion among the generations of the future.[viii]

Through narratives centering on marginalized voices, books create the means for readers to "locate themselves as having experienced some form of marginality and prejudice," without the "fears and questions inherent in challenging social, familial, institutional prescriptions and ascriptions" that they may face within the real world.[ix] Inviting young people to challenge these views, rather than reinforcing them, nurtures the growth of critical thinking in relation to societal norms. Brule's 2008 study "[asked] students to recognize the culturally established norms of beauty, gender roles, age, ethnicity, and ability," through the interrogation of these "socially accepted hegemonic norms" in fairy tales, which are commonly retold in young adult fiction.[x] The findings revealed that "students are often unnerved by the realization of their own acceptance of these hegemonic stereotypes," highlighting the extent to which the emphasis of "majority culture" norms in fiction read during childhood and adolescence can render these values invisible.[xi]

A three-year study by Blackburn and Clark involving the reading and discussion of queer young adult fiction by teenagers and adults who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and transgender led to participants demonstrating a more nuanced understanding of how queerphobia functions, promoted the interrogation of heteronormativity, and even reduced the policing of gender norms among the group members.[xii] Similar results were reported in a classroom study by Sieben and Wallowitz, through the reduction of students' use of homophobic slurs, increased criticisms of heteronormativity and gender norms, and students' willingness to publicly identify as allies to the queer community.[xiii] Younger age brackets have also been found to be influenced positively through reading about the lives of marginalized communities, as in the Cameron and Rutland study involving 67 non-disabled children aged 5–10, who were read stories featuring positive portrayals of disabled characters and who subsequently demonstrated a reduced association between negative traits and disabled identity.[xiv] These studies alone support fiction's ability to foster a growth in understanding of marginalized communities.

Reading inclusively can therefore nurture a greater capacity for empathy, as "for those ensconced in the center, the margins can provide powerful new perspectives."[xv] OwnVoices young adult fiction, then, becomes a site particularly loaded with this potential to enhance awareness and understanding, due to its perception as inherently more authoritative and authentic in its rendering of its marginalized characters.[xvi] However, the reading of fiction exploring marginalized experiences or identities to increase one's knowledge becomes more problematic when the educational potential of the book becomes an *expectation* of the author and their art. This expectation is enhanced in children's and young adult fiction spaces, where the target readership is still "acquir[ing] their . . . meanings of gender or colour, their understanding of self and other through those discourses" of identity, through everyday exchanges with adult authority figures and the literature they are exposed to.[xvii] As a result, these expectations have the potential to disproportionately affect authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction.

The significance of school and library visits for Australian young adult fiction authors to supplement their income, alongside other related promotional activities, frequently places many authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction in situations where they may be pressured by this expectation to educate teenagers.[xviii] However, little is known about how authors of Australian OwnVoices young adult fiction perceive this expectation of the educational potential of their work: Is it a burden or an opportunity to open the minds of teenage readers to new worldviews?

How do they feel about their art being viewed as an educational tool? An understanding of these perspectives would allow teachers, librarians, parents, and other adults to better support YA authors, communicate their expectations of authors clearly and respectfully, and reduce the pressures that marginalized creators may feel when participating in public events such as school visits.

Research Questions

The findings discussed in this paper emerged as part of a larger project investigating the publishing experiences of Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, with other results detailed elsewhere.[xix] Areas of interest included the level of publishing industry support provided to authors and the reception of their work among peers, readers, and professionals in literary adjacent spaces such as schools and libraries. All participants in the research were necessarily from marginalized communities, and the research was undertaken with an aim to empower and provide authors with the opportunity to share previously unknown experiences.

As a result, it was vital that the research question be framed in such a way that participating authors understood that the study sought to provide a channel through which their voices and experiences could be heard. Due to the unexplored territory of this research, and so as not to limit the potential for rich data that qualitative research provides, the study used a broad research question:

> How do marginalized authors writing young adult fiction that draws from personal experience challenge the lack of diverse representation within Australian young adult fiction? And how has this choice impacted them as writers?

As no research had been previously undertaken to explore this area of interest, it was not possible to anticipate the nature of the findings or form a hypothesis.

Methods

An extensive review of authors' promotional and marketing materials revealed that Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction rarely discussed their own publishing journeys within the context of broader global discussions about diversity and inclusion in young adult fiction, despite many regularly participating in these conversations at arts festivals. To gain insight into

their perspective and contribute the voices of Australian authors to these conversations, a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction was proposed and approved by our university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Following the construction of an annotated list of eligible authors (including names and publication details) through traditional bibliographic sites such as the AustLit Database and community-maintained archives such as Goodreads, seven authors were approached and agreed to participate in the research.[xx]

The annotated list totaled thirty-six authors at its point of initial completion in October 2016, with approximately twenty authors remaining active (i.e., having published a book within the last ten years) and residing in Australia, and, thus, seven authors represented almost one-third of the list. Participating authors were based in multiple states around Australia and included representatives from all major communities on the list, including Indigenous People, people of colour, queer people, and disabled people (inclusive of physical disability, neurodivergence, and mental illness), as well as participants who identified with more than one community. Though a survey had the potential to capture the perspectives of more participants, such an approach limits the richness of the data, prevents the asking of follow-up questions, and restricts the agency of respondents by limiting the topics to those of interest to the researcher, rather than that of participants. The semi-structured interview in contrast uses only guiding questions, while allowing the interviewee to follow tangents or raise additional points of interest that contribute "insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important," which was preferable due to this unexplored area of research.[xxi] Guiding questions to the interviews have previously been published and are attached below in the Appendix.[xxii]

Of the seven authors, two requested to participate through written responses due to their busy personal schedules at the time of the research. Aware of the research's original intention of spoken interview, they voluntarily provided us with supplementary materials (such as excerpts from correspondence with readers) that enhanced the richness of their responses and provided further insight into the areas of their work that they considered important. These contributions offset the limitations on data quality that the written response may have otherwise enforced. All other interviews were spoken and recorded for transcription, with interviews being conducted either in-person or over the phone based on geographic location. Written consent to publish from

the research was received from all authors, with one author requesting to not be quoted directly. This author's contributions are discussed in the aggregate with the other six participants.

Transcriptions were coded and analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), which "draws our attention to issues of power and privilege in public and private discourse"—a key interest in this research project.[xxiii] This coding process specifically sought to identify interactions where power was contested or exploited between the authors interviewed and their professional relationships with publishers; their readerships, librarians, and educators; and how a diverse sample of authors "represent[ed] the same area of the [literary] world from different perspectives or positions."[xxiv] It was not possible to anticipate the nature of such sites of power tensions, yet the code relating to education and expectations around education emerged naturally over the course of the interviews and is the focus of this paper. This qualitative approach in data collection, and coding with an eye to patterns in language and experience with multiple Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, allowed for "revealing . . . the range of diversity and difference *within* the group."[xxv]

Due to the smaller size of the Australian publishing industry in relation to that in the United States and the study's small sample size, and to respect the privacy of the participants, all data from this research is anonymized and de-identified, with authors assigned a random number unique to this publication. Additionally, such precautions are undertaken with the understanding that, as this data discusses pressures relating to educating readers with authors who are highly dependent on opportunities to speak to readers as a source of income, identification could have unforeseen professional consequences.

Findings

All seven authors directly or indirectly invoked the concept of education, learning, or their books functioning as a "window" to readers from communities different from their own and, in some cases, considered this potential to be a secondary purpose for their OwnVoices novels. This was an unexpected finding, as no questions about education or learning (direct or indirect) were asked during the interview process—yet the concept emerged in all seven interviews to varying degrees. Within the finding of this discourse, five authors referred to the educational capacity of their books in positive albeit bittersweet terms, and two referred to education through their

novels with a negative perspective. The perspective of the author who requested to not be quoted directly is discussed in the aggregate.

Authors who invoked the concept of education or learning in relation to their novel in positive terms did so to different extents, with some explicitly discussing the benefits of others learning about the experience of being part of their marginalized community through their OwnVoices novel; others expressed an undercurrent of their belief that their book had this capacity. In each case, however, this initial positivity held a bittersweet edge, either in the form of frustration at specific stakeholders involved in their work, or at the notion of their OwnVoices books representing experiences that were so unfamiliar to mainstream audiences that they were considered educational.

Two authors wrote their OwnVoices novels with the conscious aim of informing readers about the marginalized experiences or identities within their books (though the book was still considered to be most important for readers from their own community), one author was surprised by the revelation that their novel held an educational capacity, and two simply acknowledged that the nature of the marginalized identity represented could educate uninformed readers about the experiences of their community. In contrast, the two authors who had a negative view of the educational aspect of fiction strongly believed that such an approach to writing devalued the literature itself, as well as made it less enjoyable for the reader.

1. Positive Perceptions of OwnVoices Young Adult Fiction as Educational

Authors One and Two both wrote their OwnVoices novels with the conscious aim of informing readers about particular aspects of their identity or experiences of being a member of a marginalized community. Author One deliberately set their novel in the non-Western country and city of their birth, with the intent of making readers aware of the daily life and cultural norms there. As the majority of Australian young adult fiction novels published are set within Australia, this location for the story means readers born and raised in Australia are immediately exposed to a different context and set of life experiences.

Specifically relating to the non-Western setting, Author One stated that they wanted their novel to help readers understand what it was like to live in "a developing nation like that," where "bad shit happens to good people and that's just the way it is." Author One explained that this included extreme life-threatening situations that were considered part of daily life in this country,

but which were less common in Western countries due to different political contexts. However, this also applied to the minor details that contributed to everyday life, with Author One stating:

> I tried to capture as much of the day-to-day [city] on the page without making it mundane. I wanted to have it that you can read [my novel] and kind of be able to find your way around [my city] and experience [my city], the city [itself]? Um, as much as possible because I think it's such a great experience in and of itself, and in a frightening way sometimes.

Author One's novel heavily integrates elements of the culturally specific "urban myths" that are common knowledge within the country of their birth. These elements were drawn from "stories [they] heard when [they] [were] a kid growing up" and held major cultural significance and relevance to their own teenage years. Despite the author's use of the term "urban myths" to refer to these beliefs, and their novel's classification as a work in the fantasy genre by the Australian publishing industry, Author One shared that the beliefs they integrated are not considered a fantasy concept where they grew up (in the way that Western readers might think of fairies or elves)—rather, they are a part of the cultural daily life. However, even though these beliefs are common in the country of Author One's birth, Author One felt that the responses they received from readers in Australia indicated that their novel had introduced these different cultural beliefs to Australian readers for the first time.

Author One felt that the unfamiliarity of these beliefs to Australian readers was a sign that the Australian young adult fiction publishing industry was not meeting the needs and interests of the Australian market. Author One expanded on this view as follows:

> I mean just the idea that. . . [these beliefs] are something that are *so amazing and out . . .* and out of the blue for *so* many of the people I talk to, when you consider that one-point-six billion people on earth believe in them? So there's—more people in [continent] [who] believe in [this belief] than don't believe in [it]. And I think, here's a publishing market with its own economies of scale and trends and forces, and no one in the Western world has any idea because they don't care. [. . .] Every person who reads this book [of mine] . . . and comes up and says, "Thank god I was waiting for a book like this to come along," is a person who should have been catered to already, by publishing. And they shouldn't have to wait for someone like me to come stumbling along many years into [. . .] it, and . . . be coming up through [a smaller] publisher. (emphases in original)

In addition to the artistic merit and entertainment value of their novel, Author One clearly expressed that one of their main intentions was to demonstrate that their community and cultural beliefs exist, within a market that they passionately believed was not attentive to the genuine interests of local teenagers and young adult fiction readers more broadly. But though the excited audience response to their novel was undoubtedly a positive for Author One, and they did not express any sense of feeling burdened to educate readers, Author One also expressed significant frustration at being the first writer to introduce these culturally specific beliefs to the Australian young adult fiction market. This latter sentiment was directed at the Australian publishing industry and the reluctance that Author One felt it had toward embracing books exploring marginalized, and specifically non-Western, cultures.

Author Two was very supportive of their book's potential as a window and means to educate outsider readers about their community. When describing their book early in their interview, they stated that they "think there's something to learn from the story, [regardless of] whether you're white, [or whether] you go to a public school or a [religious] school." Author Two volunteered an anecdote that reminded them that their book "always has a place, if only to educate people," which occurred "very recently, about two weeks ago," before their interview for this study. The incident occurred during a publicity event, when

> the interviewer asked me, if [my cultural group] are an actual people
> group, or if I just made them up because [they] had the assumption that
> because I was from [geographic region], that I had to be [cultural group].
> And I'm not offended at that perception but it just um . . . we're never
> gonna go anywhere in our life or as a society if we still hold stereotypes
> about ethnic communities or religious communities, no matter what they
> are.

In this example, Author Two's novel fulfilled its secondary educational potential of informing outsiders about the existence of their community. The assumption about the non-existence of Author Two's community demonstrated the low level of awareness of their community in Australia; however, Author Two's novel became a means of resisting the erasure and stereotyping that their community faced. Author Two expressed support for the educational potential of their OwnVoices novel, due to its ability to counter societal stereotypes. Author Three, who requested to not be quoted directly, expressed the same sentiment regarding the impact their OwnVoices novel had on potential audiences, albeit with a more neutral stance.

Like Author Three, Author Four also expressed a positive but more restrained view of the educational capacity of their work, stating that their books "[provide] an opportunity for [non-marginalized] readers to understand the complexities that can exist for [marginalized] people within [marginalized] communities and [within] the broader mainstream, dominant culture." In one of their OwnVoices novels, Author Four examined equity programs for members of their marginalized community in educational institutions, as well as the societal context for why such programs have been developed in Australia. They felt that outsiders to their community in everyday life often perceived such programs as a form of "special treatment," without understanding that they are necessary to combat systemic prejudice. Author Four felt that their interrogation of these issues in their novel was "one of the areas where . . . maybe a non-[marginalized] reader might either learn or take offence."

When discussing the response they had received from teenagers outside of their community, Author Four said they "think some non-[marginalized] kids, they completely get it, they completely understand [. . .] the things I'm [communicating]." They expressed their hope that "through [their] books, readers arrive at that understanding" of the complex social context and systemic prejudices that have necessitated the establishment of these programs. Additionally, Author Four also shared that people within their personal networks had vocally supported them writing about their shared marginalized community and experiences, as they "had seen it as a way for people to gain better insight to our experiences and our history." Author Four clearly supported the idea of outsider readers being educated about their marginalized community through their OwnVoices young adult fiction novel, with this secondary potential being endorsed by Author Four's personal networks. While it was not the purpose for their writing, such expressions indicated that Author Four saw educational potential as something inherent to their OwnVoices novels, due to their status as a member of a marginalized community.

Author Five was the only author who was surprised that their OwnVoices young adult fiction had the potential to educate outsider readers about their marginalized community. Author Five had this realization when speaking to a group of school students aged 15–16 years old at a single-sex Catholic school as part of a promotional school visit. At the request of the school's staff, Author Five conceded to not mention a queer character within their novel during their presentation. However, when Author Five asked students who their favorite character in the novel was, they singled out the queer character. After only briefly acknowledging this, in

accordance with the preferences of school staff, Author Five attempted to change the topic to the students' favorite scenes in the book—only to receive the response that the favorite scene was "the scene where [the queer character] had sex with a [person of the same gender]." Author Five tentatively inquired as to why this scene was popular, and recounted the following interaction with a student they presumed was heterosexual, who

> replied, "Oh, it just made me understand my friend [name] a little bit better." And . . . that was really, really interesting, and I hadn't had someone, you know, put it back to me, it wasn't just for the [queer] kids, it was for, you know, people who knew [queer] people, and it was for them to sort of see what their lives are like.

Author Five described this revelation of their novel's educational potential as an "interesting" and a "nice" surprise, because the book had "allowed that avenue for [the students] to talk to their friends about [their sexuality]." However, Author Five also acknowledged the pressure they felt, as an author who had written about queer characters, as it was "sort of difficult to balance [their] role as someone who wants to tell stories for fun, but also the expectations that we be educators." Notably, Author Five was the only author where this expectation to educate was not limited to teenage readers outside of their community—something they directly attributed to the lack of education and support provided to queer teenagers within high school health classes and society more broadly.

Author Five shared a second anecdote to support this from when they were speaking at a different private high school to a group of students aged 13–14 years old. During their presentation, an audio alert unique to a mobile dating app commonly used by queer people sounded. Author Five began searching for the source of the audio alert by monitoring the teachers present; however it was a young student near the front of the room who removed their phone from their pocket and opened the app. Author Five was concerned for the student and recalled that in that moment they thought,

> "[This student is] getting [their] introduction to love . . . from that app," because you don't learn [queer] sex ed. [. . .] No [queer] health, nothing like that, in schools. And none of the other kids knew what was going on 'cause they didn't recognize the sound effect.

Author Five felt strongly that while it was a positive that their book could have an educational potential for teenage readers from non-queer communities, they "shouldn't have to swoop in with a book" to provide basic education to queer teenagers about relationships and physical

health, particularly as their non-queer peers received their relevant education on these topics as part of the standard Australian high school curriculum. As an author, they felt they should not bear the burden of having to "pick up the slack when schools *and parents* won't have these conversations with the kids in their care" (emphasis in original).

In this way, Author Five demonstrated a bittersweet relationship to the concept of education through their OwnVoices young adult fiction as a secondary purpose to the book—however, unlike the other six authors, this education also occurred through the book's function as a mirror to the author's own community, as well as a window to outsider readers.

2. Negative Perceptions of OwnVoices Young Adult Fiction as Educational

Two authors felt negatively about the concept of OwnVoices young adult fiction being educational, associating the idea of education with moral "messages" (Author Six) and "role models" (Author Seven) that instructed teenagers to conform to certain social norms. These authors also linked the idea of books that held this secondary potential with notions of artistic inferiority, low entertainment value, and even a lack of authenticity in the rendering of the book's marginalized characters and experiences. Additionally, both authors felt that books with this capacity could be patronizing to teenage readers of the novel, and that such books would not be realistic depictions of teenage experiences.

Author Six first drew on this discourse of education in relation to the idea of an "issue book," a term often used to deride books that explore social problems. They described such books as containing "messages" to teach the teenage reader, such as "'Don't . . . commit suicide,' I don't know. [. . .] I feel like issue books have to have a message, you know like, 'Don't do this thing . . . or this [bad thing] will happen.'" Author Six felt that books that inadequately represented the experiences of their marginalized community commonly fell into this category and, as a result, reading them felt more like an educational experience than an enjoyable one. They stated:

> I think that's when you kind of get that feeling across that "Ooh, those are
> the issue books" like what kind of—what I was talking about before you
> kind of feel like this book is tryna . . . to teach me something.

This link between inferior book quality and ideas of education and learning was strengthened with the division they established between such "issue books" and their own novel, which they

considered to be a realistic reflection of teenage life. They also extended the concept of education beyond the marginalized experiences mentioned above, of mental illness and suicidal ideation, to include moral lessons about socially acceptable and legal behavior, in relation to criticisms their book had received from educators. Author Six stated:

> I think [my novel] falls more into, it's just—this is life. This is just . . .
> what happens, and I'm not tryna make it, like good or bad, I think—there
> was a teacher review that said, "Oh there's drug use, and it's not
> demonized" or something like that, like, "Nothing happens to them 'cause
> they use drugs," like. . . . Well, sometimes kids just use drugs. And it's
> just what happens. [. . .] You know, I wasn't tryna say [to teenagers],
> "Don't use drugs." [laughs] There are drugs in the world, teenagers
> consume them. Like that is happening.

Author Six strongly rejected the idea of young adult fiction that could educate its teenage readers, while simultaneously emphasizing that their novel was realistic because of its morally ambiguous treatment of a common teenage experience. In addition to this, they highlighted that the expectations they had been exposed to about their writing—in particular, their inclusion of drug use by their marginalized protagonist—had come from teachers, rather than teenage readers. However, despite this strong condemnation of young adult fiction having an educational benefit for teenagers with regards to marginalized experiences or moral instruction, Author Six acknowledged that readers may still view their book as a novel that had this potential, stating, "I don't really classify it like that, but I'm like I don't really have a problem if someone did, so. That would be fine."

Author Seven viewed the educational potential of OwnVoices young adult fiction from a similarly negative stance and associated the concept of learning through books with a moral education. They felt that books that attempted to create "role models" for their readers would be perceived as insincere and patronizing by a teenage audience, describing such books as "so lame." They continued, "If I tried to be a role model and held myself up to be one, teenagers would see right through it." Author Seven added that they had "never felt external pressure to be any kind of role model" or an educator for their readers, unlike many of the authors who viewed education as a positive form of potential for young adult fiction.

Author Seven felt novels written by authors who viewed themselves as role models were compromised in the richness of the story, which also undermined the authenticity of the marginalized characters and experiences depicted. They felt that such an approach "actually

affects their work" because "they try and make their 'minority' characters more perfect, less flawed." As a result, the characters these authors write "represent not real people, but model minorities." Author Seven was more interested in representing what they felt were realistic experiences, and stated that "flaws make [their] characters" because "they give them their interesting internal struggles." Author Seven also referred to their past nonfiction publications where they *had* used their writing to educate readers. However, they repeatedly drew distinctions between these two different areas of their writing, suggesting that they consider their nonfiction and young adult fiction to have different purposes, because of the distinct literary categories.

Discussion

All seven authors who participated in this study raised the concept of education and learning of their own volition, in relation to their OwnVoices young adult fiction novels. This was unexpected, as the guiding interview questions did not make any reference to either of these concepts. Although all authors interviewed considered that the most important function of their books was to act as a "mirror" for their own marginalized communities, five authors also discussed the (at times bittersweet) educational potential of their novels to provide a positive perspective of their marginalized community to outsiders. The remaining two authors had a negative view of the idea that their novels could have an educational function for readers who were outsiders to their community.

Despite the two different stances, the consistency of this discourse of education and learning across all seven interviews suggests that all authors had previously been exposed to ideas about educating teenagers through young adult fiction. In many cases, authors referenced external expectations of them, their identity, and their books regarding this educational potential, with Authors Two, Four, Five, and Six all expressing an awareness of these expectations to educate from various stakeholders, including media, school staff, and personal networks. In contrast, Author Seven explicitly stated that they had never felt any expectations or pressure of this nature.

Five authors were positive about the idea that their books could inform teenage readers about the experiences of belonging to their marginalized community to varying extents. While Author Three simply acknowledged it, Authors One, Two, Four, and Five were more supportive of the educational potential of their books. However, this positive stance was consistently

coupled with expressions of frustration that such education was necessary at all. Author One directed their criticism toward the Australian publishing industry, which they felt were under-publishing marginalized voices, while Author Five directed theirs at school institutions and parents who restricted access to information about queer health. Authors Two, Three, and Four directed this frustration at society more broadly, specifically at the low public awareness of their communities and their experiences.

That the five authors who positively viewed the potential of their books as educational "windows" to teenage readers were the same five authors who criticized society and institutions of power and knowledge for under-representing their community's voices is likely not a coincidence. The existence of this parallel suggests that these authors may have felt it necessary in the past to provide additional justifications for their novel's relevance to the Australian young adult fiction market, beyond basic entertainment value. This indicates that authors who feel that the Australian publishing industry, educational institutions, and society more broadly are less welcoming of their OwnVoices young adult fiction are more likely to draw on the discourse of education and view it as a positive additional form of potential of their books, as it further endorses the presence of their books on the Australian market.

A stark contrast was evident between the authors who had positive feelings about the educational aspects of their work (while also criticizing the failure of institutions to provide such education), and the authors who rejected the idea of their works being educational. The latter authors expressed that they had never felt pressured to provide an educational "role model" (Author Seven) or that their book should have had an educational "message" (Author Six). That these authors were able to reject the educational potential of their books, and the external expectations of others, suggests that they may perceive the Australian young adult fiction market as more welcoming toward creative works that represent their specific marginalized community. They also shared the view that novels with educational potential were often compromised in the areas of artistic quality, entertainment value, authenticity in the depictions of marginalized characters and experiences, realism to teenage experiences, and the ability to engage teenage readers in a non-patronizing way. This view opposed that of the five authors who viewed the educational potential of their OwnVoices novels from a positive perspective, who never stated any concerns about the quality of their books. In fact, many of these authors highlighted extremely positive reactions they had received from readers who *had* learned something new

about their marginalized community through their books, with Authors One and Five being particularly notable.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize that Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction are aware of conversations pertaining to education and learning through their books as "windows" to teenage readers not from their marginalized community. The fact that this discourse emerged so strongly across all seven interviews without guiding interview questions raising the concept of education or learning further underscores this.

Although there were distinct similarities in the views and actions of all the authors interviewed, their differing perceptions of the Australian literary market and its expectations related to their specific marginalized communities may be a key factor in understanding their different views on the education aspect. Authors who supported the potential of their books as educational windows to outsiders to their community consistently coupled this support with frustration at the societal lack of awareness of their identities, while authors who rejected this secondary purpose displayed no signs of feeling unwelcome or burdened by expectations in the literary market. However, it must be noted that the two latter authors who did so still drew on the discourse of education of their own volition, suggesting that they have had some exposure to the concept of their book's educational potential. These different views within these findings reflect the diverse perspectives of local authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction within the broader heterogeneous community of marginalized authors in Australia.

An understanding of the perspectives and frustrations felt by authors of OwnVoices YA fiction in relation to the pressure of educating outsiders is necessary for teachers, librarians, parents, and publishers, to better support these authors and their engagement with their teenage readerships. Four authors expressed frustration at the low societal awareness of their communities and experiences, with one specifically identifying the high school curriculum as particularly lacking support for their community. Stress for these authors and their potential readers may be alleviated through more active education about these communities from parents, teachers, and librarians more broadly—for example, aligning author visits to libraries with national holidays, workshops, or social events that correspond with the book's themes, such as inviting queer authors to speak during Pride Month in June.

Foregrounding the artistry of the authors over the potential to learn from them could also reduce the likelihood of this expectation being thrust on them during author events and, based on the data in this study, is likely to be preferable to the authors too. Finally, openly communicating with authors about the level of knowledge that the potential audience may have about their community and whether they will be expected to take an educational stance during the event will likely reduce the risk of authors being caught off-guard by potentially uncomfortable questions, such as what Author Two experienced.

Young adult fiction can act as a window into lives different from that of the reader and have the potential to inform teenagers everywhere about the experiences of marginalized communities. However, windows can be a vessel for voyeurism, and those behind the glass are seen more than they are heard. Highlighting the perspectives and frustrations of the authors who are too often expected to be educators provides an insight into how we can support them through bridging the educational gap for them, so they can focus on their primary responsibility—to tell a good story.

Acknowledgments

Appendix: Guiding Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself and your book to potential readers?

2. Who do you consider to be the target demographic of your book?

3. At the time of writing your book, did you go through any changes in how you saw yourself, or how you perceived your experiences as a teenager?

4. How would you describe the reactions you have had to your book from teenage readers?

5. Where do you think your book fits in the Australian young adult fiction market?

6. Do you believe there is an expectation of you to write about characters from your community?

7. What would be your response to someone who classified your book as an "issue" book, or you as an "issue" author?

8. When you look back on your experience of being published, do you see any ways in which you could have been supported more by industry professionals?

9. Have you noticed any differences in how outsiders to your community write characters from your community?

10. What would you like your future novels to contribute to the Australian young adult fiction landscape?

These questions were originally published in the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association[xxvi] wherein the authors discuss other findings from this study.

Notes

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