

DIVERSE LEARNERS

“By 2035, students of color will be a majority in our schools. With increasing populations of children of immigrant and migrant families expanding the presence of cultural diversity in schools ... teachers must adjust curriculum, materials, and support to ensure that each student has equity of access to high quality learning.”

—Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson, University of Virginia

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ “Half of U.S. children under age five are non-white. But only 10 percent of children’s books in the last two decades featured multicultural characters. The math doesn’t add up” (Hart, 2017).
- ▶ “Culturally responsive teaching” means using the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002).
- ▶ Django Paris (2012) explains that “culturally sustaining pedagogy fosters linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of democratic schooling.” To counter the policies and practices that create a monocultural and monolingual society we need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and equality.
- ▶ Trade books are powerful instructional tools for both celebrating and supporting diverse learning styles and perspectives (Draper, 2014; Haddix, 2014; Parker, 2014; Siu-Runyan, 2014; Sumida, 2014; Tatum, 2014).
- ▶ In our increasingly diverse nation and interconnected world, students need global awareness and a deep understanding of, and respect for cultural equity and diversity. We’re called upon to help our students understand other perspectives and cultures (Miller and Sharp, 2017; ILA, NCTE 2014).
- ▶ Literature has always played a pivotal role in helping our students transcend boundaries created by ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. “Literature helps children develop their cultural identities as it allows them to understand and appreciate the cultures of others.” It’s often the first step toward “eliminating stereotyping and prejudice and helping students develop cultural identity” (Craft Al-Hazza and Bucher, 2008).

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ In “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Professor Rudine Sims Bishop writes, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (1990).
- ▶ “One important goal is for literature to offer readers a realistic and authentic mirror of their own lives and experiences. If children recognize themselves reflected accurately and sympathetically in the books they read, they may develop positive self-images and sense of worth” (Lehman, Freeman, and Scharer, 2010).
- ▶ “Writing [is] a means to make sense of and critically shape [one’s] multiple identities” (Muhammad, 2015).
- ▶ “It becomes vital to not simply advise the next generation of scholars, but to also mentor them in ways that help to cultivate their minds so they are prepared to use their voices in powerful ways to improve and advance the state of educational progress.” (Muhammad, 2015).

More to Know: Value Students’ Literate Experiences

Typically, school literacy centers around reading, writing, listening, and speaking—and traditional texts and textbooks. Spears-Bunton and Powell (2009) suggest that this view of literacy is narrow; as a result, students who experience alternative literate experiences in their homes and communities—which aren’t valued by the school—may be viewed as “at risk.”

For example, though some children may not routinely enjoy a bedtime story, they may participate in a rich, complex literate experience in their church and choir. It’s essential that educators work to understand and value the literate experiences every child brings to school. As Phyllis Hunter (2012) reminds us:

What do we consider reading? If we’re talking Hamlet or the Federalist Papers, kids may not be reading as much. But if we recognize the time they spend on the Internet and with social media as opportunities for reading and writing, then the number of minutes kids these days spend on both is not declining.

Effective teachers of reading understand that children from culturally diverse backgrounds learn best when the classroom environment is respectful of their linguistic, social, and cultural heritage. These teachers surround their students with culturally appropriate and relevant trade books that capitalize on the background knowledge and experiences that their students bring to school. By connecting these children with meaningful, culturally responsive books, they can relate to, teachers validate and build on their students' cultural and world knowledge. For this reason, the literacy director of Chicago Public Schools, Jane Fleming, maintains that we need more books that depict positive images of urban life to engage our growing populations of urban students and bolster their literacy development (Fleming et al., 2016).

In this poignant example, trade author Jewell Parker Rhodes (2015) helps us understand the need for books that reflect all the children in a class:

I was a junior at Carnegie Mellon when I saw, on the library's new fiction shelf, Gayl Jones's Corregidora. Black women wrote books? It was a revelation. I switched my major the very next day. In my creative writing class, I was the only person of color. My classmates would say, "Why didn't you tell me your characters were black?" "Why didn't you tell me yours were white?" But truth be told, the experience confirmed that I, too, "read white" unless an author told me differently.

A rich classroom collection of culturally responsive trade books acknowledges the background experience of culturally diverse students, bridges the gap between home and school, and enhances their engagement in reading. As Lehman, Freeman, and Scharer note, "As technology advances and opportunities for global communication expand, the value and importance of international children's books will continue to grow" (2009).

Dr. Alfred Tatum promotes what he calls enabling texts, books that are deeply significant and meaningful to all adolescents, but especially important for our diverse students living in high poverty urban environments. Enabling texts, at times authored by writers who have overcome adversity themselves, form a textual lineage that speaks to the rich possibilities of a life both thoughtful and well lived. Tatum believes these books offer their readers a roadmap to life as they strive to develop their own "plan of action" and a "healthy psyche" (Tatum, 2009).

Drawing from his work with disengaged adolescents in Chicago, Tatum saw the need for texts that were provocative and relevant, stories that spoke to the essential questions of students' lives. He also insisted that his students write, not just to develop skills, but as a process of self-discovery and a means of empowerment across four intellectual platforms that enable students to think deeply about their own human development. As he says, "It's not just about literacy. It's about their lives" (2009, 2013).

- **Define Self:** What are your passions, your values, and your goals?
- **Become Resilient:** How do you stay strong when life puts obstacles in your way?
- **Engage with Others:** How do you work with other people to make a difference?
- **Build Capacity:** What can you do to make the world a better place?

Closing Thoughts

Phyllis Hunter (2012) writes, "Every child should find her or himself in the pages of a book." As teachers work to bring in culturally responsive children's and YA books that will appeal to their diverse classrooms, they would do well to ask the following of each book they are considering. Does this book:

- Reflect the values, strengths, and ideals that a cultural group considers vital?
- Accurately represent the characters' countries of origin?
- Address complex issues with sensitivity and nuance?
- Portray characters as problem-solvers?
- Feature the diversity most typical in different regional areas?

By bringing the world into our classrooms and homes through culturally responsive literature, we open windows of understanding (Draper, 2014; Dybdah and Ongtooguk, 2014; Haddix, 2014; Parker, 2014).

We have the power to know more through the books we read and through the stories we hear. And as educators, we also have the power to change what our students know. We can bring books to our students that will push them beyond their limits and out into understanding the world as it truly exists. We can give them access to more empathy and more understanding by giving them access to the kinds of books that accurately represent the diversity of the people with whom we share this world (Lifshitz, 2018).

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