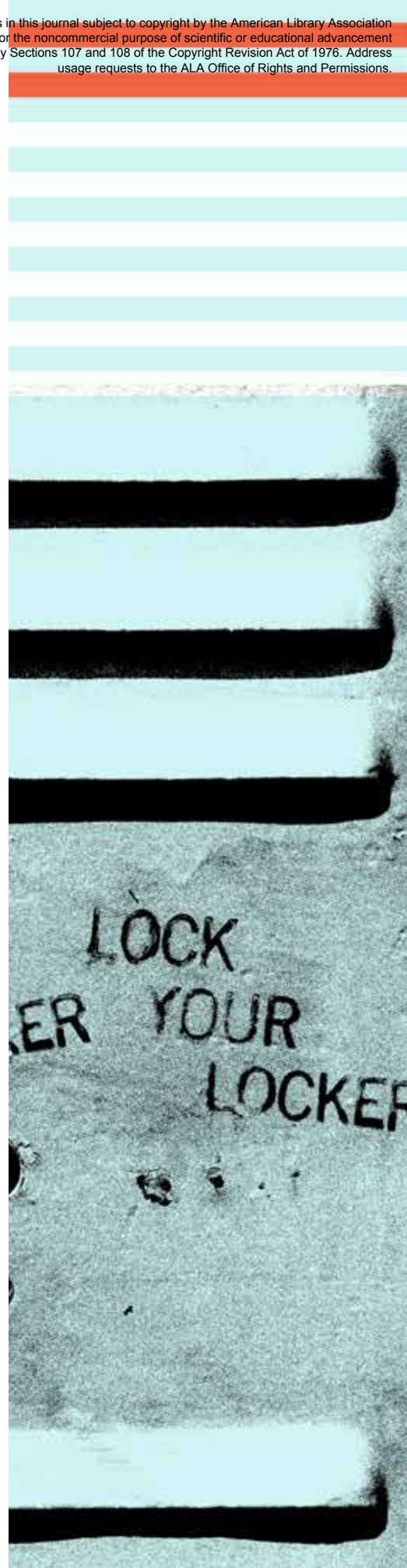


FEATURE

Shifting Lenses on YOUTH LITERACY & IDENTITY

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Racialized¹ youth, especially those who attend chronically underperforming schools in our nation's poor and urban communities, can be likened to singing canaries. These young people risk their lives by entering educational institutions that are not equipped to properly prepare them for the future. Historically, the canary served to warn coal miners of the presence of dangerous gases. When the canary stopped singing or was found dead, the miners knew a serious problem required immediate attention. Like canaries, racialized youth in inner-city schools are a litmus test for the health of the entire educational system in the United States. They are the indicators of how well *we* as educators and concerned citizens are providing quality education for our future generations. Thus, the struggles of racialized youth should be viewed as warnings that there is something wrong with the institutions themselves, not with the youth. As Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2003) suggest, "It's not the canary—it's the mine!"

It is important for us, both individually and as a profession, to take time to stop and reexamine how we see people and the world around us. This fresh look is especially important for school librarians whose decision-making power and interactions with children and young adults in and out of library spaces can shape the trajectory of their literate lives in significant ways. Youth from racialized groups comprise nearly half of all children in the U.S. (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2016).

Too often, these young people are labeled as "at risk" or "high risk" by mainstream educational institutions, including schools and libraries. In this article we first offer a diverse set of lenses for looking at issues of literacy and identity among racialized youth. By shifting our gaze beyond the concepts of risk and failure we challenge school librarians to adopt more-constructive lenses that change how we see (and consequently support) the literacy and identity needs of marginalized youth. We then offer a set of eight guiding principles that reflect multiple lenses for understanding and addressing the literacy and identity development of youth from historically underrepresented racial groups.

Multiples Lenses

Statistical Lens

This is the lens with which we are most familiar. The statistical lens affirms the shifting cultural demographic landscape of today's youth, who are increasingly nonwhite, multilingual, and multinational. This lens also affords us a level of explanatory power for examining macro-level issues that affect racialized youth such as joblessness and low college graduation rates (Cook 2015). When looking through the statistical lens, however, it is important to contextualize the numbers in ways that do not further reify stereotypical tropes about these groups. One way to contextualize these numbers is to discuss the statistical outliers or instances where racialized youth have exerted a level

of agency and surmounted the odds that predict negative outcomes for their lives.

Another important angle requires us to look more closely at statistics to see what groups or issues are hidden beneath the surface of the numbers. For instance, middle- and upper-class youth from minority backgrounds often get overlooked in the larger achievement gap narrative. The focus tends to be on low-income "poor" students who provide an easier answer for how to address the problem of school inequities. The argument goes, if we simply provide more resources to students in low-income communities, then their academic achievement and life outcomes will inevitably increase. What's hidden from this statistical view is the fact that racialized youth from middle- and upper-class backgrounds often also face numerous kinds of obstacles and experience lower academic performance and life outcomes compared to their white counterparts.

For example, studies show that racialized youth often experience what is known as stereotype threat when they enter high-stakes testing scenarios (Steele 1997). This threat involves carrying into the testing environment the burden of the prejudices other people have about one's race, leading to self-fulfilling low-performance outcomes. Also related to the racial achievement gap but hidden by statistics are racial identity development theo-

1 "Racialized" is a term used in place of the more-outdated and inaccurate terms like "racial minority" and "people of color" or "non-white." The term racialized recognizes that race is a social construct initially developed by Europeans during colonialism to mark certain groups for subjugation based on perceived physiological differences and potential for slave labor, and on Europeans' desire to acquire land and resources on other continents. Although these labels were initially imposed onto racialized groups, members of these groups have since adopted these same labels for themselves (e.g., Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, etc.) as a way to build a sense of collective identity.

ries, which suggest that nonwhite students (e.g., African American youth) often develop oppositional identities in direct resistance to the larger cultural framework that conceptually links notions of “acting white” with academic success (Ogbu 2004). The racial achievement gap statistics also do not account for the “cognitive dissonance” that racialized students experience in classrooms where the curriculum focuses on Eurocentric figures and perspectives, a focus that marginalizes and silences non-Europeans’ contributions to history, literature, science, and other areas (Carter 2007).

Overall, we should carefully consider how we frame the numbers and not rely on one-dimensional views that project deficit perspectives onto racialized youth. The statistics are powerful only insofar as we use them to dismantle oppressive systems.

Critical Lens

The next shift involves stepping back and examining youth identity and literacy through a critical lens. This lens comes with a screen filter complete with a set of rhetorical questions that should be asked as we view and interact with the world around us. These questions derive from Beverly Tatum’s ABC framework of inclusive learning, which includes A, affirming identity; B, building community; and C, cultivating leadership (Tatum 2000).

We adapt Tatum’s ABC approach to our goal of creating inclusive

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school library spaces for all youth by offering a critical lens to guide our practices. This lens requires us to keep the following ABC questions at the forefront of our minds:

- A: Ask: Who is left out of the picture in our collections and services? Likewise, who is being misrepresented or underrepresented in our services and resources?
- B: Bridge: How might we bridge the disconnects for those whose voices and cultures are missing or underrepresented in our services and resources?
- C: Cultivate: How might we cultivate new voices or be agents of change who challenge the status quo of cultural hegemony in libraries?

Refracted Lens

Through social media, we are seeing and hearing directly from youth about how they see themselves and how they believe the mainstream world sees and positions them. This next lens is the refracted lens, which affords us the ability to see the world in the way racialized youth perceive they are portrayed by mainstream media, including television, social media, and movies. This lens allows the viewer to see both how youth see themselves and how they believe others see them.

According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, refraction is "the observed altered location, as seen from the earth, of another planet or the like due to diffraction of the atmosphere" (Merriam-Webster 2006). The

refracted lens can help us push back against mainstream (altered) depictions of youth that present only stereotypical viewpoints and replace them with more generative views. For example, the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown was created in response to the negative media portrayals of young Black men such as Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, who were unarmed and yet killed under spurious circumstances (see figure 1). Not only did this hashtag push back against police brutality, but it also spoke to the unique vantage point racialized youth possess—a vantage point that shows how they are often seen and portrayed by the mainstream media stereotypically as thugs, unqualified, lazy, and so forth, even when evidence to the contrary exists.

Historical Lens

The final lens is the historical lens. This lens helps viewers see today's racialized youth as part of a broader legacy of people who have constantly fought for their linguistic rights to attain literacy and be taught in their native tongue. This fight has been mounted over a range of issues, including laws that once forbade Black slaves from reading and extend to bilingual-education laws today (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

One way to honor the literate legacies of racialized youth is to promote inquiry into their "textual lineages." Doing so can help us look deeper through the historical lens. According to Alfred Tatum (2009), our textual lineages include the things we have read that have been significant in shaping our identities. For youth from historically underrepresented racial groups, these texts are often rooted in stories about life in a particular

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era or context that reflects their own cultural experiences and ethnic group histories.

Guiding Principles

Once we've begun to view the literacy and identity development of racialized youth through multiple lenses, we are ready to embrace the following eight principles to guide our work:

1. Keep our focus on the purpose of literacy in young people's lives.
2. Explicitly acknowledge race, ethnicity, and tribal status.
3. Adopt an asset-based approach.
4. Set high expectations.
5. Use culturally relevant teaching strategies.
6. Use materials that are authentic and relevant to the lives of Native American youth and youth of color.
7. Form strong authentic partnerships with parents and the community.
8. Be there and be available.

The first principle is captured by this quote from Ernest Morrell, who is a professor at Columbia University: "Literacy is not just about decoding text. It is about becoming a superior human being that can act powerfully upon the world" (quoted in Hughes-Hassell et al. 2012, 6). As Morrell pointed out, we must keep our focus on the purpose of literacy in students' lives. Too much of the discourse about literacy and racialized youth is focused on raising test scores (Tatum 2009). When we focus only



Figure 1. Responses to negative media portrayals of young African American men.



on test scores, we neglect the real reason we want youth to be literate: to be able to speak out and make a difference in their own lives, in their communities, and in the broader society. Librarians must support the literacy development of racialized youth not only to close the achievement gap, but also because literacy is a powerful tool of voice and agency. All libraries must be spaces where young people are encouraged and supported to develop their voices, to tell their stories, and to share their unique perspectives on how we can create a more-just world.

As Tyrone C. Howard argued, race and its manifestations have played, and continue to play, an integral role in education practice. Howard challenged educators to “recognize that race, racism, and their complexities are present in school curriculum, teacher expectations, teacher-student interactions, disciplinary practices, GATE (gifted and talented education) recommendations, AP and Honors course opportunities, college preparatory courses, instructional practices, and special education referrals” (2010, 103). Adherence to principle two requires school librarians to not only explicitly acknowledge race, ethnicity, and tribal status, but to recognize the inequities racialized youth experience in our schools, and to respond by intervening when biases and inequities occur, advocating against inequitable practices and policies, and creating bias-free and equitable learning environments (Gorski 2014).

The third principle challenges us to adopt an asset-based approach

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to our work. We need to focus our attention on the strengths, assets, and resilience demonstrated by racialized youth, their families, and their communities (Cabrera 2013; Moll et al. 1992). We need to get to know students as individuals so that we are aware of the capabilities they bring to the classroom, capabilities that are not evident if we focus on the dominant deficit-oriented narrative or the one-dimensional picture painted by statistics.

Low expectations have been cited as a major contributing factor to the achievement gap found between racialized youth and others because low expectations undermine learners' sense of competency and increase their learned helplessness (Boykin and Noguera 2011). One survey of Latino teens, for example, found that those who reported low expectations from their teachers and counselors during high school were more than three and a half times as likely to report being dropouts as youth who believed their teacher/counselors had high expectations when it came to school performance (Wildhagen 2012). Similarly, Danielle Hornett (1990) suggested that Native American youth may perform poorly in school because their motivation suffers as a result of their teachers' low expectations. Thus, the fourth principle challenges us to set high expectations for all learners and to provide the support they need to be successful.

Howard Gardner noted, "The biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all children as if they were variants of the same individual and thus to feel justified in teaching them all the same subjects in the same way" (quoted in Siegel and Shaughnessy 1994, 564). Instead, we should be using culturally relevant teach-

ing, "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings 2009, 20). Culturally relevant teaching uses the backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences of racialized youth to inform library programming and services. It values and uses multiple literacy practices, not just those of mainstream, primarily middle-class, white families (Edwards, McMillon, and Turner 2010). By embracing principle five, librarians create a bridge between students' home and school lives, while still meeting the expectations of district and state curricular requirements.

Principle six reminds us that, in general, racialized youth prefer and are more likely to engage with literature and other instructional materials that portray people or characters that look like them and their families, friends, and peers, and include the accomplishments of members of their cultural community (Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001). Using materials that are authentic and relevant to students' lives leads to positive literacy outcomes such as increased motivation to read and write, increased engagement in literacy activities, improved recall and comprehension, and increased phonological awareness and fluency (Bell and Clarke 1998; McCollin and O'Shea 2005; Garth-McCullough 2008). Use of authentic, relevant materials also leads to improved life outcomes because classroom learning is connected to real-life activities, connects youth with role models from their communities, and supports positive racial and ethnic identity development (Tatum 2009). This last point is critical: current research shows

that positive racial/ethnic identity is a precursor to academic achievement for racialized youth (Hanley and Noblit 2009).

Tyrone C. Howard (2010) found that in successful schools for culturally diverse students, parents and other community members were valued as important stakeholders in the school's mission of achieving academic success. Parental involvement is associated with a number of positive outcomes for racialized youth, including increased academic performance (Dietel 2006), higher grades (Freng, Freng, and Moore 2006; Muller and Kerbow 1993), a greater likelihood of aspiring to attend college and actually enrolling (Cabrera and La Nosa 2000), and enhanced student self-esteem (Marschall 2006). Similarly, creating school-community partnerships has been found to be critical for improving the literacy education of racialized youth (Freng, Freng, and Moore 2006). Principle seven, thus, challenges us to be proactive and create authentic partnerships with parents and the community.

Finally, principle eight demands that we *be present* and make ourselves available to youth. Pedro Noguero has written, "...this may be what Black male youth need most of all: adults who are willing to open up lines of communication, to engage in dialogue, and to listen" (2013, x). School librarians must establish caring relationships with racialized youth, but we must realize that what a caring relationship looks like will vary across cultures—that is, youth will interpret caring from the perspective of their culture, which may differ from the librarian's cultural definition (Hughes-Hassell and Rawson 2017).

Concluding Thoughts

We believe the literacy education and improved life outcomes for racialized youth are critical social justice and civil rights issues in American society, issues on which the library community can potentially have a

tremendous impact. By shifting our gaze beyond the concepts of risk and failure, and acting in accordance with the eight principles presented here, school librarians can create inclusive library spaces that support the literacy development of all students.



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Sandra Hughes-Hassell, PhD, is a professor in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is president-elect of the Young Adult Library Services Association. Her research focuses on social justice issues in youth library services, diverse youth literature, and the role of school librarians in education reform. Her latest book *Libraries, Literacy, and African American Youth: Research and Practice (Libraries Unlimited 2017)*, coedited with Pauletta Brown Bracy and Casey H. Rawson, serves as a call to action for the library community to address the literacy and life outcome gaps impacting Black youth. With funding from an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant, she and her team are currently developing a comprehensive research-based professional development curriculum that focuses on cultural competence, culturally relevant pedagogy, and equity literacy. To learn more visit <http://projectready.web.unc.edu>. She served on the AASL Underserved Student Population Task Force and currently serves on the School Library Research Editorial Board.

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