

D.R.E.A.M. Literacy: Enhancing the Literacy Experience for Diverse Populations

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Abstract

“D.R.E.A.M. Literacy” represents several pieces necessary to address and provide quality learning experiences and equitable literacy instruction for all. The article delves into five sections that will provide examples of “D.R.E.A.M.” (Diversity, Relevance, Engagement, Access, Motivation) being implemented into instruction, and encourages support for using diverse texts, popular culture and technology, and multimodal resources. The article seeks to empower educators to reach out to parents, and address teaching literacy skills beyond the traditional literacy curriculums that are adopted in school districts across the country. As populations in classrooms continue to grow more diverse, this article embraces and supports the changing demographics by making literacy accessible and engaging.

Keywords: *literacy, diversity, accessibility, engagement, motivation, culturally responsive teaching*

“DREAM” represents several aspects (Diversity, Relevance, Engagement, Access, Motivation) necessary to address and provide quality and equitable literacy instruction for all. “Diversity” references a wide spectrum of issues that educators might face. Willingness to learn, acceptance, and application the culture (not just ethnicity or race) of students to instructional practice is key. Students also need to know how to apply the knowledge being taught, and how it applies to them. Engagement starts with learning the interests of students, merged with the academic knowledge needed. Ease of access to resources and parents’ insight on how to continue their child’s learning outside of the classroom doors is crucial. As for motivation, our role as educators is to grow our students’ skills and learn what makes them excited to learn—this is very important in a nation of students with unique needs that are changing daily.

Students need to feel like they are included and represented in the learning environment, as “...for most students in the United States, the literature they encounter in school consists mainly of White, middle class representation (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014, p. 28).” Based on the texts that teachers use to instruct students about varied teaching and learning styles as well as the classroom environment, students become disengaged or unmotivated to succeed if they do not feel valued. Over the past few years, there have been some efforts to address cultural representation in children’s literature. According to a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2016), only 22% of their books were about people of color, and the books written or illustrated by authors of color made up about 12% of their inventory. These numbers are slowly changing, as twenty years ago only 9% of book selections represented or included students of color.

However, it has been a slow process, though the population of students in the United States is continually growing more diverse by the day. Literacy learning, and traditional academic English can be a subject area that is intimidating to students, and many students struggle with code switching or second language learning—yet they must build a literacy foundation, as it is essential for learning in all other academic subject areas. With the challenges that many students bring to the classroom, educators must be willing to embrace diversity, creativity, patience, improve access to resources, and spark engagement.

Diversity

Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) practices are becoming more common in the nation's schools as classroom populations become more diverse. However, our students' socio-emotional learning needs are growing at a rate faster than our teaching and learning practices are developing. Our students need diverse perspectives presented to them, and the subject in which we can use to educate and appreciate what students bring to a classroom is English Language Arts.

Literacy in the traditional sense, is defined as the ability to read and write fluently. Students with learning gaps in their English skills- whether it be due to dialects or cultural aspects, or languages other than English being spoken in the home presents some challenges. To ensure that literacy learning can be better received from students, educators should provide a variety of materials when teaching, as well as provide an array of resources for students to read for leisure during independent reading time..

Students are often drawn to books that are familiar or look like their family situation. "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"

(Bishop, 1990, p. 557). Imagine going to school and using resources that had nothing to do with who you are or what you represent in society. Our students need to be exposed to books and authors who present multicultural perspectives. Students need to not only see people like themselves in their learning settings, but also seeing authors who represent them might also one day encourage them to use their voice to read or write (Jones, 2013; Lazar & Offenber, 2011; Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2009; Tyson, 1999).

Ways in which diverse perspectives in literacy can be incorporated into the classroom are:

- Planning lessons so that take linguistic and English learning needs are taken into account. (Incorporate lessons that discuss cognates, language origins, and root words)
- Make it a point to use a different cultural group or underrepresented group when selecting texts during lesson planning. If you plan with a team, one (or more) members of the team should oversee and devote time to finding resources that highlight various cultural groups.
- Doing author studies or focuses (monthly, six or nine-weeks, semester) on authors of color.
- Having students bring (pre-screened/pre-approved) print resources from home
- Use books and resources that have a balance female and male protagonists
- Check selected award-winning book lists (Newbery Medal, Caldecott Medal, Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, and Pura Belpré Illustrator Awards), as well as social media (<https://twitter.com/diversebooks>) for suggested book lists (as they

usually provide a variety of backgrounds and genres to use)

Educators ultimately need to understand that diversity is not always about race or color. Diversity is multifaceted, it is language, it is regions, it is gender, it is religion and customs, socioeconomic status and the prior knowledge and background that a student brings. Addressing diversity, as it relates to literacy learning is more than the selection of books and resources. It involves showing respect for the students an educator serves, as well as the students' families. Messages of inclusion are prevalent within many school systems, but to incorporate a classroom environment that truly reflects a changing society takes work on behalf of the educator. "Culturally responsive classrooms specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform" (Montgomery, 2001, p. 4). It involves removing and addressing biases, respect from all parties, and the building of trust. The educator must be passionate about including and introducing diverse perspectives into their classroom setting. They must also be able to show students the value of their voices, and the power of writing, literature, and reading.

Relevance

Students often perform better in the classroom and are willing to learn new or unfamiliar content if they feel a connection to what they are learning or are presented the option of applying their knowledge to real-world scenarios. Freire (1970) states that students should be "learning about the world in order to gain knowledge, by saying, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p.72). Reading fiction often becomes a way for students to escape their realities—possibly poverty, violence, abuse, lack

of resources, or various challenges that they inherit from birth. And reading non-fiction is often the way to show students a life other than their own, which can address truth in the world around us. Relevancy puts more wood on the fires that are often dying within students. The "fire" is sparked when students can connect the traditional literacy learning lessons and skills that educators teach to their everyday lives. Literacy is a form of communication, and so is social media, music, television, and electronic communication (texts, chats, blogging and vlogging, etc.). The lessons that are taught become relevant when students understand the purposes and the value of their tasks at hand as it relates to life outside of the classroom.

Examples of how to incorporate relevance into literacy instruction:

- Incorporate popular culture elements into lessons (songs, television, media, fashion, sports, current events, etc.)
- Have students share their perspectives in a project-based manner (writing, reading, speaking presentations)
- Give students the opportunity to hear stories that reflect their experiences (Compile a class wish-list on topics related to your students) Search the term "Own Voices" or #OwnVoices coined by Corinne Duyvis (@corinneduyvis) online. The term by Duyvis (2015) was created to "recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group".

Engagement

Classrooms with diverse populations mean that there are a variety of needs that are to be met in the setting (and a variety of strengths from which to draw). Keeping all engaged in a classroom takes the ability to be observant of the

students, and the ability to connect with the students. This involves trust in what a teacher is presenting to them and being comfortable in receiving new or unfamiliar lessons and resources. Students need structure and consistency, however, when teaching a diverse group, a variety of learning styles and intelligences are present—therefore, it is the educator’s job to come with an assortment of strategies. Engagement starts with learning the interests of the students, and then merging those interests with the academic knowledge needed.

Examples of how to engage a diverse population of students with literacy instruction:

- Provide writing prompts, books or stories that address students’ life situations or cultural backgrounds. Sharing/providing engaging texts and unique prompts to write about (Ex. Student led or created prompts; reading non-traditional texts like news or media stories, magazines, almanacs, or e-books and online reading.
- Provide native language support and resources for English Language Learners
- Provide non-traditional, print rich, authentic, and practical materials for students to use as resources in class. Think beyond books and magazines— and bring in objects such as labels, advertisements, brochures/pamphlets, directions, etc.
- Focusing on engagement before, during, and after reading (Use strategies that are purposeful and relevant not. Avoid having students use strategies just for the sake of doing so.)

Access

Access to books and at-home literacy resources is an issue that is often out of the hands of the educator. However, educators can support their

students when they are away from the classroom—but they must be willing and know how to do so. Underserved and students in lower socio-economic backgrounds often are at a disadvantage, as their limited access to literacy resources becomes one of the main reasons for academic gaps. Liberiste-Osirus (2019) states, “Students everywhere have an inalienable right to quality education and literacy resources, but they are being denied this right because of systemic variables that are far too great to maneuver alone” (p. 38). Educators must know that students and their families do the best they can. However, their culture in their home might not include the use of books to educate or entertain. Books are valuable resources, but chances are students have other supplemental resources at home (or near) that may be beneficial. This is where the parent/guardian and teacher relationship work together to help our students.

Examples of how educators can improve access to literacy resources and involve parents in literacy learning:

- Make expectations clear as to how the educator and parent can work as partners. Build respect. Build a culture for learning.
- Establish a Communication Plan (social media, apps, share how and when parents can reach out/contact teachers)
- Provide clarity on student learning goals for the week, month, six-weeks, nine-weeks, or the year. (Be sure the plan contains language that is “parent friendly”)
- Meet with parents beyond required parent/teacher conferences, and provide them with resources that are practical and meaningful (Websites, Apps, exposing students to different genres, word study activities)

Access to literacy resources not only affects the disadvantaged, but it affects those afforded with

resources, as they can be misinformed and disadvantaged as well. Just because a child is in a school in which everyone looks like them, doesn't mean that work doesn't need to be done in their literacy setting. Not only should students who lack the resources be presented with options and ways to secure books and learning resources, but students in homogenous class settings should have access to and be presented in class with materials and resources reflective of ideas outside of their normal world. Ease of access to resources and informing parents on how to continue their child's learning outside of the classroom doors is crucial.

Motivation

Helping students to get motivated to read and use their literacy skills is often difficult as "Motivation may be thought of as a general characteristic of a person and, as such, becomes a difficult construct to precisely measure" (Varuzza, M., Sinatra, R., Eschenauer, R., & Blake, B. E., 2014, p. 108). An educator's role is to grow our students' skills and discover what makes them excited to learn. Not only does the problem with motivation lie with the ability to "measure" motivation, but also to determine how much intrinsic or extrinsic motivation a student needs. Students from diverse populations often struggle to "fit in" to the education system. They must understand the value of the content they are learning and feel valued and understood in their classroom setting. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) share that the purposes which students have for different tasks are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, valuing of achievements, goals for achievement, and the social aspects related to motivation. In order to have the desire to read or write, our students must have a personal stake in what we present them, as well as an understanding of how reading and writing affects them socially.

Examples of how to motivate students in relation to literacy learning:

- Class Discussions: Speaking is an important, and often forgotten element of literacy. Allow students the opportunity to vocalize their thoughts and feelings about the texts and resources that are presented to them.
- Choice: Allowing students choice in the type of texts they select to read, as well as exposing them to a variety of choices (genres) is necessary in motivating and engaging students' literacy abilities. Giving students the privilege of choice does not always mean that the educator should leave the entire decision-making process up to students. Educators should provide encouragement and model specific ways to preview texts.
- Value: Underrepresented populations, in most cases come to the classroom feeling excluded. Show them the value in what they are doing in the classroom. This is done by engaging in popular culture that interest the students, and interacting with key players in the students' learning community (parents and collaborating with other teachers). Show students the value in themselves and introduce them to literacy as a tool to empower themselves and the community around them. This is done by teaching real-world relevant lessons and exposing the students to literacy— beyond stories and beyond simply reading and writing, but as a powerful, form of communication that helps them to learn and understand the world around them.

Conclusion

Enhancing the literacy experience for diverse learners involves understanding who the

students currently are within the nation's classrooms. Their backgrounds are diverse, their needs are diverse, and their capabilities are unique. Addressing the needs of the ever-changing and diverse student populations in this country involves understanding of where students have come from, and where they are

capable of going. If educators can seek to eliminate biases, provide expertise to students and parents in order to gain access to quality learning materials, and learn how to engage and motivate students, then the "dream" of our most challenging students being fully literate and successfully is attainable.

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