



CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE FOR K-5 STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The use and importance of culturally relevant literature in the elementary classroom is discussed in this article. Common classroom practices with regard to use of literature and a review of the need for culturally relevant literature that provides students with windows and mirrors into lived experiences are both explored. Ways to identify and use culturally relevant literature is provided, including a list of book awards, tips for selecting titles, and best practices for using them with students. Social media and grassroots movements that pertain to diversity in children's literature will also be addressed. Elementary teachers, librarians, and professors in teacher preparation programs will benefit from this information on using appropriate, relevant children's books that align with diverse cultural experiences.

Imagine a world in which all children see themselves in the pages of the books they read.

-We Need Diverse Books, 2020

INTRODUCTION

There is extensive research on annual publications of children's books with striking numbers: In 2019, 41.8% of children's books featured White characters and 29.2% featured animals or other entities as the main characters. Moreover, 29% of the published books featured characters of diverse backgrounds (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). While the 2019 percentages are an increase in the number of books that were published in prior years (Huyck et al., 2016), their use plays a large role in providing these windows and mirrors for readers. The concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors may sound to someone as things that provide visual access, but those words mean so much more in the literature world. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 article, "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors," described the need for children to see themselves, as well as learn about other lived experiences, through literature. Sliding glass doors allow for readers to step into and experience that lived experience through the books that they read. In recent years, the need for windows and mirrors in children's literature has become increasingly apparent (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016).

Most educators are familiar with the timeless classic works of authors such as Dr. Seuss, but content analyses indicate that these books do not always reflect the lived experiences of their readers and in some cases, have racial undertones (Ishizuka & Stephens, 2019). While not every book should



necessarily provide that mirror or window, it can be of tremendous value to have books that do; these types of books resist stereotypes and help readers understand how identities intersect across communities (Durand & Jiménez-García, 2018). Authors, librarians, and educators are making an effort to highlight and utilize books that feature diverse characters, not just White or animal protagonists, by incorporating the use of culturally relevant literature in the classroom.

Culturally relevant literature is literature that is culturally conscious and appropriate, authentic, and realistic (McNair, 2010; Gray, 2009). Books that are considered culturally relevant should have accurate information, realistic events and images, and hold true to the culture being depicted. The use of culturally relevant children's literature in classroom settings can set the tone for deeper engagement with reading and open up opportunities for meaningful conversations and learning for all students.

The Danger of Teaching the “Single Story”

A common practice in schools today is the use of a variety of books that do not reflect all students' lived experiences (Muhammad, 2020). Teaching practices, many of them stemming from teacher preparation programs in universities, are exploring best practices for responding to ethnic diversity. Students have been expected to “divorce themselves from their cultures and learn according to European American cultural norms” (Gay, 2002, p. 114). This type of instruction often utilizes books that feature characters, experiences, hair types, and activities in which many students cannot relate. Books may include European American children playing in the snow, Mexican children being deported, or African American children living in poverty. While this may be the lived experience of some people from those backgrounds, the use of these books, while well-intended, may result in perpetuating stereotypes, including the European American worldview of diverse cultures. This is the danger of teaching the single story: Students see only one version of that cultural experience, one they may or may not be familiar with, and their understandings of those windows become singular. Assumptions may be made of the world around them based on the single story (Adichie, 2009).

MULTICULTURAL DOES NOT EQUAL CULTURALLY RELEVANT

A wealth of terms exists to refer to books that represent underrepresented groups. One important term to differentiate for purposes of this article is *multicultural*. Just because a book may be identified as multicultural does not mean that it is culturally relevant. Multicultural literature is a broad term that includes books that represent the diversity of racial, ethnic and social groups in our world (Bishop, 1997). For example, a folktale set in Mexico in the 1500s may not be relevant to Mexican American students living in the southwestern states today. Culturally relevant literature, on the other hand, allow students to make personal connections to what they are reading and explore their cultural identities (Fleming et al., 2016). Culturally relevant texts should have characters and places that are potentially familiar to readers. Although multicultural books may



increase cultural relevance in the classroom, they do not always provide reflections of students' lived experiences.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE

In order to understand the need of culturally relevant literature, the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy should first be explored. There has been a rise in awareness of the need for culturally relevant pedagogy, a theoretical model that addresses student achievement while helping students to accept and affirm their cultural identity and develop critical perspectives that are aware of inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Three components comprise culturally relevant pedagogy: academic achievement (intellectual growth and ability to problem-solve), cultural competence (affirmation and appreciation of culture of origin and at least one other culture), and sociopolitical awareness (identifying, analyzing, and solving real-world issues, particularly issues that pertain to societal inequalities).

Culturally relevant teaching is an approach in which teachers become familiar with their students' culture, especially if the teachers' backgrounds are different from their students (Gunning, 2020). In 2018, 50% of U.S. children were White, non-Hispanic; 25% were Hispanic; 14% were Black, non-Hispanic; 5% were Asian, non-Hispanic; and 5% were non-Hispanic "All other races" (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019). As of the 2017-18 school year, 79% of teachers in the United States were White, 9% were Hispanic, and 7% were African American, with other racial/ethnic groups falling at or below 2% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Considering these percentages, the need for culturally relevant teaching is imperative to ensure optimal student learning. Teachers should strive to understand their students' cultural background and socialization practices, building on this knowledge to differentiate instruction.

Selection of culturally relevant children's literature is a key component of culturally relevant teaching. Wanless and Crawford (2016) provide an example of using a culturally relevant text in a classroom setting: the teacher reads the book *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley, 2001) and leads a discussion on things adults do to help children take care of their hair. Children in this classroom shared responses about their grandfather shaving their head and another mentions the beads on her braids. "Showing children that we see and value all aspects of them is a critical step in helping them feel welcome and connected to their teachers and peers" (Wanless & Crawford, 2016, p. 9). Reading this book and welcoming students' responses validates and recognizes their cultural experiences. In one second grade classroom, the teacher pre-selected culturally relevant texts and allowed the students to select the book they wanted to read to form culture circles, a grouping similar to literature circles but in which the dialogue revolved around the cultural aspects reflected in the book. In these culture circles, the teacher acted as a fellow participant and allowed the conversation to flow naturally rather than her acting as teacher/facilitator. Blurring the lines between teacher and student roles, including literature that reflected students' lives, and promotion of critical



consciousness were among the findings from the observations that were conducted. Interactions in culture circles differed from discussion of stories in basal anthologies, which usually do not reflect diverse characters (Osorio, 2018).

Less than 30% of recently-published children’s books portray children from diverse backgrounds, yet students need these books to achieve the concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors – reflections of themselves and windows into the lives of others. Culturally relevant literature refers to titles that are culturally conscious and appropriate, authentic, and realistic. This type of literature stems from the seminal work of Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy, a model that addresses student achievement, acceptance and affirmation of students’ cultural identities and awareness of inequities. Next will be an exploration on how to use culturally relevant literature in the classroom.

IDENTIFYING AND USING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

Book awards, particularly those that have a cultural focus, are a great starting point in seeking out exemplary literature that reflects various backgrounds and lived experience. Kibler and Chapman (2018) provide tips that are instrumental for further identifying culturally relevant literature. Once educators have made their book selections, there are numerous ways to implement them in the classroom and beyond, even taking to social media for further exploration.

BOOK AWARDS

The past 50 years have seen a tremendous effort in recognizing exemplary children’s literature that reflects authenticity in the cultural experience. The American Library Association (2020) and its affiliate organizations have a variety of youth media awards that recognize outstanding materials for children and young adults. While some awards, such as Newbery and Caldecott, do not have a cultural focus, several do. Table 1 provides a list of culturally-affiliated book awards.

Table 1

American Library Association Culturally-Affiliated Children’s Book Awards

Book Award	Description
<i>Coretta Scott King Award</i> (founded 1969)	Outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books that demonstrate appreciation of African American culture
<i>Pura Belpré Award</i> (founded 1996)	Works by a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator that best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience



<i>Stonewall Book Award</i> (founded 1971)	Works of exceptional merit for children or teens relating to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender experience
<i>Sydney Taylor Award</i> (founded 1968)	Titles for children and teens that exemplify high literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience
<i>American Indian Youth Literature Award</i> (founded 2006)	Honors the very best writing and illustrations by Native Americans and Indigenous peoples of North America

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but should provide educators with a stronger idea of which awards to keep an eye on for noteworthy titles. These book award programs have members appointed or elected to serve on the committee and are tasked with detailed award criteria to follow while critically reading and analyzing each book being considered. Members often include librarians, educators, and children’s literature experts. Committee members typically have terms that vary in length (one year, three years, etc.) and the titles that win each year are those that were considered to be the most exemplary works for their charge at that point in time.

TIPS FOR SELECTING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

Kibler and Chapman (2018) have recommended numerous actionable steps for teachers to select culturally relevant literature for their classrooms. From examining teachers’ own positionality to getting to know their students to exploring existing literature, the following tips should provide a roadmap for teachers to successfully embark on selecting culturally relevant texts.

- Look for quality: Books should have an engaging story and illustrations, as well as high-quality text. This can be a very subjective and problematic task to take on, since teachers each have their own positionality and perceptions of their students’ positionalities. When looking for quality, consider including your students in the process to get their input from the start. Sharing that the idea of quality varies from person to person might help open up conversations on what is considered to be a high-quality book.
- Choose books that help children see themselves: Books should mirror different aspects of the identities of your students. Remember the danger of the single story, and seek out multiple perspectives. For example, not all books about Latinx youth should center on immigration, because this is not a part of the identity of all Latinx children.
- Seek books that help children expand their understanding of others: Books should introduce students to new people, places and concepts, including those that may be part of their community.
- Cast a wide net in your search: Be alert to new titles; follow publishers, authors, and relevant hashtags on social media; communicate with your school or public librarian on the types of books you’re seeking; collaborate with colleagues.



- Conduct an author study: Several authors write books based on their cultural experiences; a few examples: Jacqueline Woodson, Duncan Tonatiuh, Linda Sue Park, and Jason Reynolds.

HOW TO USE CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS WITH YOUR STUDENTS

An important concept to remember is that simply reading culturally relevant texts to students is not enough. The use of culturally relevant texts embedded in the curriculum can help readers construct meaning and increase comprehension; these gains are a result of students being able to draw on background knowledge and recognize students' cultures (Kibler & Chapman, 2018). Culturally relevant texts go hand-in-hand with culturally relevant pedagogy.

When I was a school librarian at a Title I, dual-language campus, I made every effort to seek out culturally relevant titles to purchase for our collection. Moreover, I wanted to include these books in read-alouds and lessons. One of my favorite titles to read with both children and pre-service teachers is *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales (2018), which won the Pura Belpré Award in 2019. In this picture book, author Morales draws from her experience as a young immigrant mother with her son, adjusting from life in Mexico to life in the U.S., learning the language and observing the habits of people around them. All the while, the mother and child in the book are dreaming of what the future holds in this new country. This book is often a familiar story to students who may have immigrated themselves or know someone who has, and resonates with many who have their own dreams for the future. The book's story line lends itself to conversations about inequities (particularly with language barriers) and taps into the sociopolitical consciousness component of culturally relevant teaching. Students can discuss their thoughts on language barriers or other issues noted from the book and identify possible solutions. After reading this book aloud, students can produce an original piece describing their dreams for the future. This book can provide a mirror for readers who have experienced moving to a new place, learning a new language, or navigating two cultures; it can also be a window for readers into these experiences, and the universality of dreams for the future can apply to everyone. Not every book will check off all the boxes like this example, and again, teachers should be cognizant that the immigrant narrative is not the only aspect of the Latinx experience, but this is one example of how I have used culturally relevant books with students.

Teachers should strive to get to know their students individually and their cultural histories, including the neighborhoods and community in which the students reside. In addition, educators should provide opportunities for students to share about themselves in a safe learning environment, regardless of what type of space that may be (classroom, library, community center, etc.). Upon text selection, keep in mind that it may not be relevant to all students; this is where the windows and mirrors concept comes into play. Although what may be relevant to one student may not be for another, it can provide a window for all students to consider the experiences and story line from the selected text. While reading the book with students, whether in a read-aloud setting, small group, or individually, teachers should engage their students in dialogue about the book; interrogate the story from various perspectives and allow the book to act as a comparison point for



the students' own lived experiences (Kibler & Chapman, 2018). Finally, educators should also consider their own positionality and sociocultural identity and how that impacts the way they teach (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This will help educators recognize their own assumptions and reframe understandings, which can in turn be facilitated with their students.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MOVEMENT FOR WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

Authors, educators, publishers and readers alike have taken to social media, websites and blogs to increase awareness and seek resources for culturally relevant texts. As a result, there are social media influencers (who use their handles, or usernames, to promote their work) and hashtags to follow that regularly provide information, best practices, book reviews, and other related resources. Table 2 provides a handful of resources to begin exploration:

Table 2

Social Media Hashtags and Handles

Hashtags and handles	Description and website
#DisruptTexts	A movement to rebuild the literary canon using an antibias, antiracist critical literacy lens (disrupttexts.org)
#OwnVoices	Children's literature about diverse characters written by authors of that same diverse group (corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices)
@DiverseBooks	A grassroots organization to help produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people (diversebooks.org)
@debreese	Debbie Reese, founder of American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL); provides critical analyses of Indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books (americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com)
@LatinosInKidLit	Critically reviews and promotes Latino children's literature (latinosinkidlit.com)
@brownbookshelf	Highlights African American children's authors and illustrators (thebrownbookshelf.com)
@WeAreKidLit	Promotes and recognizes the works of indigenous and people of color in youth literature (wtpsite.wordpress.com)



The people who worked behind these social media movements come from various backgrounds – educators, authors, publishers, and experts in literature. At times controversial, these hashtags and handles can be the focus of heated discussion. There is pushback at times from educators or other individuals who disagree with what these groups are saying. For example, the #DisruptTexts movement has been accused of promoting censorship on social media, and in January 2021 they released a statement detailing what their movement does and does not stand for (Ebarvia, 2021). (For example, they do not believe in censorship.) These social media handles and hashtags are helpful to follow for awareness, but they may also include their share of pushback and criticism. Teachers who peruse these social media movements should decide for themselves what and who to follow.

CONCLUSION

The reflection of cultural experiences, language and history fosters meaningful connections among students when interacting with culturally relevant books. The impact of studying and utilizing authentic culturally relevant books is felt in numerous ways: it assists students in opening up and partaking in purposeful talk in their classrooms, engaging in critical analyses, and performing at higher levels (Gunning, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Original stories with diverse characters and themes encourage deep, meaningful text connections on a level that is often not reached with books about animals or books exclusively about White protagonists. Authentic books are out there, but it may take searching on the part of educators and librarians to find them; smaller, independent publishing companies and local authors often produce books that represent local cultures, geographies and histories. The search is worth the work! Culturally relevant, authentic books provide all readers with the opportunity to identify themselves within those stories, opening up a plethora of opportunities for learning, sharing, and growth for everyone involved.

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