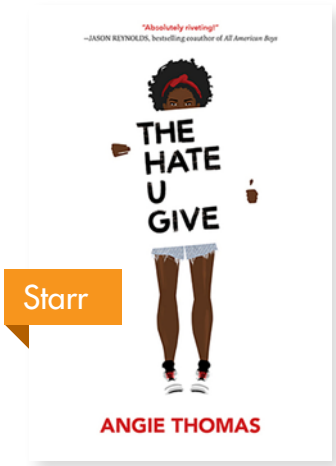
Supporting
ARTICLE

ACCESS

Why we defend this core value

Mitzi Mack

Do you know their stories?



Diverse reads. Marginalized characters. According to the grassroots organization We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), the books that tell the stories of Starr, Josh, Jordon, and Xiomara are just a few of the available published books reflective of the diversity of human lives. Providing access to and promoting diverse books—especially in these times of increased book challenges—is key to addressing growing trends and adjusting attitudes toward stereotypes, re-engaging teens in the art of reading for the sake of connection, telling more than a single story, and, lastly, securing an inclusive future built on choice.

Equitable access to resources and diversity are among the core values of librarianship (ALA 2019). Equitable access and diversity are important to me professionally and personally.

My Professional Journey

Appealing, sunny television commercials prompted my move to Florida nineteen years ago to teach in a suburban Latinx community at an elementary school with 410 students: 48.05 percent Latinx, 33.66 percent African American, 13.17 percent white, and 5.12 percent multiracial. More than 40 percent of the students were considered English Language Learners (ELLs). Though considered a suburban community, the median annual income was $42,000. Since the census of 2010, Florida's population has seen exponential growth, added a congressional seat, and shifted the racial makeup, which, according to the 2020 census, is 64.1 percent non-white, with the Latinx community showing the most growth over the years, growing to 26.5 percent (Sachs 2021).

My next school assignment as a librarian, just forty-five minutes down Interstate 75, took me to the heart of Tampa. At this magnet middle school in the city, we had 500 students: 79 percent African American, 15 percent Latinx, 3 percent multi-racial, 3 percent white. This corridor community included three public housing units, a park, a community center, and a city library as well. Both school settings shared the common denominator of more than 70 percent of the students benefiting from free and/or reduced-price lunch. The staff makeup for each school was quite different, as the middle school staff consisted primarily of African American and a few Latinx females. In contrast, most staff members of the elementary school had been white women, with higher numbers of Latinx people in varying roles than at the middle school.

The most important resources gathered for both schools were diverse books, best defined by Malinda Lo as books "by and about people of color, LGBT[Q] people, and/or disabled people" (ALA OIF 2015). Gathering these resources was not always easy because of the relative scarcity of titles, especially in the early years of my career as a school librarian.

WNDB began with the outreach of authors, including Malinda Lo, proclaiming the need for more diverse books in response to an all-white panel at a book conference (Mabbot 2017). However, the conversation about how white the children's book world was had started much earlier. It was fueled in 1965 when Nancy Larrick wrote an article "The All-White World of Children's Books," published in Saturday Review, yet by 2013 there had been little change (Mabbott 2017). The conversation continued and expanded into a hashtag.

In 2018, David Huyck and Sarah Park Dahlen created an infographic based on statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, depicting the number of characters from diverse backgrounds in children's literature published in 2018. According to the infographic, in 2018 more books were published in the United States with animals as characters than books with characters who were people of color. This was alarming to educators, including librarians, because in 2020 the U.S. diversity was at 61 percent while Florida's was at 64 percent (Sachs 2021), and yet in the publishing world, barely 30 percent of new books published in 2018 would reflect children of color, or expose white children to diverse characters or subjects. In fact, this preliminary data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center revealed far more than the number of books published reflecting children of color. It also highlighted the lack of diversity in the publishing world and a need for diverse imprints (Fernando 2021). Today, almost five years later, amid the pandemic, we hear outcries over alleged teaching of Critical Race Theory—or even objections to teaching accurate history—in K–12 schools, and over Black Lives Matter campaigns. From my perspective, society is at a critical crossroads as we see the uptick of book challenges focused on LGBTQ+ issues and people of color, especially in the state of Florida.

At the two school communities where I served as school librarian, the diverse books I selected as resources focused on Latinx and African American students since at least 50 percent of the books already in the libraries featured White students. Though the main ethnicity was different in each school, I could not presume either was the "norm," any more than a school librarian in a different district could presume whiteness was the norm. I also could not assume that all Latinx learners, for example, were interested in the same stories. Both school settings had Latinx students from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Mexico. Therefore, stories of deportation could not dominate the Latinx titles. Likewise, depictions of African American culture had to consider that students identified as "Black" could also be Haitian Creole, Dominican, Jamaican, or Nigerian. There is never just one story—especially for learners living in what Rudine Sims Bishop referred to as a parallel culture (Bishop 1990).

Ours is a nation in which there are many stories but too often only the most dominant is maintained as the norm. Because books are socializers, this presents an issue when only the dominant story is represented in books. Books demonstrate what is valued in languages, traditions, cultures (Bishop 1990). Books set precedence. Therefore, diverse titles selected for the school libraries in which I served had to offer students opportunities to see themselves and their experiences represented in the books they read. For learners who were not from cultures that are sometimes marginalized in literature and in library collections, diverse titles in the school library also provided windows to view experiences beyond their own.

According to Rudine Sims Bishop, "one of the reasons literature exists is to transform human experience, and reflect it back to us so we can better understand it" (1990, 3). How would books in our school libraries transform human experiences if they lacked the diversity to reach the many perspectives and intersectionality's of lives of individuals in the school and the broader community? Bishop's promotion of publishing and making available to all children books that provide windows, mirrors, and sliding doors encouraged educators to allow room in schools and libraries for the complexity of an individual's life, demonstrating the need for resources that tell more than a single story.

My Personal Story

My own life has influenced my strong belief in access as a core value of librarianship. Personally, my story evolved through access to diverse reads. The day I walked into a school library at the age of eight, feeling scared and alone, I looked through the shelves and saw two books that grabbed my attention: *Tell Me a Mitzi* by Lore Siegel and *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. In that moment, I acquired a culture and community empowered by books across a broad spectrum. This was access. Every day, I walked, ran, or skipped over a broken-down bridge to find my way to this access. The American Library Association's "Equity of Access" brochure states that libraries serve as "cornerstones of the communities they serve" and must provide free and equitable access to "books, ideas, resources and information" to all (ALA n.d.). Though just a child, I was able to partake in the services of one of these cornerstones, and I learned two lessons. First, my name was important, as it graced the cover of an ALA Notable Book and National Book Award Finalist, honors bestowed with the intent of celebrating the best literature in America and giving honored stories a prominent place in American culture. Secondly, I learned that access is a valuable asset, as Neil Gaiman explained in his plea for libraries:

"[L]ibraries are about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication. They are about education (which is not a process that finishes the day we leave

school or university), about entertainment, about making safe spaces, and about access to information…" (Gaiman 2013)

Access was granted to me by a mirror when I was introduced to the characters and author of R*oll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. I was given a window with *Tell Me a Mitzi*, provided by a Jewish author and with a setting quite different from my own community, a fact that opened sliding doors in my life.

Giving 21st-Century Readers Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors

Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give*, a book that can give young people mirrors and windows today, has been quoted as saying, "It's important to have diverse characters in books because books give kids mirrors and windows. Books create empathy. If we do not have diversity, if we are only showing things from one perspective, how are we creating empathy?" (Penn 2017). *The Hate U Give*, featuring Starr Carter—one of the characters featured at the top of this article, was a *New York Times* young adult bestseller that won ALA's Coretta Scott King Award and was shortlisted for a Carnegie Medal. As a diverse read, it speaks to teens about Black lives amid awareness of racial sociopolitical issues impacting community. Teens still enter the school library asking for access to *The Hate U Give*, seeking that connection to community, compassion, and critical literacy. All learners need access to books like this. I have done my best to provide that access.

Poetry served as a sliding door allowing me to embrace worlds created by others. A 2014 novel in verse with Josh and Jordan, the basketball duo mentioned at the top of the article, slid me into a world of sports and family. These marginalized protagonists in Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* never listened to the naysayers. In his writing, Kwame Alexander took the versatility of language to the next level, peeling apart each layer until it was crowned with a Newbery. *The Crossover*, as a One School, One Book title, has captured the ears and hearts of teens in my urban school. National Assessment of Educational Progress data published in 2020 showed young teens' daily reading dropped to its lowest levels since the mid-1980s (Schaeffer 2021), and I felt one way to reengage students was through the use of diverse novels in verse. I learned early in my teaching career about the importance of the O-I-C (Oh I See) in voice and choice and sought to use it alongside Gholdy Muhammad's teachings on historical responsive literacy to motivate teens to read and engage. Gholdy Muhammad, a Chicago professor of literacy, language, and culture supports the use of best practices in culturally and historically responsive and equitable instruction for students (Muhammad 2020). An important aspect of her (Gholdy) equity framework is identity development, meaning students need to understand themselves within their world and the world around them. This was another way of saying books help people transform, which is exactly what Rudine Sims Bishop believed.

As an educator, poetry became my means to build bridges, so I no longer walked, skipped, or ran over a bridge. Instead, I introduced students to novels in verse and built

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bridges and communities. Using novels in verse, like *The Crossover*, I started book clubs, worked with other ALA members on compiling African American book lists, and developed a website devoted to diverse reads <www.mackmedialibrarian.com>. Novels in verse, my diverse read of choice, have been around since the 1990s, generally addressing historical fiction, displacement, or stories centered on the life of a character. Additionally, novels in verse have been considered shorter, faster reads (Farish 2013). Terry Farish, author of *The Good Braider*, considered the white space to be silence and a friend to striving readers. Just as Josh felt he was losing his identity after his locs were cut in *The Crossover*, many teens experience loss of identity when immersed in situations in which they see few learning resources that reflect them or in which language fluency is a barrier or the faculty lacks the diversity of the student body. Seeking a sense of competence, fluency, or just a safe space, for some students reading a novel in verse is like a match made in heaven as they learn to embrace the lyrics that fit the narrative and reveal identities teens can connect with and embrace. I see reading novels in verse as a path back to reading for teens. Use of such novels is consistent with Muhammad's ideas of building connections between curriculum, texts, and students' individual identities, cultural behaviors, and practices (Muhammad 2020).

Serving in the capacity of librarian/gate opener in an urban middle school, I introduced my students—including striving readers—to Xiomara, the last character featured at the top of the article. In Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, joining poetry club gave Xiomara a lifeline. (I feel like becoming a member of the Florida Association of Media Educators (FAME) has stood the test of time as my lifeline to continued support for diverse reads in the lives of the students I serve!) I started a young poet's club for all interested students, regardless of their reading proficiency. Our reading and writing led us to explore a crop of new novels in verse with diverse characters and plots. In addition to *The Poet X, Booked and Rebound* by Kwame Alexander became popular reads, as did *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga. Currently a group of students have settled in to read *Becoming Muhammad Ali* by James Patterson and Kwame Alexander.

In 2019 I knew increased book challenges were a "thing" when it was suggested to have students complete parent-signed forms to join book clubs prior to reading YA books. It took longer to notice that the books challenged were more frequently those relating to diverse characters, LGBTQ+ characters, or written by people of color.

Maintaining Learners' Access to Diverse Books

In 2019 I knew increased book challenges were a "thing" when it was suggested to have students complete parent-signed forms to join book clubs prior to reading YA books. It took longer to notice that the books challenged were more frequently those relating to diverse characters, LGBTQ+ characters, or written by people of color. Here in Florida, talk of Critical Race Theory put more than books about and written by people of color in the line of fire. Most recently, as I write this in early 2022, support for the idea of limiting learners' access to resources that reflect diversity—especially books about marginalized groups—has led to a legislative proposal referred to by its supporters as the Stop WOKE Act (Florida HB 7 "Individual Freedom"). Librarians in my state and elsewhere need to ensure they are well versed in library collection policies and challenge procedures.

As a school librarian in Tampa, Florida, following the annual FAME state conference in December 2021, I placed several to-dos on my list so that I could continue to provide mirrors, windows, and sliding doors for my students.

1. Revisit my district collection development plan and challenge procedures. When I did this, I realized our district procedures acknowledge the school librarian's role and professional responsibility in selecting materials as well as the parent and student interests in the process and choices made. In fact, the district policy even mentions,

> Occasional objections to some materials may be voiced by the public despite the care taken in the selection process … Library media materials that are sensitive or mature may not be appropriate for all readers in a school but could be appropriate to remain a part of the collection to address the needs of some of the reading community if it meets

> the district selection criteria. (Milburn and Defusco 2021, 16)

This statement supports my role of assisting students in book selection but made it clear that ultimately, it is the student's choice.

2. Review my own school collection development plan in the context of my most recent school library diversity audit. A collection diversity audit informs the librarian of the inventory in a collection and reveals areas needing growth or weeding. It is important to be aware of specifics regarding your own collection should a question arise about a book new to the collection. Data will be available to justify its purchase for a balanced collection.

After the audit and adding items to the collection to fill gaps, I strongly recommend drawing attention to areas recently improved with new inventory by posting book displays curated based on the audit with pictures of the audit and student survey results showing areas of interest. At the beginning of each year, students at our school are surveyed on the types of book they most like to read. The survey results are also compared with the quarterly library checkout statistics to verify the types of books most read by students. These types of displays can serve as ways to justify curation in various areas of the collection.

3. Finally, gather important contacts for resources supporting intellectual freedom. In our state, an essential contact is the chair of the FAME Committee on Intellectual Freedom, as this individual has a team that responds to challenges via a protocol. Recently, FAME posted a graphic on its website to remind others of the association's ability to offer support (see figure 1). Another resource is ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom <www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif>, which offers confidential support and training, and works to increase public awareness of attacks on intellectual freedom and the importance of supporting the rights of all readers in all types of libraries. If you are faced with a book challenge, do not hesitate to reach out to the school librarian community in your state and nationwide.

There are several other ways FAME—and your own state and local organizations—can assist when you face a materials challenge. These other interested parties can e-mail letters to school board members and other stakeholders, attend meetings to support diverse access, and take their case for access to the local media. FAME is, in fact, proactive in their support through their work with state book award selection by adding statements to clarify the type of list and considerations to be made when the list is used. For instance, the Florida Teens Read program webpage states:

> This program is designed to entice teens to read. In order to engage their interest and to provide a spur to critical thinking, the book selections include those that involve sensitive issues. The content of some of the titles may be more mature than younger students may have previously encountered. Please recognize that this is a voluntary reading program. Not every book selected will suit every student. In a democratic society,

Figure 1. Florida Association for Media in Education offers support to school librarians.

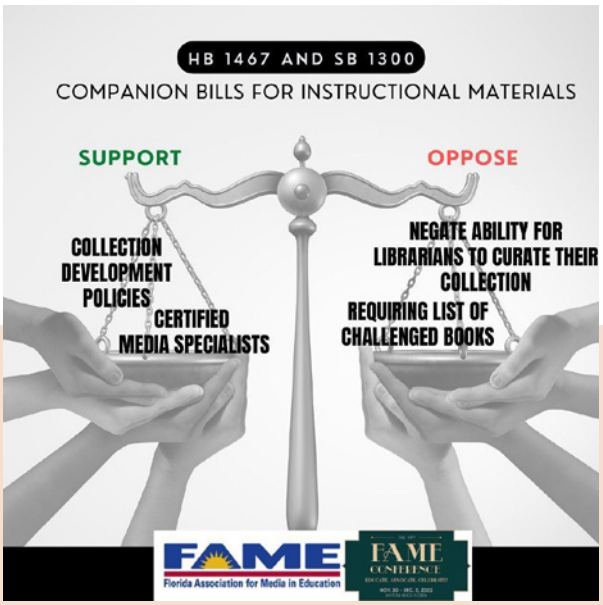

Figure 2. Florida Association for Media in Education tracks bills affecting school librarians and their students.

a variety of ideas must find voice. As readers, teens have the choice to read the more mature titles or to close the book. (FAME 2015)

Currently, in Florida, FAME, its members, and other interested parties are tracking the state bills HB 1467 and SB 1300 (see figure 2).

HB 1467 and SB 1300 focus on instructional materials. However, they also include best practices of placing a school librarian on every campus and having collection development policies on file and open to the public. In the past several years, several Florida counties saw cuts in positions for school librarians (called "library media specialists" in our state), so supporting HB 1467 could result positive changes for librarians and learners across the state.

Access can be the greatest asset, especially if it is acquired in a culture and community empowered by scholarship across a broad spectrum. Let's ensure access to diverse reads continue to be accessible for all.

Dr. Mitzi Mack *is a middle school librarian, member of AASL and AASL ESLS. She volunteers on the ALA Evaluating Volunteer Resources Task Force, ALA Black Caucus, and ALSC BIPOC. She serves on the Florida Association of Media Educators (FAME) Board representing Region 4 and is a member of the FAME Diversity Committee. She is also a member of a Scholastic Teachables advisory board.*

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