Using Literature to Support Adolescent Identity Development: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Adolescent literature has the power to positively impact and support the identity development of all adolescents, regardless of ability, gender, race, cultural, or linguistic background. Yet, we contend that this is only possible through the intentional, purposeful, and cognizant selection of texts that accurately and respectfully portray characters with whom students can relate and connect. To that end, this article explores the sociocultural needs of adolescents, their challenges in today's society, and the ways that literature can support their adolescent identity development to leverage rather than deter their reading skills.

Keywords: adolescent, literacy, identity

Presently, the world is watching the devastating turmoil unfold within the United States amidst the ongoing and pervasive issues of social justice. These issues are underscored by both systemic racism and implicit bias toward Black, Asian American, Muslim, immigrant, and other groups of color that differ from the Eurocentric Western values historically upheld by many in the majority population. Sadly, our nation's adolescents are watching, too. While some American adolescents struggle to understand current events from safe spaces, many are exposed to overt acts of hatred, explicit hate speech, and prime examples of systemic racism within our very schools. As Malcom X (1970) once stated, education is a powerful means of moving forward, for uplifting communities, and for preparing our youth to make positive contributions to society. As such, literacy is arguably the core gift meant to facilitate this transition.

Yet, many questions arise when particularly considering the literacy instruction, practices, and corresponding texts provided to American adolescents in their public schools:

What messages are our adolescents receiving about their identities through their public education system? How are their unique social and cultural identities being supported through their reading instruction, if at all? And, what implicit messages may we be sending by way of the very texts that they hold in their impressionable hands in classrooms across the country at this very moment? The purpose of this literature review is to acknowledge the integral role of identity in adolescent literature, briefly explore the social and cultural needs of diverse adolescent learners and ways to support their identity development, and to highlight the compelling need for adolescents to have access to books that serve as mirrors, windows, and doors (Bishop, 1990), thereby offering them the opportunity to see themselves reflected, to see into the cultures of others, and to step into others' experiences.

Positionality Statement

We believe that understanding a researcher's positionality is essential to understanding the core essence of their research, appreciating their methodological approach, and in promoting authentic transparency. To that end, the first author of this review is a Puerto Rican first-generation college graduate, an early childhood educator, a Hispanic doctoral candidate of literacy, and the mother of an interracial child. The second author is a White female who subscribes to the dominant Christian religion, a special educator, and an assistant professor of special education. Together, we believe that identifying ways to best support students from all backgrounds and ability levels within an inclusive environment is paramount. This paper represents our perspectives on the intersection between research on today's adolescents, adolescent literacy instruction, issues of diversity and ability, and the profound importance of literature in order to support the identity development of our most important stakeholders in education: the students. To set the stage for the current issues that adolescents face in their

literacy development, the sociocultural aspects of the identities of today's students will first be explored.

A Changing Portrait of Adolescence

As the American standards of literacy achievement change and evolve, so too do the adolescents that enter middle school and high school classrooms each day. Today's youth are increasingly aware of social justice issues (Fine et al., 2003; Flood, 2016), sophisticated in their use of technology to combat issues of inequity (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017), and demonstrate creativity in addressing and implementing social change (Flood, 2016). The potential for fostering diverse, positive adolescent identities through literacy experiences is boundless, yet there appears to be a profound disconnect between the current portrait of today's diverse adolescents (Moje et al., 2020; Shalaby, 2017), foundational literacy research and suggested texts (Paige, 2011), and the current predominantly White, female teaching demographic (Ball, 2000; Cowhey, 2006).

In order to capture an accurate understanding of today's youth, one must first consider the adolescent experience. Elliott and Feldman (1990) describe adolescence as a unique period in human development distinctly separate from childhood and adulthood. Meanwhile, Alexander and Fox (2011) rather view this period as a more flexible transition between the two. Regardless of the interpretations imposed on this period, Elliott and Feldman (1990) and Wigfield and colleagues (2006) highlight four core aspects of adolescence: cognitive development, physical development, changing contexts, and evolving self and social relationships, marking this time as one of the most challenging for many students. By extension, Moje (2015) asserts that all research on adolescent literacy should highlight these domains, including the social practices, cultural practices, emotional considerations, and norms within the period of adolescence. As

such, the following sections address each of those areas in turn within the context of today's portrait of adolescence.

Social and Community Issues

In today's society, many adolescents are currently experiencing incomparable levels of trauma and anxiety, particularly in communities where economic growth is slow and drugs, guns, and instances of youth targeted by police are rampant (Fine et al., 2003; Morsy & Rothstein, 2019). Relatedly, community trauma surrounding gentrification, housing insecurity, the potential reality of homelessness, hunger, and inhumane living conditions continue to affect the students and teachers who live in them (Dutro, 2019; World Health Statistics, 2017). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are not immune to the current pressures of adolescent life and are currently subject to the mounting stressors of sexual harassment, bullying, and noxious political conflicts, many of which are often mitigated through social media (Shalaby, 2017). Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to the societal pressures depicted in beauty magazines, amplifying the significant connection between reading material, body image, and risky health choices (Thomsen et al., 2002). Further, adolescents from all socioeconomic backgrounds may be exploring unique intersections within their identities, such as those navigating the Black, queer, and hip hop communities (Love, 2017).

Additionally, the immense focus on high-stakes testing and the dehumanization of students and teachers to equate a test score with achievement, particularly for students of color and/or from marginalized groups (such as the rising LGBTQ+ community), has become insufferable (Moje et al., 2020). Lastly, as educational professionals are encouraged to focus on instructional goals and skills for students with disabilities, the complex problems associated with students with a dis/ability are reduced to a medical model of a "cure," "rehabilitation," or

"fixing" (Mueller, 2019). Such environments are arguably a threat to any adolescent's positive identity development and can inevitably inhibit academic achievement rather than support it.

The Adolescent Literacy Dilemma

The period of adolescence is particularly unique when considering the profound development of cognitive processing that occurs to support literacy development, which may incorporate elements of not only maturation but an overall increase in exposure to literacy experiences (Alexander & Fox, 2011). This development allows adolescents to make meaning of literacy experiences in a more sophisticated manner than young children, enabling them to think both hypothetically and abstractly, as well as the ability to use a wider array of literacy strategies (Keating, 1990). Despite the profound biological and experiential changes that allow adolescents to better access literacy experiences and create deeper meaning in texts, a dilemma exists when considering the literacy skills of today's youth.

Historically, standardized testing data have been used to capture nationwide attention and highlight the belief that adolescents are consistently lacking proficiency in the literacy skills needed to demonstrate proficient and/or advanced literacy achievement (Grigg et al., 2007). Even more striking is the requirement of proficient reading as a critical element for educational advancement and community engagement, with deficits in literacy negatively impacting the quality of life of people, most notably those with disabilities (Erickson, 2006). Yet, it appears that the field of literacy often places an urgent focus on finding a one-size-fits-all solution to the literacy dilemma, while simultaneously avoiding the need to critically analyze some of the core underlying causes for poor literacy achievement, particularly among adolescents of color (Paige, 2011) and those with disabilities (Chai et al., 2015). Conversely, DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) remind us that there is no singular correct way to teach multicultural education, but rather that

quick fixes may only serve to further perpetuate stereotypes. By extension, Yon (1994) asserted that stereotyping by dominant groups, systemic racism, and discriminatory practices by teachers, administrators, and classmates are directly related to student achievement, while numerous other studies have demonstrated how racism and discrimination can affect the learning of students (Gougis, 2020; Steele, 1997; Walters, 1994).

While we believe an overhaul of the nation's literacy instruction and assessment in public education is needed, adolescents are demonstrating that they do indeed often have the skills necessary for successful engagement with literacy practices. For instance, researchers have found that adolescents participating in literacy experiences outside of school, including those identified as "struggling," often demonstrate some level of proficiency with complex texts (Alvermann et al., 1999; Mahiri, 2003; Moje, 2000). Likewise, the advent of new literacies has highlighted the importance of integrating digital and media texts alongside their traditional counterparts as notable resources for promoting students' identity development (Alvermann, 2012; Dezuanni, 2010). To that end, Moje and colleagues (2000) assert that all reading acts are the culminating outcome of sociocultural and disciplinary contexts, the reader's knowledge and interest, and the text itself.

The Teacher/Student Disconnect

The aforementioned circumstances surrounding the current portrait of American adolescents and their subsequent reading achievement are particularly concerning when considering the profound contrasts between our increasingly diverse student population and consistently homogenous teacher population (Ball, 2000; Cowhey, 2006), specifically in regard to the role of literacy in adolescents' lives. As Moje et al. (2020) describe, "The contrast between the racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of predominantly monolingual, white, female

teachers and their plurilingual, racialized, religiously and culturally diverse student populations is a game changer" (p. 5). This point is particularly evident in the observation that reading research and instruction can carry assumptions of ubiquitous childhood experiences (Bloch et al., 2006; Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and access to equitable educational environments. Teachers' perceptions may therefore influence their use of diverse and/or contemporary literature in schools, including the privileging of certain mainstream educational and cultural capital (Gangi, 2008). Additionally, many teachers express that they lack the confidence to address issues of diversity in their classrooms, while others intentionally employ a color-blind attitude (Cushner, 2011). To that end, Moje and colleagues. (2020) have called for advocates for reading research and practices that purposefully support diversity, honoring these individuals with the title of "game changers -- [influences] that demand reading researchers do a better job of closing gaps" (p. 5).

Intersectional Identities

Of equal concern is the lack of access to educational opportunities of those with intersectional identities, particularly students of color and with dis/abilities, which nourish intellectual growth (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). The majority of inclusive education research and efforts have predominantly focused on ability differences (e.g., including students with dis/abilities in the general education classrooms), while overlooking the historical and troubling intersections of race, language, and dis/ability (Gonzales et al., 2017). Therefore, inclusive education efforts have yielded positive impacts for some students, but not all.

The intersectional identities of today's adolescents have led to an overrepresentation of students from racial and language minority backgrounds in special education (Skiba et al., 2008). Despite decades of efforts and research to combat this equity issue, data from the Office of

Special Education Programs suggest racially and linguistically marginalized students continue to be placed in more segregated settings than their White peers with the same dis/ability determination (U.S Department of Education, 2014). This phenomenon is further exacerbated for such students who are economically disadvantaged (LeRoy & Kulik, 2004). Although the factors that have sustained disproportionality are complex and not fully understood, it is necessary to critically examine how educational professionals participate in institutional practices that, left unexamined, reinforce a status quo that maintains race-and ability-based hierarchies (Skiba, 2008). The first step to understanding the aforementioned phenomenon is to attempt to understand the students themselves. As such, in the following section, the sociocultural needs of diverse adolescent readers will be explored.

The Sociocultural Needs of Diverse Adolescent Readers

Culture is the shared heart of human existence, yet many diverse students are implicitly taught to separate their home culture from their Eurocentric educational experience through the framing of their cultural, racial, linguistic, and other identities as obstacles and/or deficits to authentic learning (Lee, 2006; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006; Skerrett, 2015; Valencia, 1997). By extension, there is a historic avoidance of curricula that honors students' diverse experiences and potential for learning (Lee, 1997, 2007; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). When attempts are made to acknowledge diversity, district policies, classroom instruction, and teacher practices rarely go beyond the surface to unlock the full potential of students' cultural capital, privileging instead a Eurocentric approach to discourse about the topic (Heath, 1983; Lee, 2006, 2007; Reese et al., 2012). Yet, the importance of sociocultural learning for all students is paramount. As Ladson-Billings (2014) explains "In our attempt to ensure that those who have been previously disadvantaged by schooling receive quality education, we also

want those in the mainstream to develop the kinds of skills that will allow them to critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage" (p. 83).

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical frameworks and a multitude of empirically-based research highlight the influential social and cultural components influencing reading progress (Cole, 1996; Heath, 1983; Lee, 1997, 2007; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Moll, 2014; Scribner & Cole, 1978; Street, 1984), while seminal studies have enriched this foundation to explore reading instruction and subsequent learning gains (e.g., Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lee, 1997, 2007; Moll, 2014; Skerrett, 2012; Tatum, 2014). Particularly, Street (2012) leverages the framework in alignment with Freire (1990) in the power of supporting students' ability to read both the word and the world, shedding light on the immense need for literacy instruction to "embrace both the everyday aspect of learning and that to be found in more formal educational institutions… the two fields… instead of being polar opposites, might embrace and build on the strengths of each other" (pp. 225–226). While this harmony has yet to come to fruition when considering the aforementioned avoidance of honoring adolescents' sociocultural needs in their learning in favor of a focus on high-stakes testing that privileges a middle class, Eurocentric construct of knowledge (Au, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2007), some literacy scholars have prioritized marginalized groups in a push for a revolutionary sociocultural advent in the field (Cole, 1996; Heath, 1983; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Scribner & Cole, 1978; Street, 1984). Thus, it is evident that the sociocultural needs of all adolescents must be considered when designing quality literacy instruction to adequately support their identity development.

Using Literature to Support Adolescent Identity Development

Through the previous analysis of the sociocultural needs of adolescents, as well as the recognition of the profound mismatch between the diverse student population and their mainstream public-school experiences, it is clear that ways of bridging the literacy gap for youth and providing authentic opportunities for literacy learning are sorely needed. In recognition of the need for such opportunities, Alexander and Fox (2011) notably acknowledge the relationship between the identity of adolescents and the sociocultural implications of the texts that they read, sharing that there are reciprocal relationships between the identity of adolescents, their reading engagement, and their social roles, as well as cultural implications around what is read and how adolescents' self-perceptions are developed. To that end, one strategy for supporting the identity development of adolescents and their subsequent reading skills is the integration of high-quality literature that accurately and positively portrays the diverse adolescent population.

Text Considerations to Support Identity Development

To provide adolescents with texts that serve as mirrors, windows, and doors (Bishop, 1990) that best support their identity development, it is essential to incorporate a wide variety of positive character portrayals. Several text considerations must be taken into account, including the date of publication (D'Angelo, 1989) and refreshing the core canon (Jogie, 2015), opportunities for discussion (Marsh & Stolle, 2006; Stewart, 2017), representation of marginalized groups (Stewart, 2017), and the need to challenge gender stereotypes (Carnell, 2005; Neilsen, 2006). Table 1 provides an overview of the aforementioned text considerations, including recommendations of selected texts and attention to potential pitfalls that may occur during implementation.

Table 1

Using Literature to Support Adolescent Identity in the Classroom

Teaching Tip	Look For	Caution
Refreshing the Canon Consider how contemporary novels can be used as a counter-argument and/or or provide a fresh take on the historical lens often presented within the canon texts.	*Brown Girl Dreaming* (Jacqueline Woodson) *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Benjamin Alire Sáenz) *The Song of Achilles* (Madeline Miller) *Some People, Some Other Place* (J. California Cooper)	Some schools may prohibit the revision of canon text lists. If current curriculum guidelines mandate the use of a canon, examine how to uphold their place in instruction while also intentionally dismantling outdated stereotypes.
Book Clubs Consider conducting informal book talks to introduce students to the selection of books for book clubs. At the conclusion of the book clubs, students can create book trailers that will advertise or showcase the book for the next class of students	Look for books with a variety of reading difficulty that include not only diverse cultural representation, but varied text genres as well. *Alvin Ho* (Lenore Look) *This Promise of Change: One Girl's Story in the Fight for School Equality* (Jo Ann Allen Boyce and Debbie Levy) *The Hate U Give* (Angie Thomas) Consider books that can also be found in an audio version to ensure access for all.	Some texts may inadvertently distort cultures, reinforce stereotypes, or uncover cultural nuances that are not meant to be shared (Gultekin & May, 2020). Be sure to preview texts to be offered to students and consult diverse book resources like socialjusticebooks.org for anti-bias texts.

Marginalized Adolescents Be mindful of the unique identities and experiences of the students within their classrooms. Encourage students to read within and extend beyond their own cultures.	*American Born Chinese* (Gene Luen Yang) *Alejandria Fights Back!* (Leticia Hernández-Linares) *Born Confused* (Tanuja Desai Hidier)	Students' identities and experiences are complex; remind students that one person should not be expected to speak as a representative for an entire group. Instead, invite (but do not require) students to share as a model of an experience.
Challenge Gender Stereotypes Within teacher education classrooms, discuss the traditional gender stereotypes and roles that were present in U.S. history. Invite preservice teachers to consider how this history is the same or different from other cultures' history.	*This is Your Brain on Stereotypes* (Tanya Lloyd Kyi) *The Servant* (Fatima Sharafeddine) *Wandering Son* (Shimura Takako)	Encourage students to be sensitive towards individuals who may not fit into binary gender roles or who may have changing gender identity roles.
Fanfiction Explore nontraditional texts, such as fanfiction. The existence of choice, such as the creation of cartoons, plays, comics, books, narratives, etc., in fanfiction product creation is of paramount importance in the development of motivation and engagement among students (Magnifico, 2010).	*The Fanfiction Reader: Folktales for the Digital Age* (Francesca Coppa) Fanfiction.net Archiveofourown.org/fan-fiction/ Wattpad.com/fanfiction/ Quotev.com/fanfiction/-stories/	Present clear expectations for students providing respectful feedback to peers. Consider using self-contained discussion media such as Wikispaces or private discussion boards to allow students to provide each other with feedback in a safe, controlled space (Mathew & Adams, 2009)

Publication Date and Refreshing the Canon

Through a content analysis of award-winning young adult novels, D'Angelo (1989) identified ten American novels likely to be used in classrooms that highlighted the role of a female lead character, noting a shift in the portrayal of the female character toward increased

intellect, body acceptance, and emotional independence according to publication date. This slow, yet significant social shift in the portrayal of females represented through texts has the potential to better support today's adolescent females seeking to develop these traits themselves. It stands to reason that the same shift may apply to other social constructs as well, including gender stereotypes and cultural representations. As such, educators should logically consider the publication dates of texts in their literature canon (including award-winners), recognizing the connection between period social norms and character portrayals within.

Relatedly, many curriculums worldwide incorporate a core canon of texts that encompass the required reading for adolescents, with the intention of teaching students about their own culture and the culture of others (Jogie, 2015). Yet, the publication dates of these texts are rarely taken into account either, with the canon list rarely changed or updated to reflect contemporary and/or diverse perspectives. The outdated texts provided may be one of the greatest barriers to student curricular outcomes, causing disengagement and/or an inability for students to relate to the characters portrayed, with teachers thereby losing valuable opportunities to support their students in identity development, engagement, and subsequent building of literacy skills. Thus, continuous updates to curricular reading lists to include contemporary and diverse titles should logically be at the forefront of curriculum development.

Opportunities for Identity Development and Discussion

Educators can use texts to propel literacy and identity development within their classrooms, which can be facilitated through the use of book clubs, the use of texts that include marginalized adolescents and those that challenge gender stereotypes, and through the use of fanfiction. These dynamic character portrayals have the potential to negotiate positive literacy

experiences that help adolescents through their academic and social development (Chamberlain, 2005).

Book Clubs. Further research on adolescent girls by Marsh and Stolle (2006) took an ethnographic approach to identity development through book club discussions, facilitating discussions with adolescent females that allowed them to analyze, validate, and reconstruct their social and cultural identities, including their perceptions of gender and stereotypes. Interestingly, participants described their identities as a self-selected personal choice with little regard to the social implications of forming identity, demonstrating that many adolescents may be unaware of the social ramifications imposed on them. The discussion portion of the study allowed researchers to gain insight into how adolescents build their identities through texts in a way that may be hidden in many classrooms. In addition, in a yearlong experience within a New York City public school, Francois (2015) observed that book clubs can serve as powerful mechanisms for facilitating adolescents' reading motivation. Specifically, "a school can shape students' motivation to read in the classroom in ways that have positive effects on their reading identity, efficacy in reading, and ability to read well" (p. 68).

Marginalized Adolescents. Although studying adolescents' responses to relevant young adult novels and award-winning texts certainly lends insight into their identity development, there is also a pressing need for diverse texts and portrayals of characters from marginalized backgrounds. In Stewart's (2017) single case study of a female multilingual adolescent refugee from Burma, a reader response model was implemented to determine how the participant used her lived experiences to make meaning from a text portraying a relatable character. Findings indicated that the diverse text introduced to the student was pivotal in fostering her identity development and providing an authentic opportunity for engagement with a text, while

meaningful discussion with the researchers allowed for deeper connection and understanding. It may be logical to surmise, therefore, that educators and parents must be cognizant of providing adolescents with quality texts that contain a wide variety of positive portrayals of groups as the texts that adolescents read, the portrayals depicted within, and opportunities to discuss such texts play an integral role in implicit identity development.

Challenging Gender Stereotypes. Additionally, Carnell (2005) sought to understand the identity development of adolescent boys through a literacy intervention magazine that sought to promote reading, highlight role models, and promote positive decision-making. Interestingly, survey results indicated that girls read the magazine as much as boys did, though boys shared that reading material other than the magazine in public was a social challenge, shedding light on the challenges of gender roles and stereotypes within their reading identities. Furthermore, Neilsen (2006) conducted thorough interviews of 11th-grade female and male students regarding the characters portrayed through mainstream texts, noting that these texts allowed opportunities for adolescents to temporarily take on the roles of the characters, their character traits, and their attributes by immersing themselves in the text. Thus, reading is not only a productive way for students to overcome social obstacles, but one that has the potential to facilitate the breakdown of negative stereotypes for adolescents of all genders and allow them to try on the identity of others.

Fanfiction. Fanfiction, broadly described, is a piece of fictional writing or a story that is written in an amateur and unauthorized manner based on an already existing fictional work and published universe. Young adult literature and media are ideal for the creation of fanfiction because the texts include “real” problems that mirror the experiences of adolescents (Bean & Moni, 2003). Because the nature of fanfiction draws heavily on source texts for inspiration, it can

seamlessly be adapted for any target audience, preference, or ideation. For example, adolescents may choose to rewrite popular texts, such as *The Hunger Games* or take characters from *Harry Potter* and create entirely new narratives. As such, fanfiction is a space that is recognized for the creation, exploration, and communication of identity. Additionally, fans, or consumers of popular texts, may interpret narratives or characters differently based on their own identities and meanings, which holds the potential for activating critical conversations while offering a catalyst for diverse communities. The usage of fanfiction provides a place for students to honor their own identities while also fulfilling their desire for community (Waggoner, 2012). This community not only provides a space for fans to explore not only their own identities, but also the identities that are not often explored within typical texts. Scholars of fan communities and fanfiction have recognized fanfiction as a medium of exploring gender (Bury, 2005), sexuality (Willis, 2006), literacy (Black, 2013), and dis/ability (Raw, 2013) identities.

Particularly, the internet offers a space for members of the fanfiction community to interact, including popular websites such as Fanfiction.net. This platform serves as a vehicle for not only creating, but also reading and decoding meanings and identities. This follows what Henry Jenkins (1989) considers to be a participatory culture, in which a multitude of outlets for exploration is provided. Labeling and classification in dis/ability communities are often associated with medicalization, stereotyping, and the curtailing of individuality. Tagging, or the archiving and creative identification of characters, objects, and events in fanfiction, provides a communicative scheme between authors and readers. The tagging functions of fanfiction serve as an inclusive and normalizing force, despite the problematic and demeaning role of labeling in disability communities.

Potential Benefits of Supporting Identity through Literature

Agosto (2007) posited that texts that portray the cultural background of students can lead to increased self-esteem and learning receptivity. Likewise, students who are able to relate to and engage with the characters depicted in a text are increasingly likely to engage with the text itself (Neilsen, 2006), allowing the book to serve as an entry-point text in their reading development (Zambo & Brozo, 2009; Brozo, 2006). Furthermore, Lee (1997; 2006; 2007) designed a cultural framework through her work with African American students, fostering students' existing reading abilities by engaging them in authentic cultural texts from their everyday lives. With this support and honoring of their African American language dialect, students increased their sophistication in analyzing challenging texts, including such texts that schools have historically privileged within the curricula. Sadly, despite the valuable qualitative research highlighted within this paper, Alexander and Fox (2011) agree that while high-quality and well-crafted texts do indeed have the power to support students' identity development, the empirically-based benefits of diverse texts for adolescents remain understudied and more research is needed to capitalize on the full potential of such powerful tools – a call that is still relevant today. Meanwhile, educators and researchers alike must take precautions with the texts that are currently available. These text precautions will subsequently be explored.

Text Precautions

While the premise of this paper is built upon the importance of providing adolescents with texts that serve as mirrors, windows, and doors (Bishop, 1990), there are also several text precautions that must be considered. In response to Bishop's (1990) metaphorical comparison of literature, Gultekin and May (2020) remind us that texts can also serve as fun-house mirrors, blind spots, and curtains, distorting students' identities through misrepresentation, overlooking

marginalized or lesser-known cultural groups, or providing insights into cultures that were never meant to be revealed to a wider audience. Such texts may therefore perpetuate what Chimamanda Adichie (2009) would describe as a "single story," one that "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." Thus, while we should be seeking to provide all adolescents with access to the most authentic and relatable texts possible, we must also be selective, intentional, and diligent in ensuring that said texts are accurate and respectful. As Maharah-Sandhu (1995) once shared, "if the child feels alienated, and cannot see his/her world view represented in the school experience, it is unlikely that there will be equality of educational outcome" (p. 16), thereby defeating the purpose of literature in the first place.

Conclusion

The research presented in this literature review provides an overview of the role of identity in adolescent literature, the sociocultural needs of diverse learners, and ways to support adolescents' identity and literacy development. Findings demonstrate that adolescent literature has the power to positively impact and support the identity development of all young people, regardless of gender, race, cultural, dis/ability or linguistic background (Carnell, 2005; Marsh & Stolle, 2006; Neilsen, 2006; Stewart, 2017). Specifically, students from diverse backgrounds benefit from literacy instruction that recognizes and affirms their multiple and intersecting identities (Francois, 2015; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). In particular, reading instruction that is significant to adolescents, recognizes students' out-of-school lives, and values their literacy practices is likely to increase literacy performance and close the achievement gap (Perry, 2012).

There is an urgent call for educators to take a sociocultural approach to the construction of identity in relation to the specific literacy skills and disciplines that adolescents are learning.

One strategy to meet this call is through the intentional, purposeful, and cognizant selection of texts that accurately and respectfully portray characters with which students can relate and connect to (Jogie, 2015). To that end, we must seek to fully understand the sociocultural needs of adolescents, their challenges in today's society, and their unique circumstances and contributions to society rather than forcing mainstream texts upon them, while simultaneously providing opportunities for authentic discussion (Marsh & Stolle, 2006; Stewart, 2017).

Literacy practices within a sociocultural perspective acknowledge that the transformative nature of texts are mediated by and established within social systems and cultural norms (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Teachers of reading should be cognizant of the sociocultural capital that adolescents bring to the classroom and consider community, engagement, and diversity as pedagogical virtues (Yoder, 2016). Instructional practices should interweave the individual social and cultural perspectives of students with the individual understanding – reconciling social and individual perspectives as a mutual relationship between individual knowledge and cultural traditions (Bartlett & Bartlett, 1995; Good & Lavigne, 2017). All of these factors can be leveraged to subsequently build students' reading skills as well as their identity development. As Stewart (2017) powerfully states, "far more important than new programs or strategies… youths need access to relevant literature and authentic meaning-making for educators to most effectively nurture their literacy, language, and identity development" (p. 239).

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