

From diversity to belonging: Nurturing inclusivity and literacy skills in the classroom

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Abstract

This article is a summary of information provided in a workshop encouraging educators to explore creating brave spaces in schools and communities through literacy. Educators are introduced to a culturally responsive pedagogy that prioritizes fostering inclusive literacy environments and supporting students with dignity. Teachers are encouraged to nurture diverse voices and promote meaningful, inclusive literacy experiences that foster belonging and growth for all students.

Introduction

As an educator of color in a suburban school district, moving the goal from diversity to belonging through literacy in the classroom has been my passion throughout my entire career. It is my mission to bring more diverse reading materials into classrooms so children of all races and backgrounds can see themselves represented in a positive way that fosters belonging and growth.

Growing up in West Philadelphia, I had the privilege of going to schools with Afro-centric teachers. My teachers exposed me to historical, fiction and non-fiction stories with African or African-Americans as the main character. Reciting stories in the first grade, such as Honey, I Love by Eloise Greenfield, helped me develop a sense of belonging. From my childhood experiences, I was inspired to attend Hampton University, a Historically Black College and University, and obtain a Bachelors of Arts In English Early Childhood Education and a Master's in Education.

After graduating from college, I began teaching in an inner-city elementary school that had mostly African-American students. Immediately, I noticed a lack of reading materials in the classrooms that featured stories and characters that looked like the students in my classes. I realized that seeing myself reflected in my teachers, curriculum and peers from a young age and through young adulthood was a privilege that most students of color do not have. I questioned how children could thrive in an educational setting when they lack a sense of belonging, and how we as educators can create a positive learning environment in the classroom, particularly through literacy.

In this article, I share my best practices for introducing diverse stories to classrooms, the positive impact it has on all children, and ways to increase student literacy and understanding through various classroom activities. I also identify some books by African-American authors that have become my classroom favorites.

Where to Begin

For children to have a sense of belonging, it is imperative that teachers nurture inclusivity through literacy. When I introduce a new story to my class, I choose books with relatable stories that feature main characters who are persons of color. I also do not start with books about the Civil Rights Movement, slavery or trauma. Instead, we start from a place of peace, assurance and everyday lives of children of color.

[Salt in His Shoes](#) by Deloris Jordan, is one of my favorite stories for introducing diverse literature to my third-grade students. It is the story of a young Michael Jordan. He wanted to be taller, so his mother told him to put salt in his shoes. The scenes include young Michael Jordan in his family home, playing basketball, eating dinner, going to church, and going to the neighborhood playground. I love sharing this story with my students because it positively depicts everyday activities of an African-American family.

The first time I introduced this book to my class, I was nervous about how it would be received by the students, parents, and school administration. However, the feedback has always been positive. After reading the book aloud to the class, I leave it out and available for the students who want to read it independently. Every year, students share how they wanted to “be like Mike,” or how they related to young Michael when he was teased by older kids who were better basketball players than him.

Teachers should not fear exposing children of all ethnicities to diverse stories because I have found that the parents, administration, and most importantly the students appreciate reading about people with different backgrounds. I engage my students in meaningful discussions that help them bridge the gaps across cultures and backgrounds so they feel connected to one another and a part of our classroom and community. Ultimately, the smiles, questions, connections, and conversations that take place in my third grade classrooms have reinforced the importance of sharing stories that help everyone feel seen and connected.

Creating belonging requires teachers to share stories where students of color don't feel ashamed because the story highlights vulnerabilities and the dominant culture students also don't also feel shame or embarrassment.

Promoting Dignity and Belonging

When I left the inner city to teach in the suburbs, I experienced a culture shock. I was accustomed to teaching children who looked like me and had shared experiences. I was a highly qualified educator with experience from my previous school district, where I was a successful teacher for many years, and yet I did not feel like I belonged in that space. I questioned how I would ever fit in. But then I began to wonder how students of color felt in this environment, and what I could do to support them. It was not long before I realized I could do what I always did – bring in the books, tell the stories, and start having the conversations.

I introduced my students to Eloise Greenfield and they loved sitting on the carpet snapping their fingers while we read “Jump Rope Rhyme”- the same way my students from North Philly loved it. I made sure my students saw themselves in the posters on my wall, the projects we did, and especially in the books on the shelves.

For years, educators have excused the lack of diverse classroom literature by proclaiming, “I don’t see color,” and that they view “children as children.” However, these phrases are damaging because if you don’t see color you do not see all of the beauty and the challenges that come with diverse students. If you don’t see color, you don’t see me. We should strive for all of our students to thrive in education settings – not disappear because they are not seen. In this challenging time, when municipalities are banning books, rewriting history, and constantly pushing back on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, it is important that educators create a brave, culturally inclusive and responsive space for students in their classrooms. I do this through literacy, which is why my students learn Honey I Love poems by Eloise Greenfield and enjoy reading Salt in His Shoes by Deloris Jordan.

Culturally responsive literacy is defined by Gay (2010) as

[...]an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges and respects the cultural backgrounds, experiences and perspectives of students. This approach aims to empower readers to become effective readers, writers and communicators within their own cultural contexts while also developing the skills to navigate and engage with diverse perspectives (p.37).

If we want our students to feel as though they belong, a variety of books, genres and print materials must reflect not only their cultures and experiences, but also people who they may encounter in real life. As educators, it is imperative that we allow students to browse through books, take notes, ask questions and find the answers while reading these stories. We must also make sure the books they read honor their stories and complicated experiences, while highlighting the joy of who they are and how they came to be.

As teachers choose books to share in their classrooms, they must choose diverse and respectful texts, because texts have incredible impact. I continuously research books for my elementary classrooms that have “window” and “mirror” representations.

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. (Bishop, 1990, p. ix)

I recognize how difficult it can be to find books where the main characters in the story are people of color who are not faced with some type of trauma or stereotype. I have spent a lot of time finding books where the children in my classrooms could relate to the main characters and ask questions about experiences that did not mirror their own. An authentic classroom should represent both.

I often read one of my son's favorite books, My Cold Plum Lemon Pie Bluesy Mood by Tameka Fryer Brown. It is about an African American boy who goes through his day expressing his feelings through the use of colors. This book provides a mirror – it reflects the feelings and interactions of siblings arguing and shows a reflection of playing basketball with the neighborhood kids. It provides a potential window into dinnertime with an African-American family where the main character begrudgingly has to wash the dishes after dinner is finished. After I read each page in the book, I allow for discussion and turn and talk opportunities with my students. My students are able to continuously engage with the story throughout the school year because it has a permanent spot on the class bookshelf.

Choosing to create a diverse library in your classroom not only benefits students of color, it also benefits the “majority” student. Oftentimes, they get their information from stereotypes displayed in social media, television and music. Through text, however, we can have meaningful conversations and discourse in the classroom about the shared experiences that remind us that we are more alike than different.

Culturally Responsive Literacy Resources

For the past 2 years, I have sat on my school district's English and Language Arts Curriculum Committee to help create lessons and choose appropriate books for our 3rd graders to read. My district purchases copies of the books we recommend, so every 3rd grader in our district has a comparable exposure opportunity. Unfortunately, not every teacher chooses to share the books we recommend with their classes. At times, they chose books they felt more comfortable with because they were afraid there would be backlash, especially with the initiatives and laws to ban certain books. However, doing so can be a disservice to their students.

The book I chose for my district was by Renee Watson, the author of a chapter book series about an African-American girl named Ryan Hart. The first book is called Ways to Make Sunshine. After I introduced the book to my class, they could not put it down. We read it in small groups during our morning readers workshop. I assign them specific chapters to read each day and provide questions for them to read and respond to during daily discussions with their classmates. We discuss the book each afternoon. I have a very diverse class of boys and girls, Caucasian, African-American, Biracial, Indian, Hispanic, Catholic, Jewish, Christian, etc. Every child enjoyed this book – they smiled, laughed, and related to so much of its content. I gave them a graphic organizer to document their windows and mirrors, so they could write about ways they connected with the main character.

As a culminating assignment for this book, I have the students create a project that represents something significant in the book. They work in groups or with partners using our STEM/ART cart. One group of girls made a hot comb; they were blown away reading that the main character had to use a hot comb to straighten her hair and were also surprised at what

happened to her hair when she jumped into a swimming pool. Windows and mirrors from this chapter book helped my African-American girls feel seen, while helping other members of our class have a better understanding of experiences of the African-American characters. They were able to relate to her story in multiple ways: having an older sibling, problems with best friends, family moving, etc. This book allowed my class to have an affirming literacy experience. Students accessed literacy skills such as comprehension, listening, speaking, critical thinking and research. In contrast, when students are consistently exposed to stories and information that fail to reflect their own experiences, or when they continually encounter stereotypes, it hinders their ability to connect with the text and participate in meaningful discussions with their peers.

There are many resources for educators choosing books to share with their classrooms. Caldecott Honor's, NAACP Image awards, and Coretta Scott King book awards for Non-Violence and Social Change are curated books that have been vetted by a diverse group of educators and librarians. Once books are chosen, educators can use the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards to create lessons around and discussions about the book using the standards.

I use the Social Justice Standards as a Framework for anti-bias teaching. As I select stories to read aloud to my students, I carefully consider the standards, which are divided into anchors emphasizing themes of identity, diversity, justice, and action. These standards offer prompts, scenarios, and clear learning objectives tailored to these themes. Justice 13 JU.K-2.13 states, "I know some true stories about how people have been treated badly because of their group identities, and I don't like it" (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, p.5). Identity 5 ID.K-2.5 reads, "I see that the way my family and I do things is both the same as and different from how other people do things, and I am interested in both" (Teaching Tolerance, 2018, p.4).

Making these standards explicit when writing lesson plans and reading these stories is paramount to creating an affirming literacy environment. Affirming students of color to ensure they feel seen in all types of books – picture books, chapter books and classroom novels – helps to make them feel as if they belong. Too often, students spend their time in classrooms without encountering stories that resonate with their own lives. For example, some educators exclusively rely on narratives featuring animals or primarily focused on pain and suffering, neglecting the inclusion of stories that bring light and joy. This happens when we focus on merely showcasing diverse books, rather than committing to developing a culture of belonging where the titles we choose are infused in the curriculum to make all children feel seen, heard and valued.

About the Author. Elaine Johnson is a member of the CARE Committee to Address Race in Education in Lower Merion Township in Pennsylvania. She is the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Liaison where she provides professional development and leads staff meetings in her school district. She is also the founder of Eteaches365 educational consulting, where she shares information on Youtube and on her website about social justice and culturally relevant teaching.

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