

Children's Literature Assembly Position Statement
On the Importance of Critical Selection and Teaching of Diverse Children's Literature
February 12, 2019

Diverse literature collections provide young readers insight into an array of experiences, perspectives, and histories. As a cultural and socio-political artifact that contributes to the shared cultural memories and narratives readers adopt, literature depicting the complexity and richness of a collective group of people can shape the way students come to understand their own and others' identities. High-quality, diverse children's literature can authentically represent different and nuanced lived experiences when thoughtfully shared by the classroom teacher.

The Importance of Sharing Diverse Children's Literature

In beginning to unpack and describe ways in which teachers might offer diverse children's literature to students, it is imperative to define *diverse children's literature*. An often overused, undefined or under-defined term, diverse children's literature refers to depictions of people, bodies, voices, languages, ways of loving, living, and being. These narratives may intersect, overlap and braid together in an infinite number of ways among those individuals, communities, or histories it seeks to represent. From this perspective, thoughtfully sharing diverse children's literature is important. We emphasize its importance in three ways:

First, as children read diverse children's literature, these texts can sustain and affirm their own and others' identities and inform the narratives children take up about themselves and others. In other words, children come to see themselves and their experiences represented in the stories they read and these stories can also provide insight into ways of living and knowing that depart from their own. This point alone makes access to diverse literature an ethical and moral imperative so that all students' lives and languages are represented, especially those communities historically underrepresented in schools.

Second, as readers respond to literature in which they see themselves, their motivation to participate in the literacy classroom increases. It is through this intrinsic motivation that students might come to engage more actively in literacy learning and validating their developing sociocultural identities. This, then, helps to create the third reason for sharing diverse children's literature. **By sharing diverse literature, teachers cultivate spaces in the literacy classroom where students might engage dialogically with texts in an attempt to come to know themselves in the world and disentangle the complexities of social justice issues, invisible histories, and complex realities often embedded in this literature.**

This third and final reason is the key to cultivating a classroom space that **engages** diverse children's literature. While a wide range of books must be present in the space for these critical conversations to take place, it is not merely enough to flood a classroom with diverse texts.

Rather, the heart of this practice lies in what teachers and students *do* with diverse texts and how these texts come to serve students' social identities, understandings of others, and language and literacy development. Diverse texts in and of themselves are only the beginning. It is how these texts are thoughtfully mediated by the teacher that the literature might begin to fulfill its potential and promise.

Selecting Diverse Literature

As teachers enter into the process of selecting high quality, diverse children's literature, it is important to first spend time engaging in critical self-reflection. Teaching is a political act imbued with one's own socio-political understandings of equity and diversity, and these understandings are grounded in personal experiences and ideological belief systems. Literature selections are filtered through these beliefs, both consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, teachers' reflexive practice during the selection process is vital to choosing texts that attempt to account for a *range* of perspectives, even when those perspectives might not necessarily align with their own experiences. Engaging texts that offer a perspective different than one's own can serve as an opening to valuable and critical literary response discussions in the classroom.

Criteria for selection.

When choosing high-quality, diverse literature, thoughtful and purposeful selection is imperative. Because diverse children's literature often attempts to tackle social justice and equity issues related to power, race, ability, gender and sexual identity, being purposeful and critical during the selection process accounts for multidimensionality and intersectional representation. Below, specific guiding questions for text selection are provided to accompany this process.

Guiding Questions for Text Selection:

- From whose perspective is the story told?
- Whose voices and experiences are present/absent from the text?
- What moral values and socio-political messages are dominant in the text?
- How are cultural practices depicted?
- What is the overall tone of the illustrations? The written narrative?
- How are the lived experiences of historically minoritized populations represented in the text?
- To what degree are complex social situations oversimplified in the text?
- How are complex relationships between characters represented in the text?

Diverse children's literature that has taken into account these questions is more dynamic in nature. These texts attempt to provide narratives told from the perspectives of the individuals being represented rather than of an onlooker or outsider. The values and cultural practices of the community in the text are honestly and respectfully depicted, and steer away from stereotypical narratives and dominant histories. The illustrations and written content of the text offer humanizing portrayals of the characters and context. At the same time, diverse literature grapples with and addresses the complexities among the communities represented through depictions of

multidimensional protagonists and historical figures and their multifaceted relationships and practices.

Engaging Students in Diverse Children’s Literature

As stated, of critical importance in the practice of sharing diverse children’s literature is an emphasis on *how* to approach literature in conversation with students. First and foremost, teachers who are committed to engaging diverse children’s literature embed this practice within the framework of their literacy block and across content area instruction. We would add that this is work for all classrooms, including language designation classrooms and special education settings. Sharing diverse children’s literature is *not* intended as a designated practice for certain holidays, specific months of the year or even specific content areas. Rather, this practice is oriented toward a social justice initiative that is entrenched in the classroom community *year* round and woven into the framework of classroom practice. While there is not a “how-to” guide for this work given that all classrooms are unique and situated in a particular time and context, there are guiding principles that teachers might consider when attempting to begin this process.

Getting started.

As with all literacy instruction, text selection driven by student interest remains an important tenet to begin the process of sharing diverse literature and actively engaging students. Teachers might consider explorations of more focused topics and texts with students by beginning with a book flood in which the teacher fills the room with a meaningful collection and then invites students to spend time widely exploring and responding to the literature. As students come to interact with these stories, characters, and experiences, it is likely that certain topics, representations, questions, or narratives will emerge as most relevant and worth deeper investigation. Teachers, reading and discovering alongside and with their students, come to identify and share these interests and follow specific student-generated topics for collective inquiry.

Sharing a touchstone text.

Touchstone texts can serve as shared invitations to critical conversations and practices with diverse literature. A touchstone text, in this instance, can be described as an exemplary diverse children’s book that the teacher selects as a model to support how students might begin to approach the literature. Often shared through a read-aloud experience, teachers can offer repeated readings of a text and invite students to share their responses to questions similar to those the teacher first used when selecting the text. This is a starting place for learners to begin reading with and against the literature they encounter and self-select mentor texts for writing from this collection. In these conversations, teachers invite students to negotiate and disagree with one another in their meaning making process in an effort to create dialogic spaces that are oriented toward helping students develop their own stances towards issues of equity and

diversity represented in the literature. Examples of questions that might serve as openings are below.

Guiding Questions to Begin Engaging Students:

- How are you like _____ [character]? How are you *not* like _____ [character]?
- How does this book make you feel?
- [After selecting a particularly important spread in the book] If you could draw yourself anywhere in this picture, where would you be? What would you be doing? What would you be saying? How would you be feeling?
- Whose voices are present in this book? Whose aren't?
- Whose experiences are represented? Whose aren't?
- How are the issues in this book relevant to you today? To your community? To others?
- What does this book have to say about the world?

Contextualizing and pairing texts.

Having given students opportunities to explore thoughtfully constructed stacks of diverse children's literature as well as modeling how to read with and against these texts, the teacher can begin to group students in sharing and reading texts that align with student inquiry interests. Often, students gravitate toward a certain text or topic that emerges in these interactions to further pursue. It is in these instances that a teacher begins to contextualize the representations in these texts. The teacher offers opportunities to explore the time and space in which this story came to be created. Students are invited to investigate the authors' and illustrators' experiences that impacted and influenced the telling of *this* story rather than another. Offering these opportunities helps to show students that each story that is told and each life represented is wrapped up within a particular time, space, and set of experiences, and among a particular set of people and their perspectives to tell the story.

In taking into account the contextual nature of each text students encounter, teachers also begin to pair texts that represent a variety of these contexts. Pairing texts, or selecting multiple texts that might be read together, approaches a topic or issue from a variety of perspectives to ensure that representations are varied and multidimensional. The practice of pairing related diverse texts addresses the trappings of a singular story as representative of one community's experience. It is important to convey to students that a single story or text cannot be held up as representative of the lived experiences of all. It is in pairing and sharing multiple stories around a specific topic that readers begin to see intersectional and authentic variation of experiences. These diverse literature pairings also span genre and format, mixing fiction with nonfiction, poetry with digital texts, news media with video—inclusive of the infinite number of text pairings possible.

Time and tension.

When sharing diverse literature with children, time becomes an important factor worth considering. Teachers sharing diverse children's literature recognize that many of the portrayals

and issues within these texts are complex and take *time* to unpack and discuss. It is essential that teachers and students be willing to steep in these texts that require discussion. These conversations require fostering a classroom environment that can engage in respectful dialogue from multiple viewpoints. It is also worth acknowledging that discussions around portrayals and issues of diversity and equity often come with moments of productive tension and these moments must be *acknowledged* and *welcomed* in the literature-based classroom space.

Becoming comfortable with moments of discomfort can offer productive tensions that emerge through discussion. It is also important to note that there will be moments during these discussions where teachers may not know how to respond to specific questions or comments raised by students. The purpose of these moments of tension is **not** for teachers to have all of the answers. Rather, these moments create sites of inquiry for students and the teacher to pursue together. Responding to questions with phrases such as, “I need to think about that...” or “Let me give some thought to...” are legitimate reactions to unforeseen and complex issues. Teaching and learning are vulnerable in these moments because teachers have offered a space where complicated issues can be discussed, and both teachers and students can work their way through their responses.

Toward the Pursuit of Equitable Representation in Literature

It is in this pursuit of equity through the sharing of diverse children’s literature that teachers and students come together to work toward a more socially just world. This commitment should not be taken lightly for the challenge in doing this work is great. Instead, teachers might view this orientation toward social justice as an ongoing collaborative effort and commitment to augmenting and amplifying the voices and histories of diverse authors and illustrators. Critically selecting and sharing diverse children’s literature is a process in which teachers and students consistently work to unpack increasingly complex issues. Collectively, readers begin to account and honor the experiences of all people by acknowledging the ways in which progress has been made through increased representation of diverse perspectives. Simultaneously, this practice helps to open critical conversations as to whose voices are still not counted in our schools, in our communities and in our world. These conversations serve as invitations to impact and shape young people who will become the next generation of active citizens, leaders, and policy makers.

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