

Mirror, Mirror: Who Are Literature Anthologies Really Reflecting?

By Jessica Tovar-Hilbert



Abstract: Research shows that anthologies do not adequately supply culturally relevant texts that meet the needs of a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population. It is necessary and critical to find ways to ensure that students receive the benefits of culturally relevant literacy instruction. This article provides a framework for culturally responsive literacy instruction to ensure that students see more mirrors that affirm their unique backgrounds and engage them in literature in ways that provide a more personal transaction with texts. However, supplementing the current canon with diverse texts is more than just inclusion of these texts, and finding the balance of mirrors and windows is no simple task. The author describes the three primary considerations, the 3 Es, for shaping a more inclusive and responsive literature experience for students: Explore culture, Examine content, and Engage in conversation.

Keywords: culturally responsive literacy, multicultural, literature anthologies, middle school, minority students

Jessica Tovar-Hilbert is an adjunct professor in the Department of Urban Education at the University of Houston–Downtown. Her research interests are culturally responsive literacy, motivating reluctant readers and writers, and analysis of instructional reading and writing materials. She may be reached at tovarhilbertj@uhd.edu.

When we choose to read a particular book, we often base our decision on our anticipated connection with the text. This explains why, if given the choice, a sixth-grade girl who loves graphic novels might choose to read *Smile* by Rania Telgemeier about another sixth grader of today over *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

When you find a book that you connect with, the feeling is electric. As you move your fingertips across the spines of a shelf of books and wonder if you will see familiar or new faces or places once you read the first few pages, a transaction is happening, a give and take. From this exchange, it is clear that a book can serve as the mirror reflecting your soul, your being, your uniqueness or serve a window

into an unknown life or place. And either way it is unforgettable.

What students see of themselves in texts are derived from the three layers of culture Valle (1997) identified as: (a) language, symbols, and artifacts; (b) customs, practices, and interactional patterns; and (c) shared values, norms, beliefs, and expectations. For minority students, text mirrors often describe multicultural literature in which they can see themselves (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). However, the benefit of text mirrors is not only for the students whose identity is reflected in culturally relevant texts. It also helps to create text windows that promote students' understanding and appreciation of differing cultures (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

Unfortunately, many of us do not have the bookstore-size resources that provide the myriad choices students need to foster unforgettable text connections that mirror their lives or provide new windows through which to peer. So we rely on the most readily available resource—the thud-inducing literature textbook—with all its classics along with a few more modern and diverse texts sprinkled in. However, based on the demands of the standards to which we are beholden, this primary source of literature should mirror many more of our students as well as open windows for all of them.

Research conducted on anthology content showed that these resources did not offer many texts in which students could see themselves, especially in regard to race (Applebee, 1990). In fact, for minority students, they offered significantly more windows than mirrors. Nearly 50 years ago, a call to diversify the literature canon was made by the National Council of Teachers of English and that call continues to be a tenet of its mission (NCTE, 1970). But how much has the literature textbook canon changed since the call for inclusive texts and Applebee's research? The answer is very, very little.

Who's That in the Mirror?

Applebee's (1993) study of high school literature anthologies revealed that there was little representation of minority authors. Bird's (2005) similar study of high school anthologies showed that Hispanic authors represented 15.73% or less of authorship, and

African American authors represented no more than 18.51% in a given anthology. Bird's research also found that while several aspects of the anthologies had changed over time, the canon contained works that have persisted since anthologies published in 1917.

Tovar-Hilbert's (2017) recent study of eighth grade anthologies revealed a 1.34% increase in Hispanic authorship from the 2001 to the 2011 Texas-adopted anthologies, a state wherein Hispanic students make up 52% of the student population. Because these anthologies do not adequately supply culturally relevant texts that meet the needs of a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population, it is necessary and critical to find ways to ensure that students receive the benefits of culturally relevant literacy instruction.

When students are engaged with culturally relevant texts, they experience the books as mirrors. This phenomenon is a critical part of the reader response theory in which Rosenblatt (1988) posited "human activities and relationships are seen as transactions in which the individual, and the social, cultural, and natural elements interfuse" (p. 2). The sociocultural impact of texts and the transactional nature of reading are evidence of the power of culturally relevant text to validate student culture and to develop understanding and respect for other cultures (Smolen & Oswald, 2010). These interactions are described by Cox and Galda (1990) as having the effect of mirrors and windows, reflecting and affirming a student's cultural identity or providing a view of another culture that would not otherwise be explored or considered. What students see of themselves in texts is important because it imparts to them how they are viewed and valued in this society. What students do not see of themselves in texts because the text "tells students who and what their society and culture values" (Bishop, 1990, p. 561).

As students engage with multicultural literature, their culture is a part of the transactions they are making with the text and at the same time is being influenced or shaped by it. The interplay of culture and multicultural texts has very influential and critical effects on the type of image students see in text mirrors. Larrick (1965) asserted that when children do not see themselves in books, they receive the message that they are not important enough to appear in books, and children who do see themselves in books receive the message that those who are different from them are not valued enough to appear in the books. Boy, Causey, and Galda (2015) stated "teaching—and especially teaching with literature is political. The books that we offer children will affect them and their worlds" (p. 379).

A framework for culturally responsive literacy instruction will help

to ensure that students see more mirrors that affirm their unique backgrounds and engage them in literature in ways that provide a more personal transaction with texts. However, supplementing the current canon with diverse texts is more than just inclusion of these texts, and finding the balance of mirrors and windows is no simple task. There are three primary considerations, the 3 Es, for shaping a more inclusive and responsive literature experience for students: 1) Explore Culture, 2) Examine Content, and 3) Engage in Conversation.

Explore Culture

The number of literature selections reflecting diverse backgrounds is relatively small, making finding books that reflect the backgrounds of culturally and linguistically diverse students a bit of a challenge (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2015). Recently, there has been a powerful response to the lack of diversity in children's literature with organizations like We Need Diverse Books (weneeddiversebooks.com) calling attention to the small

percentage of diverse children's and young adult books, and aiming this attention toward publishers to be more inclusive and representative of the diversity of culture and language in the United States. Fortunately, authors like Diana Lopez, a former Texas middle school teacher, are writing books to meet the specific interest and culture of Hispanic students. Of the need for students to see themselves in books, Lopez (2017) stated, "Students need to feel that my [their] world is story-worthy" (n.p.).

Although the scant availability of diverse children's literature gives less from which to choose, it is critical to ensure that what is presented to students will mirror students' backgrounds accurately and positively. The literature presented as mirrors impacts students' sense of self and influences what students of different backgrounds see in these cultural windows to which they are now privy. The importance of identity was examined in Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris's (2008) study wherein they surveyed and interviewed students from a predominately Latino community to identify which types of texts students read, how often students read, and why students chose to read. They found that the importance of racial and ethnic identities were reflected in students' decisions to read. Unfortunately, not all mirrors offer a sharp, clear, and accurate image reflecting back at students. These texts must be closely vetted to ensure that they do not misrepresent or create a distorted image of students' cultural and backgrounds.

One way to ensure that the culture identities represented in texts accurately represent students' backgrounds is to engage in activities in which students share their stories and experiences. This can be done through reflective personal writing, surveys, or



student-facilitated discussion in which they share their cultures. Additionally, bringing in community resources to share in the storytelling add varied perspectives and validate student stories and experiences. After texts are introduced, a powerful way to verify the mirrors they provide is simply to ask students what they think of the representation in the texts they read. In this way, students serve as the expert members who can evaluate texts and help to validate the texts' ability to affirm students' backgrounds and experiences.

Examine Content

Another important aspect of culturally relevant text is how the content explores cultural identity, which is the primary tenet of teaching with culturally relevant literature. Culturally relevant literature can be used as a means to validate and improve the self-view of students of minority cultures and groups and as a mode for building respect across cultures, creating a critical literacy perspective defined by Freire as literacy that affirms learners as they navigate and learn about the world through texts (Norton, 1991; Freire, 2000), situating literacy in the sociocultural context that culturally relevant texts and culturally relevant instruction acknowledges. Culturally relevant texts that meet the needs of students will embody the five functions of multicultural literature identified by Taylor (2000): (1) provide knowledge and information, (2) provide multiple perspectives, (3) foster appreciation of diversity, (4) promote critical inquiry about self and others, and (5) provide enjoyment, illuminate human experiences, and prompt questions.

Identifying high-quality culturally relevant literature that successfully carries out the functions of multicultural literature begins with identifying the literature that has been vetted by experts and educators alike. One of the best ways to identify these texts is to begin with sources that recognize high-quality literature. The following are resources for identifying high-quality multicultural children's literature:

- American Library Association's Pura Belpré Awards—recognizes authors who showcase Hispanic cultural experiences in outstanding works of children's literature;
- The Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs' America's Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature—recognizes quality works of children's and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States;
- Texas State University's Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award—honors authors and illustrators who create literature that depicts the Mexican American experience;
- Coretta Scott King Book Awards—recognizes outstanding African-American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African-American culture and universal human values;
- John Steptoe Award for New Talent—recognizes excellence in writing and/or illustration for African-American children's books;
- The American Indian Youth Literature Award—honors writing and illustrations by and about American Indians;



- Arab-American Book Award—honors books written by and about Arab-American authors; and
- Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature—recognizes literature about Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage.

Another valuable resource for identify high-quality multicultural texts is the Database for Award-Winning Literature (<http://www.dawcl.com/introduction.html>). This resource, drawn from over 12,000 records from 143 awards, allows users to search using a variety of filters such as cultural representation, genre, story setting, and award (Bartle, 2017).

Engage in Conversation

When students read high-quality multicultural literature that allows them to explore their cultural identities, they develop a more informed sense of self and are provided a more expansive view of the society in which they live. Such literature experiences also foster the critical thought needed to negotiate complex societal issues. Multicultural literature can be used as an impetus for classroom discussion and writing that requires critical, meaningful examination of topics that impact the lives of students. It can also be used to negate or dispel stereotypes and misconceptions for both

students and teachers. Looking at other cultures and worldviews through literature allows students to gain a deeper understanding and respect for these differences as well as help students grapple with difficult topics such as dealing with prejudice. Regarding exposure to multicultural literature, Diamond and Moore (1995) stated, “[It] further activates silent voices, opens closed minds, promotes academic achievement, and enables students to think and act critically in a pluralistic, democratic society” (p. 7).

The use of multicultural literature allows all students to examine culture and identity and allows educators to connect pedagogy to students’ realities, both of which reflect the transformative aspect of multicultural education in Banks’s (1989) multicultural hierarchy of integration. When multicultural education is transformative, it exposes students to perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and it is the next step to reaching the social action approach. In this approach, students make decisions and take action on important social issues—whether they impact their own lives and communities or those of others—and they attempt to solve the problems surrounding these issues.

Looking at the Mirror Again

Through careful consideration of the culture, content, and conversations represented by the multicultural literature promoted as culturally relevant to our students, we can create literacy environments in which connections between the curriculum and students’ lives can be made. Such literature positively reflects the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse students, ensuring that when students “see” text, they see themselves as they know themselves. In addition, students looking out windows not only learn new ways of being but also see the ways the mirrored reflections of others actually look similar to their own.

References

Applebee, A. N. (1993). *Literature in the secondary school: Studies of curriculum and instruction in the United States (Report No. 25)*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Banks, J. A. (1989). Integrating the curriculum with ethnic content: Approaches and guidelines. In J.A. Banks & C.A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 189-207). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Bartle, L. (2017). *Database of award-winning children’s literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.dawcl.com>

Bird, S. (2005). *A content analysis of the most commonly adopted high school literature anthologies* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://info.lib.uh.edu/>

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Walk tall in the world. African American literature for today’s children. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59(4), 556-565.

Boyd, F. B., Causey, L. L., & Galda, L. (2015). Culturally diverse literature: Enriching a variety in an era of common core state standards. *The Reading Teacher*, 68(5), 378-387.

Callins, T. (2006). Culturally responsive literacy instruction. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 39(2), 62-65.

Cooperative Children’s Book Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison. (2015). *Children’s books by and about people of color published in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>

Cox, S., & Galda, L. (1990). Children’s books: Multicultural literature: Mirrors and windows on a global community. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(8), 582-589.

Diamond, B. J., & Moore, M. A. (1995). *Multicultural literacy: Mirroring the reality of the classroom*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Freeman, Y., & Freeman, D. (2004). Connecting students to culturally relevant texts. *Talking Points*, 15(2), 7-11.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International.

Larrick, N. (1965, September). The all-white world of children’s books. *Saturday Review* 48, 63-65, 84-85.

Lopez, D. (2017). The author next door. Presentation at the 2017 Texas Association for Literacy Education Conference, Corpus Christi, TX.

National Council of Teachers of English. (1970). Criteria for teaching materials in reading and literature [Statement]. Urbana, IL: Author.

Norton, D. (1991). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children’s literature*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing.

Rosenblatt, L. (1988). *Reading and writing: The transactional theory* [Technical Report]. Retrieved from https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/18044/ctrstreadtechrepv01988i00416_opt.pdf

Smolen, L. A., & Oswald, R. A. (Eds.). (2010). *Multicultural literature and response: Affirming diverse voices*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Taylor, S. V. (2000). Multicultural is who we are: Literature as a reflection of ourselves. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(3), 24-29.

Tovar-Hilbert, J. (2017). *An analysis of the authors, content, and genres of Hispanic-related selections in adopted 8th grade literature anthologies in Texas 2001-2011*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Houston.

Valle, R. (1997). *Ethnic diversity and multiculturalism: Crisis for challenge*. New York, NY: American Heritage Custom Publishing.