

## *Honoring Multiple Identities Using Multicultural Literature*

**Sonja Ezell, PhD**

*University of Texas at Arlington*

**Annie Daly, PhD**

*University of Texas at Arlington*

### **Abstract**

*Multicultural texts are essential classroom tools because they create opportunities for all students to feel visible, included, and valued. In this summary paper, the authors begin with an overview of why multicultural literature and multiple identities have a place inside elementary and secondary classrooms. The authors then describe three literacy practices embedded with hands-on teaching activities to support the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. The authors argue that given the current sociopolitical realities of injustice, discrimination, and violence, multicultural literature is an essential classroom tool to honor children and youth's humanity and safeguard their well-being.*

**Keywords:** *multicultural text, multicultural literature, diverse learners, culturally diverse teaching, literacy*

---

Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) argued that multicultural books are beneficial to all students because they have the capacity to serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Books can be mirrors when they reflect readers' own identities and illuminate narratives with familiar faces, friends, and families. They can also be windows when providing glimpses into relationships, cultures, and communities that are unlike our own. Texts can also serve as sliding glass doors, inviting students to interact, exchange, and establish personal connections to new and unfamiliar experiences.

Multicultural texts create opportunities for students to feel visible, included, and valued, yet literacy educators are often challenged with using these texts in ways that honor students multiple identities and address the intersections of identity and (in)justice (Crenshaw, 1990; McNair, 2016; Muhammad, 2020). Literacy teachers in states like Texas face additional challenges of deciding how to use multicultural literature while simultaneously navigating a political climate that has become increasingly hostile to reading and discussing books about diversity and race (Zou & Kao, 2021).

In this summary paper, we describe how literacy educators can use multicultural literature to create learning environments that honor the multiple identities students bring to the classroom. We begin with an overview of why multicultural literature and multiple identities have a place inside our elementary and secondary classrooms.

### **Why Multicultural Literature in the Classroom?**

Multicultural literature has the capacity to foreground stories and experiences of individuals and communities who have been silenced and have experienced injustice. Voices captured in stories, tales, and poetry can validate and empower students of color, multilingual students, and other students whose identities and experiences are marginalized by the dominant culture (Thomas, 2016). Multicultural literature can also teach children and youth who have privilege to recognize ways they benefit from their race, class, and gender identities and use their power to end discrimination and oppression (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

Research has found that elementary and secondary educators who seek to empower students as change makers and critical, compassionate community members through their literacy instruction can do so through the shared pages of a story or information text (i.e., Vlach, 2022). Multicultural literature is often most impactful to students' learning when teachers use texts as a tool to facilitate conversations about identity, power, and equity.

### **What are Multiple Identities?**

Every person develops a sense of who they are through the relationships they hold with family, friends, and society. Muhammad (2020) defines identity as "composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be" (p. 67). Identity markers include categories such as race, gender, class, religion, language practices, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and citizenship.

Multiple identities are normal and make each of us unique. Yet across U.S. society, ideologies such as white supremacy and patriarchy position some identities (white, male, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied) as the norm, creating a dangerous pretext for dehumanizing and excluding people of color, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, differently-abled persons, and other marginalized identities (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). Multicultural literature that humanizes people who hold multiple identities is a tool literacy educators can use to interrogate harmful ideologies and equip children and youth with knowledge and skills to make society more inclusive.

### **Using Multicultural Literacy in the Classroom**

Schools are a microcosm of society (Hollins-Alexander & Law, 2022), and research shows that when we begin to truly value and understand the students in our classrooms, we can begin to engage with them academically (Ahiyya, 2022). In this section, we offer three literacy practices embedded with hands-on teaching activities to support the use of multicultural literature in the classroom.

#### **Practice #1: Normalize Discussions about Multiple Identities in your Classroom**

In order for students to be fully seen and heard at school, their multiple identities must be recognized and honored (Muhammad, 2018). Normalizing discussion about identity is one way to help students learn about who they are and how identities and experiences differ.

**Individual Identity Webs.** One way to begin discussions about identity is to use books to introduce new identity-based vocabulary to students. Invite students to notice and name how characters define themselves or are defined by others. Generate a list of identity markers (race, gender, language practices), and discuss if these descriptions are claimed or ascribed to the character. Invite students to use this list to name their identities. Ahmed (2018) suggests creating a social identity web with a student's name in

the center and branches of identity markers extending from their name (see also Kleinrock, 2021). Teachers and students can add, change, and revisit their identity web throughout the year.

For young students, teachers can support emergent literacy practices by creating a whole-class web. Engage students in collaborative discussions while reading multicultural literature and scribe students' observations of identity into a shared, written text, such as an anchor chart. See Figure 1 for an example of a whole-class identity web from a pre-kindergarten classroom created after the teacher and students read and discussed *The Colors of Us* (Katz, 1999), *Brown: The Many Shades of Love* (James, 2020), and *Our Skin: A First Conversation about Race* (Madison & Ralli, 2021).

### **Practice #2: Sustain Students' Access to Multicultural Literature**

Teachers should ensure students have access to various types of multicultural literature throughout the classroom at multiple points of the school day. This can include having access to books in print and on multiple digital platforms (including e-readers, cellphones, and iPads) during independent and guided reading. A place to anchor acceptance and a commitment to all members of our nested, local, and global community is the classroom library. Housed on the shelves of classroom libraries should be stories, songs, struggles, and symphonies of the hardened journey and the harnessed joy found within humanity. Books, texts, narrations, diaries, autobiographies, and detailed renderings of maps and drawings should serve as a catalyst to propel our students to explore, engage, and participate in transformative conversations.

***Read Alouds and Class Discussion.*** Ongoing access to multicultural literature requires that teachers make time to read and discuss these texts in their curriculum (Ahiyya, 2022). During instructional time, make sure to model listening and as the instructor to share the microphone to make room for student voice. Encourage

shoulder partner dialogue (e.g., turn and talks) so students can develop independence and a deeper understanding and connection with the text.

We also suggest using a common set of questions during read aloud discussions that focus students' attention on mirrors, windows, and/or sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). By returning to the same question set across multiple read alouds, students can begin to develop language and literacy practices for analyzing and discussing identity as well as complex social and political topics (see Table 1).

### **Practice #3: Integrate Effective Instruction with Inclusive Teaching**

Too often, multicultural literature and discussions about identity are viewed as deviations from the official, academic curriculum (Dyson, 2013). Yet research shows that teachers align their use of multicultural literature with state standards to create inclusive curriculum (Vlach, 2022) and integrate literacy instruction (i.e. phonemic awareness, vocabulary development) into read alouds and discussions about identity and race (Daly, 2021). Below are instructional strategies designed to capture the attention of students across grade levels and ensure their thoughtful participation in literacy learning with multicultural texts.

***Oral Sharing and Literacy Development.*** For emergent readers, oral language experiences can support the development of phonological awareness or the ability to detect and manipulate syllables and phonemes, as well as increase students' vocabulary (Cassano & Rohde, 2020). For emergent readers, oral language experiences can support the development of phonological awareness or the ability to detect and manipulate syllables and phonemes, as well as increase students' vocabulary (Cassano & Rohde, 2020). Sharing personal, familial and community connections immediately following the reading or exploration of a multicultural text can offer students ongoing, authentic opportunities to develop oral proficiency and increase their exposure to new sounds and rhythms of

language. This instructional strategy will also create meaningful space and provide a platform for the exploration and discussion of students' lived experiences.

**Discussion Norms.** Collaboratively create guidelines and expectations to establish consensus for the collaborative voices. After class discussions, return to the discussion norms and reflect with students about the discussion. Teachers can ask students: What went well in our conversation today? What can be improved for next time?

**Personal Reflection and Student Surveys.** Utilize a student lesson reflection journal or an Exit Ticket to harness the power of personal pondering. Throughout the school year, conduct a student poll or survey to ascertain the books and authors they want to read and hear from. Incorporating student feedback and commentary into the lesson cycle will ensure that students' perspectives and experiences are prioritized in the selection and use of multicultural texts in the classroom.

**Recommendation Posts and Class Blogs.** Provide students with a self-adhesive note and let them write a brief endorsement or recommendation for the book. The students can use peer recommendations to guide and inform their next book selection from the classroom library. In addition, create a Class Blog to allow students the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions of a recently read text in a digital, online platform. Class blogs can be shared with students in other classrooms, grade levels, or even schools. This way, students' reflections and candid commentary of featured stories, authors, and classroom titles are prioritized in the

development of a literacy curriculum that uses multicultural literature.

**Ongoing Inquiry and Digital Literacy.** Authors and illustrators are people, too, and create stories that reflect their identities and experiences. Empower your students with digital literacy tools to inquire, explore, and research further into the lives of the authors and illustrators of multicultural literature. Students can use the Internet to examine informational texts, organize ideas across multiple sources, and evaluate texts for accuracy and the inclusion of diverse perspectives (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). This practice will allow students to actively engage with the content shared in class and discover more about the authors and illustrators of the stories, narratives, and biographies they read and enjoy.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Students are the voices of the next generation and deserve access to multicultural literature. Students need to experience inclusive and affirming literacy learning by seeing reflections of themselves in classroom texts. Students also deserve opportunities to encounter diversity with appreciation and learn from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color whose voices and experiences are oftentimes silenced by the dominant, white culture. Finally, students must be given the opportunity to step into a more just and inclusive future by applying new knowledge from literature into their own lives and communities. In the wake of an ongoing pandemic, senseless violence, and persistent social inequities, we implore educators to prioritize multicultural literature in the literacy classroom.

---

## **References**

- Ahiyya, V. (2022). *Rebellious read alouds: Inviting conversations about diversity with children's books*. Corwin Press.
- Ahmed, S. K. (2018). *Being the change: Lessons and strategies to teach social comprehension*. Heinemann.

- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for your classroom*, 6(3), ix-xi.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1300.
- Daly, A. (2021). *Antiracist pedagogy in the elementary literacy classroom: talking about race and racism across one school year* [Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin]. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/33185>
- Dyson, A. H. (2013). *Rewriting the basics: Literacy learning in children's cultures*. Teachers College Press.
- Cassano, C. & Rohde, L. (2020). Phonological awareness in early childhood literacy development. *Position Statement and Research Brief*. International Literacy Association.
- Hollins-Alexander, S., & Law, N. (2022). *Collective equity: A movement for creating communities where we all can breathe*. Corwin Press.
- Kleinrock, L. (2021). *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide to Antibias and Antiracist Work in Your School Community*. Heinemann.
- McNair, J. C. (2016). #WeNeedMirrorsAndWindows: Diverse classroom libraries for K-6 libraries. *The Reading Teacher*, 70(3), 375–381.
- Muhammad, G. E. (2018). A plea for identity and criticality: Reframing literacy learning standards through a four-layered equity model. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(2), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.869>
- Muhammad, G. E. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic Teaching Resources.
- Rogers, R., & Mosley, M. (2006). Racial literacy in a second-grade classroom: Critical race theory, whiteness studies, and literacy research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(4), 462–495. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.41.4.3>
- Souto-Manning, M., & Martell, J. (2016). *Reading, writing, and talk: Inclusive teaching strategies for diverse learners, K–2*. Teachers College Press.
- Thomas, E. E. (2016). Stories still matter: Rethinking the role of diverse children's literature today. *Language Arts*, 94(2), 112-119.
- Vlach, S. K. (2022). Elementary literacy teachers change the underlying story through transformative read-aloud curricula. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 48(1), 12.
- Zou, I. & Kao, J. (2021, August 3). Texas teachers say GOP's new social studies law will hinder how an entire generation understands race, history and current events. *The Texas Tribune*. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/08/03/texas-critical-race-theory-social-studies-teaches/>

### Literature Cited

- James, N. (2020). *Brown: The many shades of love*. Abrams Books.
- Katz, K. (1999). *The colors of us*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Madison, M. & Ralli, J. (2021). *Our Skin: A First Conversation about Race*. Rise x Penguin. <https://www.mwera.org/MWER/volumes/v33/issue1/MWER-V33n1-Bacevich-COMMENTARY.pdf>

## Tables and Figures

**Figure 1:** Whole-Class Identity Web from a Pre-Kindergarten Classroom



**Table 1:** Guiding Discussions Questions about Books as Windows, Mirrors, and/or Sliding Glass Doors (Questions are inspired by this concept from Rudine Sims Bishop.)

Books as a Mirror	Books as a Window	Books as a Sliding Glass Door
<p>In what ways do you see yourself in this text? Are there places where you feel a connection to the character’s experience? What are places where you do not see yourself in the text?</p> <p>What are you learning about yourself through reading this book?</p> <p>How are you thinking about your life, friends, family or community now?</p>	<p>What are you learning about others’ experiences in this world through this book?</p> <p>Does the author and/or illustrator have a connection to this experience? If not, how might we read this text differently?</p> <p>Are there stereotypes or forms of discrimination that we need to be aware of while reading this book?</p>	<p>What kinds of problems or challenges do you notice occurring in this text? Are they individual or societal or both?</p> <p>Who has power in this text? Is the distribution of power fair or just? If not, what could be done differently?</p> <p>How do people make change? What are the skills they have? What is the knowledge they use?</p>
<b>General Questions to Honor Multiple Identities with Multicultural Literature</b>		
<p>What are you thinking about as you read this book?</p>		

What do you want to learn more about? Where do you want to go next in your learning?

Are there people in our families, friend groups, and communities who can teach us more?