

# No Longer Invisible

How Diverse Literature Helps Children Find Themselves in Books, and Why It Matters

Several years ago, eighth-grade teacher **Karimah Tennyson-Marsh** took stock of the lagging reading scores for her students and decided to make a change.

Tennyson-Marsh's classes at Century Community Charter School in Inglewood, California, were comprised of about 80 percent Hispanic/Latino and 20 percent African American students. Many of her children came into class already feeling "defeated with reading" and didn't enjoy reading "because they didn't connect with it," she says.

So, Tennyson-Marsh decided to use culturally diverse literature with all her lessons—to find books with characters and themes that reflected her students' lives and heritage. The shift appears to be working. Her class's most recent test scores (from the 2015/2016 school year) show 46 percent of her students are meeting or

exceeding standards for reading—up from 36 percent the previous year.

"They have come a long way from where they were," she says, "and part of it is due to using diverse books."

Yet it can be a struggle to find such texts. While the number of children's books featuring characters of color rose in 2015 to 505 (from 396 in 2014), they still represent a small slice of the youth market (only about 15 percent of the 3,400 books published), according to research by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. (The actual percentage is likely to be even lower, since the CCBC total represents only those books received for review and not the total number published in a specific year.)

Why is this important? How do texts that feature characters from non-majority racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups benefit students? And how can we both find and take advantage of culturally responsive literature in the classroom?

## Empathy, Engagement, and Improved Academics

"When students don't see themselves reflected in their classroom curriculum, it gives them the impression that they are not valued, that something must be wrong with them," says **Sandra Osorio**, assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University.

This is especially true when talking about the Latino/a students she works with, says Osorio. Lack of representation in

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Sandra Osorio

texts “makes them feel like they have to assimilate or change who they are in order to fit into what is being shared.”

When students are provided that mirror—when they see characters like themselves described in the pages they are reading—they are often more drawn to and interested in the texts.

“The students are more highly engaged,” Osorio says. “Any child when they feel some connection to a book is going to be more into it, have more conversations around it—and then that leads to what we all want, which is greater gains when it comes to reading and critical thinking skills.”

“Having diverse children in literature is also important for children who are *not* members of those groups of color,” says **Tonya Perry**, an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction’s secondary education program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Perry says exposure to multicultural texts allows students to “learn more about other children and be exposed to other worlds and other cultures, so they have an opportunity to become more global in their understanding of people.”

In addition, seeing through the eyes of characters who are different from you can foster empathy, which is “very important,” says **Vivian Yenika-Agbaw**, professor of literature and literacy at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Pennsylvania State University and a former high school English teacher. “When students read books and they are able to empathize, then they are able to grow as readers and also able to grow as critical thinkers—and they will begin to gradually see diverse issues in more complex ways,” Yenika-Agbaw says.

Diverse texts can reflect many kinds of diversity, from racial, ethnic and cultural differences to disability, sexual orientation, and religious belief.

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**Crystal Brunelle**, a teacher-librarian at Northern Hills Elementary School in Onalaska, Wisconsin, has worked for years to incorporate all manner of diverse texts in her school’s library, even though her school’s population is mostly white. She has brought in bilingual books in a variety of languages that aren’t spoken in the school, just to expose students to the idea of bilingualism and to share some of the world’s many cultures (“I may not have many books in Urdu,” she says, “but at least I have one!”).



Crystal Brunelle

Brunelle’s school does have a large Hmong population, so she sought Hmong-oriented books to share with her students. She showed one to a little boy who gasped: “There are Hmong in books?” After encountering difficulty finding more books, Brunelle helped her students create their own book about Hmong New Year celebrations, which she printed from an online vendor and now stocks in the school library. The book is frequently checked out by both Hmong and non-Hmong students, she says.

Diverse literature can tackle problems like racism and, from the right source, change attitudes, says **Violet Harris**, professor emerita of curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. For example, she says the nonfiction book *Sugar Changed the World*, by Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos, is unlike other books for young people in its unvarnished depiction of the horrors of slavery.

Too often, Harris says, “we don’t want to talk about the horrific nature of slavery with children, so as a consequence we get books that focus on an itty-bitty teeny component of it and sort of humanizes the slave owner and the institution. But a book like *Sugar Changed the World* would make a tremendous difference.”

Harris also points out that multicultural youth literature can also be great literature, period. “If at the core we wish to share with children the best in literature, then that is not literature only written by white people,” she says. “We need literature for children that does everything that literature is supposed to do, but that comes from many voices and not just one group of voices.”



Violet Harris



## NCTE Member Django Paris (Michigan State University) was interviewed by Larry Ferlazzo for his BAM! Radio Show.

**Ferlazzo:** What is one simple thing a teacher can do tomorrow to begin a journey toward culturally sustaining pedagogy?

**Paris:** [T]hink about who the students are in their classrooms, and what language varieties and languages they use in their communities and at school, and start thinking about ways to bring those meaningfully into the classroom—to ask students about what it is they care about and rather than simply thinking about bringing that into the classroom, [to] think about joining it. The start is an invitation.

Hear the ten-minute interview clip here: <http://bit.ly/Bam-The-Look-and-Feel>

It's been said that culturally diverse books can act both as windows (into others' lives) and mirrors (reflections of a reader's life)—a theory spelled out by Rudine Sims Bishop, an emerita education professor at Ohio State University, in an influential 1990 article in *Perspectives*. And indeed, the conversation about the importance of diverse literature has been going on for decades. Yet the relative shortage of diverse texts persists—as do other challenges facing teachers who try to include them in the classroom.

### Time, Lack of Training, and Other Impediments

When Tennyson-Marsh first began her hunt for diverse books to offer her students, she found it difficult and frustrating. "It was a bit of a struggle," she says. "It was time-consuming."

Indeed, finding time to research and locate multicultural books can be a problem for many teachers.

"Many times teachers are so bombarded with the pressures from administrators about high-stakes testing that they don't have time to be looking at diverse literature," says Osorio. "It takes time for you to investigate it, find it either from the library or order a copy—it's not like you can just grab it from the book shop—and then you must read through it to make sure it is appropriate."

Another issue is figuring out how to use diverse books with students. A big problem: teacher training programs aren't always adequately preparing teacher candidates—about 80 percent of whom are white—to teach with diverse literature, says Osorio.

**Ruth Lowery**, professor of education at Ohio State University, argues that literature about other cultures needs to be integrated into education curricula, especially given the increase in nonwhite populations in schools

today, which is projected to continue into the future. The National Center for Education Statistics says that by 2023, the majority (50.5 percent) of K–12 students will be Hispanic, African American, or Asian/Pacific Islander.

"We are seeing that the educational landscape is changing," Lowery says. "How do we help [new teachers] become the teachers who can help these students?"

Lowery says she can't count how many times she's been told by a teacher who is not Black, "Oh, but I don't know about African Americans; I can't share those books," to which Lowery replies: "Not true. There are things we can all identify in and among ourselves through stories. You may not be [from a particular group], but people's experiences transcend race, class, and gender."

Similarly, some teachers will say that their student bodies are largely White, so they have no need to include multicultural books, which is not true, says Osorio.

"Eventually the students are going to run into individuals from other cultures and it shouldn't be something that is shocking," she says. "You want students to be able to learn about all aspects of different cultures."

Teachers also need to be able to teach literature that reflects other types of diversity beyond race, says Osorio, such as disability or sexual orientation, "so that students feel like their family is represented and their environment is welcoming."

Introducing LGBTQ materials can sometimes result in pushback from parents or staff, especially at younger

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Ruth Lowery

## Resources for Teachers Seeking to Use More Diverse Texts



- African American Read-In: Learn how you and your students can be part of this popular annual event! (<http://www.ncte.org.aari>)
- American Indians in Children's Literature blog (<http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>)
- American Library Association awards (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia>) — see also the Belpré Medal for Latino literature (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>) and the Coretta Scott King Award (<http://www.ala.org/emiert/ckskbookawards/about>)
- The Brown Bookshelf (<http://thebrownbookshelf.com>) — features African American literature
- Colorín Colorado (<http://www.colorincolorado.org/>) — ELL resources for parents, schools, and communities
- Cooperative Children's Book Center (<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/multicultural.asp>) — multicultural resources
- Disability in KidLit (<http://disabilityinkidlit.com/>)
- Diversity in YA on Tumblr (<http://diversityinya.tumblr.com/>) — booklists and other tips
- International Literacy Association ([www.literacyworldwide.org](http://www.literacyworldwide.org)) — can be searched for multicultural booklists and units
- Latinxs in Kid Lit (<https://latinosinkidlit.com/>)
- Lee & Low Blog ([blog.leeandlow.com](http://blog.leeandlow.com)) — provided by a publisher of diverse books
- Reading is Fundamental (<http://www.rif.org/books-activities/booklists/multicultural-k-5/>) — includes multicultural booklist
- Rich in Color, a blog by Crystal Brunelle — <http://richincolor.com/resources/> — has a compendium of resources
- Teaching Tolerance ([www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)) — includes lessons and lesson-planning
- United States Board on Books for Young People ([http://usbby.org/list\\_oibl.html](http://usbby.org/list_oibl.html)) — Outstanding International Books (OIB) List
- **Weneeddiversebooks.org** — provides tips on where to find and how to use diverse books

grades. However, says Brunelle, “It’s material that needs to be there for children. If not, it says that [LGBTQ issues] are something you never, ever talk about, [which] definitely sends a negative message to kids.”

### Best Practices for Including Diverse Literature

First, teachers need to find—and read—texts. Becoming familiar with diverse books helps us talk about and inspire students to read them, as well as know how particular books might fit with standards and goals during lesson-planning.

Lists of quality multicultural children’s books can be found online, as can lesson suggestions (see sidebar). One good resource is the American Library Association, which hosts awards in different cultural categories (such as the Coretta Scott King Award for African American books).

Texts can be evaluated for appropriateness by using Teaching Tolerance’s “Reading Diversity” tools (<http://www.tolerance.org/publication/reading-diversity>). Just because a book is diverse doesn’t mean it’s right for your students, points out Osorio. For example, she sometimes has found books in Spanish that are just direct translations of the English version and do not represent her students’ backgrounds or cultures.

Violet Harris notes that books featuring characters of color don’t need to be “de-racinated” in order for them to be broadly appealing—“you don’t have to make characters of color bland with no particular cultural references or attributes—you can make them who they are.”

One thing Brunelle looks for is whether the author of the book is from the same cultural group. “I do tend to prioritize books written by somebody from that specific culture—it shows a voice from that culture,” says Brunelle.

Most of all, make sure the books are appealing, says Brunelle, who doesn’t buy books just because they are diverse, but also because they have “a really good story” or other engaging features.

After you’ve found your books, figuring out how to use them is the next hurdle.

"I think we have gotten better as teachers at including diverse literature or having it present in the classroom—but how it's used is the piece that's lacking," says Osorio.

Often this involves guiding robust discussions, which may be sparked by students who want to discuss a wide range of issues.

## Kids Want to Have These Conversations

Diverse texts energize the classroom experience, says Yenika-Agbaw, because everyone in the class now can have a voice. No longer invisible in the literature that's being discussed, students from diverse cultures are empowered to "express their views, to make connections with the text and make connections with each other and with themselves, so by the end, everybody wants a piece of that literary and cultural experience."

Such discussion, bringing in perspectives and comparisons from students' own lives, may become impassioned, but should not be feared, says Tennyson-Marsh. "Our kids want to have these conversations. . . . One of the ways to help them to become critical thinkers is to allow them to have these conversations in the classroom."

Building a welcoming, nonjudgmental community in the classroom can make it easier for students to have open, frank discussions. Tennyson-Marsh, for example, tells her students anything said in her classroom stays there—that the classroom is a safe space.

Yet—and this can be hard, she says—it's best not to "insert yourself in the conversation." As much as possible, let the students hash it out, while also making sure students follow rules such as showing mutual respect for differing views.

Beyond discussion, use diverse texts in any project or display, where possible, suggests Brunelle. Consider themed units that can incorporate literature with diverse characters and topics, says Harris, such as a unit on the family showcasing many different ways families exist in the world. Book talks—by both teachers and students—are another way to spark interest in diverse works.

While it can be challenging for teachers to put in the work of finding, vetting, and incorporating multicultural texts, says Tennyson-Marsh, the rewards—such as seeing students identify with characters, be inspired by authors who share their heritage, and experience deeper learning—make it well worth the effort.

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**Lorna Collier's** articles about education and technology have appeared in *US News & World Report*, *the Chicago Tribune*, *MSN.com*, and *AARP Bulletin*. She is the former online editor for *GetEducated.com*. Reach her at [lorna@lornacollier.com](mailto:lorna@lornacollier.com).

## Sources:

Cooperative Children's Book Center  
<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>

NCES: Table 203.50 (Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2023) predicts that in 2023, 15.1 percent of students will be Black; 29.9 will be Hispanic, and 5.5 will be Asian/Pacific Islander.

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_203.50.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_203.50.asp)

Rudine Sims Bishop's article "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" originally appeared in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*. Vo. 6, no. 3. Summer 1990. Access article here:

<https://www.psdschools.org/webfm/8559>

Now is a great time to start thinking about hosting an African American Read-In!



Need a little inspiration? Browse local events from 2016: [www.ncte.org/aari/local-events](http://www.ncte.org/aari/local-events)

## DATES & SITES

### NCTE Annual Convention

**2016: Nov. 17–20** (workshops: Nov. 17, 21–22), Atlanta, GA, "Faces of Advocacy"

**2017: Nov. 16–19** (workshops: Nov. 16, 20–21), St. Louis, MO

### CCCC Annual Convention

**2017: March 15–18**, Portland, OR

### Whole Language Umbrella "Literacies for All" Summer Institute

**2017: July 20–22**, Tucson, AZ, "Global Literacies, Global Conversations: Celebrating Our Connections"

For details on professional learning, including Web seminars and conventions, see the NCTE homepage at <http://www.ncte.org>.