

LINKING THE WORD TO THE WORLD: Connecting Multicultural Children's Literature to the Lives of 21st-Century Youth



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THE IDEA OF LINKING the world of the classroom to the worlds of our students is nothing new in education. More than a hundred years ago educational pioneer John Dewey (1901) highlighted the importance of centering learning in the worlds of children. Throughout the 20th century, critical scholars such as Paulo Freire of Brazil and Gloria Ladson-Billings in the United States encouraged educators to embed classroom practices in the everyday experiences of students (Freire, 1970) and to create lessons that increased cultural competence among historically marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When we are able to use multicultural children's literature to link the world of the classroom to the lives of students, we increase motivation, engagement, achievement, and relevance and promote active learning that stimulates curiosity, creativity, and the social awareness needed to foster kindness, courage, and hope (Allyn & Morrell, 2016).

However, it isn't always so easy to translate these ideas into practice in the multifaceted United States of the 21st century. There is a world filled with languages and cultures and constantly changing demographics in our schools, but also a world filled with new technologies and new ways of acquiring and transmitting language that have radically changed the way we live. While it may seem intuitive to us in our everyday lives that the world is rapidly changing, we must also acknowledge that English language arts can often be resistant to these chang-

es. We recognize that some teachers may feel pressure to strictly adhere to a particular curriculum or focus on test preparation for high-stakes tests, which may not allow time and space for supplemental texts that accurately and authentically reflect their students' experiences and identities. These factors present a tension between our ideas and our instincts and the mandates and standards that we live and work within.

In this article, we play out some of these contradictions and tensions as they relate to the teaching of multicultural literature by exploring what it has meant for us, in our 50 collective years of teaching and working with K–12 literacy teachers across the country in large districts with diverse students populations, to link the teaching of literature to the worlds of our students. We talk about what this means in terms of the selection of the texts that we teach, the theory of reading that we promote, the writing we ask students to do, and finally how we link the lessons learned inside the classroom to action in the world around us.

How We Choose the Texts We Read

We need a broader array of stories in our classrooms because children need to see themselves in the stories they read (Bishop, 1990; Morrell & Morrell, 2012). As Henry Louis Gates (2002) mentioned in his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives*, true literacy for historically marginalized groups entails the ability to write ourselves into

being. Through the stories we share, we affirm ourselves and our existence as unique and as varied as our existences may be. So when we say that children need to see themselves in the stories that they read, we mean that literally and figuratively. In a diverse selection, students will see others who come from similar frames of reference, including culture, geography, and ethnicity. But students should be able to identify across these simple markers to see those with whom they would have other affinities, interests, and concerns about the world. Students should be able to relate to texts where the authors come from a cultural or geographical background similar to theirs and be encouraged to relate to authors and texts of all sorts. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2016), notable scholar of children's and young adult literature, asserted that we need "more accurate and humanizing representations of children of color" (p. 113) and that "stories still matter, and always will" (p. 118). Fortunately, with the growing selection of multicultural texts across the K–12 spectrum, more children are seeing themselves in positive and authentic ways in literature.

Choice of texts can happen in a variety of ways. There are the texts that the whole class reads and discusses, such as read-alouds, and these should be varied in background and perspective. We often think of read-alouds as only appropriate for elementary students; however, read-alouds can be used with older students to introduce a new concept, encourage and scaffold dialogue, and develop a deeper interest in reading. Teachers and older students can select texts that are age- and developmentally appropriate but that students might not be able to read independently due to the difficulty of the text or texts that can be better understood with whole- and small-group discussion (Allington, 2001). As Colabucci et al. (2016) suggested, read-alouds should play an integral role in literacy classrooms to engage and motivate readers while "supporting vocabulary development, critical thinking, and listening comprehension" (p. 49). This is especially true for classes with a significant number of students for whom English is a new language or students reading below grade level. In elementary classrooms, teachers and students can select

trade books that are appropriate for guided reading groups that feature interesting and engaging topics (nonfiction) and plots and characters (fiction). As mentioned, the range of well-written and interesting multicultural books, from easy to advanced levels, is broad and continually growing. Recently, books by and about individuals of color, including by authors such as Meg Medina, Veera Hiranandari, Erin Entrada Kelly, Derrick Barnes, Jason Reynolds, Kwame Alexander, and Renee Watson, have received notable attention and various awards by the American Library Association, which is evidence of the increasing stature of multicultural literature. And, according to statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2021), the number of books by and about Africans and African Americans, Asian Pacific and Asian Pacific Americans, and

Latinx continues to grow at a promising and steady rate.

There are also texts that students read on their own. This is where we have tremendous flexibility in choosing texts that are highly motivating and engaging. In his work with middle school students, Jeff Wilhelm (2016) found greater success when he allowed his struggling boys to select texts that had meaning for them. When working with upper elementary boys, Jodene has found that the most popular books are biographies of athletes and celebrities, classic and contemporary

comic books, graphic novels, books related to movies and video games, and nonfiction. When these books are available in the classroom and school library, students can look forward to independent reading time because they have choices and the books have meaning for them.

For students to be engaged and motivated to read, they must see connections between their lives and the texts. They need to imagine and see themselves in the texts that are used throughout the day and across the curriculum. Fortunately, we have a tremendous selection of books that address themes such as social justice, community, and collaboration and nonfiction on topics that are interesting and relevant to students. These can be incorporated into and supplement the required curriculum to support and extend students' learning while strategically meeting their specific reading needs and interests.

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How We Read the Texts We Choose

Simply stated, “reading is not a monolithic activity” (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010, p. 86). Readers bring a tremendous range of background knowledge, interests, and perspectives to texts that can be as varied as novels, poetry, grocery lists, traffic signs, and newspapers, to name a few. In the classroom, students express varying degrees of motivation and interest in reading, depending on the text. We should no longer assume that their reading stance fits neatly on a traditional continuum, with efferent stance at one end and aesthetic stance at the other (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). Reading is a complex process that varies with the reader and the text; therefore, we propose a new theory of reading that draws on existing research while focusing on how we connect literature for children to the lives of our students. Reading is not solely about decoding words; rather, students should be actively reading to make meaningful connections, enhance their understanding of the world, and increase their empathy and authentic care of others.

Obviously readers need to learn phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and text reading comprehension skills to become fluent readers (Snow et al., 2005), but this is just the starting point. We need to ask ourselves several questions about how we teach our students *how* to read. How do our students use what they have read to truly transform their ideas and views of the world? How do they connect with texts and grow as readers and citizens? How can they draw on the texts to improve their writing? These are just some of the questions we believe our theory of reading addresses.

We strongly believe that multicultural literature should be included in the curriculum across grade levels and content areas. Because our student population is rapidly changing nationally, with our schools more than 52% nonwhite and projected to increase to 56% by 2029, according to National Center for Education (2020) statistics, we need to provide texts that reflect this racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. While students can make text-to-self connections with any text, we feel it is extremely important for students to see themselves (e.g., culturally, geographically, socioeconomically) in obvious and blatant ways in the words and illustrations they encounter. However, when students do not see themselves specifically in terms of culture, ethnicity, geography, and so on in the texts, we believe they should be taught to read from a multicultural perspective. By this, we mean that students bring multiple cultural and critical per-

spectives to any texts they read, and we need to teach them how to tap into these perspectives.

When Jodene was working as a middle school literacy specialist in the Midwest, she collaborated with a fifth-grade teacher as the class read Christopher Paul Curtis’s *Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1995). Half of the 20 students had come to the school through refugee services, and as a whole, the 20 students represented nine birth countries and collectively spoke nine different home languages (English, Somali, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Kurdish, Haitian-Creole, Dinka, and Swahili). Their time in the United States ranged from 1.5 to 13 years. It was impossible to find a text that represented all of their home cultures and unique and diverse experiences; therefore, while reading the novel, we guided students in taking up the perspectives of the characters, especially Kenny, an African American child living in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. Our students became invested in the Watson family and discovered ways to create deep connections to the characters and imagine how life may have been during this time period. They laughed at Kenny’s misunderstandings and his brother’s antics, loved Kenny’s sweet little sister, and felt like a member of the family. As the Watsons traveled to the South and experienced a horrific event, our students were visibly upset and expressed tremendous grief and anger during our discussions and in their writing. While the majority of students did not share the same ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic background as the Watsons, they did deepen their knowledge of the 1960s and most importantly expressed empathy and authentic emotions throughout their reading of the novel.

Students should continue to make a range of connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world) to not only increase their comprehension of a specific text, but to take what they read and apply it in meaningful ways. By making these types of connections, they are more motivated, engaged, and empowered as readers. Since we want reading to be authentic and for students to see a clear purpose, whether this is to learn about the world and themselves or for the sheer joy of learning, it is important to provide them with a wide range of literature that promotes tolerance and acceptance and challenges stereotypes and essentializing. High-quality multicultural literature can serve this purpose, to not only help in the teaching of reading but to develop students’ understanding of social community action and their role as active and informed citizens.

Finally, when we think about how we want our students to read, we should also be thinking about how we want them to write. When students have opportunities to engage in thought-provoking, personal, and intellectual discussions about their readings, these ideas and perspectives make their way into the students' writing. In the next section, we consider how students use their multicultural readings as a springboard to rewrite the world.

Rewriting the World: Telling Our Stories as a Response to Multicultural Literature

The changing landscape of K–12 education is requiring more writing from students across disciplines and grade levels. Where literacy in our field was once synonymous with “reading,” we now understand that students must leave our classrooms with an ability to express their thoughts and feelings through writing in multiple genres and for multiple audiences. We feel that this is a positive change, for writing represents voice, and one of the most powerful and lasting effects of an education is to instill students with the confidence and the tools to be articulate and outspoken advocates for the people and issues they care about. Even further, we know that the artistic world and the world of industry require those who have a command of the written word. We believe that a curriculum that foregrounds multicultural literature can inspire this kind of writing.

One of the historical reasons that people have written their stories down is to commemorate important migrations and transitions in their lives and the lives of people they care about. In this way, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) argued, we learn more about ourselves and our values through the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves as we navigate the borders of multiple cultures and ways of being in the world. Telling and retelling our stories facilitates memory, presence, perseverance, and consciousness. This is certainly important for our students, who are often asked to navigate multiple cultural borders defined by ethnicity, language, religion, age, geography, and socioeconomic status. To facilitate the writing of their own stories, there are many books across the K–8 spectrum that deal with migrations and transitions into new worlds. Whether it is the first day of school (e.g., *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor* [Dismondy, 2015]; *I'm New Here* [O'Brien, 2015]; *The Name Jar* [Choi, 2003]), a move to a new city, or moving to a new country where very few people speak your language (e.g., *Dreamers* [Morales, 2018]; *Lucky Bro-*

ken Girl [Behar, 2017]; *One Green Apple* [Bunting, 2006]), these transitions can be very traumatic for children and their families. Literacy teachers can use these narratives as an opportunity to allow students to share their own stories of migration and transition. Students can also learn to empathize with others who are experiencing these sorts of transitions. As examples on the upper end of this spectrum, Ernest has worked with teachers who have used stories like Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* (2014) and Matt de la Peña's *Ball Don't Lie* (2007) to encourage students to tell stories about their lives, their families, and their communities in verse and prose. As a final example, we all know of stories that point to harmful conditions in our cities and in the larger society. These stories deal with bullying (*The Curse of the Bully's Wrath / La Maldición De La Ira Del Abusón* [Saldaña, 2018]; *Tales From the Bully Box* [Woods, 2014]; *Lucky Luna* [López, 2018]), harm to the environment, and ethnic or religious intolerance (Nasreen's *Secret School* [Winter, 2009]). We know of many examples of teachers whose students have wanted to engage in social action based upon their readings of texts. The writing can take the form of letters to school and public officials, newsletters and pamphlets on environmental awareness, or even drama, as Ernest witnessed while working with a third-grade teacher whose class created a forum-theater play pointing to the economic and structural causes underlying neighborhood violence after reading children's literature that discussed violence in cities. Engaging literature has the power to motivate students to write, and since the most effective way to improve writing is through reading, we owe it to our students to provide a variety of texts to which they connect in multifaceted ways.

One example of how a third-grade teacher came to use literature to transform her classroom culture began when she told Jodene how upset she felt by the way her children were interacting with one another at the start of the school year. The children were quick to anger, push each other, and speak without kindness or empathy toward one another. The teacher was also concerned about her literacy instruction and how to increase the amount of writing throughout the day. In an attempt to improve the classroom culture and increase writing production, we found several picturebooks about friendship and bullying (e.g., *Nobody Knew What to Do* [McCain, 2001]; *My Secret Bully* [Ludwig, 2004]; *Sorry* [Ludwig, 2006]) to use as read-alouds each week, to engage students in thoughtful discussions about how they could

connect to the characters and situations in the book and how they might be kinder to one another to create a safer and more compassionate learning environment. By the middle of the school year, students had filled their writing journals with reflections on the read-alouds, which improved not only their comprehension but their writing production and small-group discussions. They became so passionate about improving their community that they began an anti-bullying movement at their school by talking with other students and posting anti-bullying signs and posters with positive messages in the hallways. By the end of the school year, the teacher was so inspired by the kindness her students were expressing to one another that she continued to use the same books the following year to teach empathy and kindness, to motivate her students to write, and to impact their school culture in concrete and powerful ways.

While we should be encouraging our students to read and write beyond the regular school day, as elementary educators our focus should be on explicit, excellent writing instruction across genres throughout the school day, and for middle and secondary educators, on explicit and excellent writing instruction in discipline. Literature can provide templates or models across genres and offer engaging and thought-provoking multicultural perspectives to motivate students to read and write. For example, there are thousands of versions of *Cinderella* throughout the world (e.g., *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* [Step toe, 1986]; *The Rough-Face Girl* [Martin, 1998]; *Adelita* [dePaola, 2004]; *Yeh-Shen* [Louis, 1982]), representing a rich diversity of cultures and perspectives. When teaching fairy tales and folktales, teachers can select versions of *Cinderella* to show how writers begin with a premise and add their own cultural perspectives and details. When teaching writing in middle school, Jodene used selected vignettes from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) to teach students to write vignettes. Many of the sixth- and seventh-grade boys and girls who claimed to dislike reading and writing found copies of books such as Sharon Flake's *The Skin I'm In* (1998) and Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (1999) in order to read the entire texts on their own after hearing the first half of the books as read-alouds. We often think of narratives as models, but we can also use texts by great expository writers to see how the authors use voice and creative techniques (Duke, 2010).

Inspiring writing through a rich and diverse selection of literature can be one way to motivate students—even students who claim to dislike writing and do not see them-

selves as writers. Providing constructive, specific feedback and abundant opportunities to write will also increase the amount and improve the quality of the texts students produce. By combining reading and writing throughout the day or a class period, students will see the close connection between the two and how reading can both inspire and improve their ability to rewrite the world.

Connecting Themes of Literature to the Social World and Community Action

One strategy for engaging students via literature is to draw upon the themes and issues brought up in these texts to develop social action projects that students can undertake in their own neighborhoods and communities. Working within the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) tradition (Mirra et al., 2016), we regularly ask students how they would like to change the world. Great literature should encourage us to think and act differently, so we recommend that final projects push students out into the real world as much as possible.

For 12 years, Ernest directed a YPAR project out of UCLA, where students attending Los Angeles schools developed social action projects based on issues that mattered to them. Teachers would assign students multicultural literature to inspire discussion and reflection on their lives and the world around them. Subsequently, these teachers would take the students through a 10-step project that started with identifying a problem, developing a question, and collecting and analyzing data and culminated with data analysis, creating traditional and multimodal products, and ultimately taking social action. In one example, Ernest assigned students Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" poem and asked them to consider how the lost dreams of youth might inspire research and social action projects. Students chose to study the media and its impact on youth trajectories, curriculum offerings in K–12 schools, how economic downturns influenced opportunities in communities, and access to books and learning materials in communities, among other topics. Each group developed a research report, a video documentary, and a virtual presentation to share with community members, the local media, and local and state politicians including the mayor, the district superintendent, and several state senators. Ernest and his research team analyzed the student reports for evidence of academic and critical literacies and tracked student participants in the program to

see whether YPAR had any impact on their likelihood to take advanced courses, to graduate from high school, and to enroll in and persist through college (Mirra et al., 2016).

In another example of how literature inspires community action, a fourth-grade class in California read children's books depicting the civil rights movement as part of a larger unit on education and justice. These students then began to study the conditions in their own schools in comparison to schools in surrounding neighborhoods to see if education had changed very much in the 50 years since Marshall had fought against school segregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case. The students interviewed their peers and examined reports on school achievement. They also used the Internet to look up other schools in more affluent communities. Ultimately, the students shared their research report via a PowerPoint presentation and a Theatre of the Oppressed-style play that they wrote themselves to audiences of educators and preservice teachers. They also wrote letters to their local superintendent sharing the findings of their research and offering recommendations for how to promote equity in their school system.

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Conclusion

While we struggle to find ways to promote excellence and achievement in literacy for all of our students, we remain steadfast in our belief that all students want to learn and do well. We also believe that most students possess the intellectual capability to become powerful readers and writers in our classrooms. Tapping into students' background knowledge and experiences, connecting great multicultural literature to the everyday lives of students, and allowing students to use their experiences with literature to speak to issues

they care about will increase the confidence and the motivation that our students need to succeed in school. Even further, we believe that these approaches will foster a love of literature and of communication via the written word.

We agree with Patrick Shannon (2016) that the idea of reading for pleasure might be found in the past, as suggested by progressive educators such as John Dewey and Francis Parker, particularly with a learner-centered approach and a belief that "learning is natural, challenging and enjoyable and students are interested and interesting" (p. 39). We take up these ideas and suggest that offering students choice and a wide range of multicultural literature across all grades and content areas will help them to develop empathy, celebrate their own experiences and interests, and inspire them to write and read for authentic purposes. We have offered examples of how teachers have used literature across K–12 classrooms as the foundation for their writing units while building students' love of literature and often leading to social action. With the consistent increase and availability of high-quality multicultural literature and resources to assist with selecting literature, such as the Notable Books for a Global Society: Empathy, Caring and Understanding from Multiple Perspectives, which dates back to 2016 and provides annual lists of suggested books, we are optimistic that teachers can draw on our suggestions to foster a love of literature with their students while helping students to become more powerful readers and writers. •

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