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Call for Culturally Inclusive Texts in the English Classroom: Books as Mirrors and Windows

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I remember sitting in my English class during my junior year of high school and reading *The Great Gatsby, Jane Eyre,* and *The Scarlet Letter*. I was entranced by Daisy Buchanan's voice "full of money" and her decadent lifestyle. I admired Jane Eyre's independence and pursuit of true love based on equality and respect. I cheered as Hester Prynne unraveled her luxuriant hair and ripped off the scarlet "A" from her chest. An avid reader, I devoured these stories, stepping into the fictional worlds and rooting for the characters to overcome their obstacles. However, as much as I enjoyed these stories, it wasn't until my English teacher played the films in class and asked us to create book covers for the literature we read that I saw how all the characters we read about were caucasian and looked nothing like me. I wondered, *do these stories even apply to me*? I began to feel a sense of otherness as I could never see myself in the heroic protagonists or fully relate to them on a deeper level.

Since the last time I stepped out of an English classroom as a high school student to the first time I walked into my own classroom as a teacher, to the present, I can't help but notice the problem that still exists. Seeing my shelves lined with American classics such as *The Crucible, The Catcher in the Rye, A Raisin in the Sun, The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the anthology of short stories by Faulkner, Hemingway, and Crane, I am transported back to the past and reminded of the times I have felt invisible, my voice and story nonexistent. While "the canon" is safe and holds merit, they do not fully represent the stories of *all* my ethnic and culturally diverse students with their own "American" experiences. There has been ongoing controversy around "the canon," the lack of literary representation of marginalized communities, and the call to reevaluate the suitability of the texts that educators prescribe in the classroom; yet, significant progress has not been made. As educators, we must make it a goal to provide students with opportunities to read culturally inclusive books that serve as mirrors and windows or else we run the risk of perpetuating the issue of poor representation in the literature that we teach for more years to come.

The Issue: Lack of Cultural Representation in Books

The literary canon has long been revered in public education as representing the "'depth and breadth of our national common experience,' but the problem is that what was once defined as 'common'—middle class, white, cisgender people—is no longer the reality in our country" (Anderson 1). We live in a culturally pluralistic society; yet "millions of Americans—both White people and people of color—still don't come close to fully understanding people outside their mostly homogeneous immediate communities" (Guo and Vulchi 6), which can perpetuate anxieties, hostilities, prejudices and racist behaviors toward unfamiliar groups. The lack of cultural representation in books and "typecasting particular groups as dependent and helpless

victims who make limited contributions of significance" exacerbate the existing issue. "Literature should represent ethnically diverse individuals and groups in all strata of human accomplishment" (Gay 33), because the danger of a single story, in which the characters are homogeneous or typecasted, is that it "creates stereotypes that are untrue and incomplete… and it robs people of dignity" (Adichie).

In addition, the lack of culturally responsive texts contributes to marginalized children feeling a diminished sense of self-worth and invisible—their identities erased and voices irrelevant. For this reason, children need opportunities to read literature that serves as mirrors—helping readers reflect what they observe about themselves through relatable characters—and windows—offering views of new worlds, different realities and experiences. Bishop posits, "Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, as well as their connections to all other humans" (1). When books serve as mirrors and windows, they become more than just works of fiction; they become powerful tools in nurturing students' self-worth and empathy, deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, and enhancing cultural awareness.

Student Reflections: Books Serve as Mirrors and Windows

With support and initiative in my district for more diverse books within our curriculum and independent reading choices, my juniors were encouraged to choose books from a culturally inclusive book list that my colleagues and I collaborated on. After three weeks of independent reading, my students were asked to create a 4-5 minutes long podcast in which they recorded their thorough review on their multicultural book of choice. Using the Anchor application by Spotify, students combined audio, text, and visuals to respond to the following questions:

1. What is the main premise or plot of the book?
2. How did reading this make you feel?
3. Which characters did you like/dislike and why?
4. Does this book connect to your own life in any way?
5. What did this book make you think deeply about?

In addition to creating a podcast, my students also participated in one-on-one reading conferences and group reading circles. Overall, the discussions encouraged students to reflect, make personal connections, and share any insights, questions, or takeaway ideas they had about their reading with an audience.

My student, Dania (all student first names are used with permission), read David Yoon's *Frankly in Love*, a story about Frank Li, a high school senior stuck as a "Limbo," his term for Korean-American kids who find themselves caught between their parents' traditional expectations and their own Southern California upbringing. His parents pressure him to "date Korean," which proves complicated when Frank falls for Brit Means, his smart, beautiful, and Caucasian classmate. In her podcast, Dania explained that the novel focuses on Frank's "struggles with cultural identity, racism, family, and love" and is a "great coming-of-age story that demonstrates a teenager's perpetual conflict of embracing his Korean culture and parental demands or assimilating to feel more 'American.'" Giving her highest recommendation of the book, Dania shared that it teaches readers to "embrace both sides of one's culture" as shown when

Frank states, “I have one name. It’s Frank. I used to think I had two names; Frank, my ‘English’ name, and Sung-Mi, my ‘Korean’ name. But now, I’m calling Frank my first name and Sung-Mi my middle name” (Yoon 401). In our one-on-one reading conference, Dania concluded, “I really enjoyed *Frankly in Love*. As a Korean-American first-generation teenager myself, Frank’s struggle with his cultural identity, racism, and family pressure is something that resonated with me. This story gave me a sense of familiarity and relatability that I’ve never felt from a book.” In this case, *Frankly in Love* served as a mirror for Dania to celebrate her own Asian-American identity.

My student, Sarah, read Tahera Mafi’s *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, a contemporary novel about first love and the devastating impact of prejudice. The story follows Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl who is bullied for wearing a hijab, in post 9/11 America. In Sarah’s podcast, she explained how she both sympathizes and empathizes with Shirin, especially in the scene when Mr. Jordan tells Travis and Shirin to look at each other and asks Travis what he thinks of Shirin as part of the lesson. Travis hesitates, “When I look at [Shirin] I don’t see anything… I mean she doesn’t, like–I just don’t see her. It’s like she doesn’t exist for me. When I look at her I see nothing” (Mafi 81). Sarah claimed that even though Shirin is from California and is American, her entire existence is eradicated and students like Travis choose not to see her; Shirin is invisible when she is not a target of racist bullying. In addition, Sarah empathized:

> Shirin is perceived to be a strong, confident young woman but on the inside she is breaking down from these hurtful comments. In a way, I can relate to her because deep down, people’s opinions matter to me too. How could students bully her relentlessly without even getting to know her on a deeper level?

In our one-on-one reading conference, Sarah reflected, “Reading this book gave me perspective on Shirin’s experiences and made me realize that you never know what people are going through.” Ultimately, *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* served as a window for Sarah to learn about a Muslim-American’s experiences post 9/11 as she was able to “step into [Shirin’s] shoes” and look at the issues from the character’s point of view. Even though Sarah did not share identical experiences as those of Shirin, she related to the teenager’s desire to fit in high school and through this empathy and cultural knowledge, she “broke down stereotypes” she initially had.

Reading Conferences: **Students Make Text-to-Self Connections**

In our reading conferences, my students further shared their insightful reflections and takeaways from their book, which revealed that they made connections between the literature and their own lives. For instance, Ben read Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X*, a story about Xiomara, who discovers slam poetry as a way to understand her Dominican mother's strict Catholic expectations and her own relationship to the world. Ben enthused over how much he loved the protagonist’s voice and empathized with the character:

> Xiomara is an empowering character, and I love how she finds her own identity at the end of the book rather than follow her parents’ dreams for her. My parents also have high expectations for me and while I do appreciate their involvement, I want to follow my own path and spread my wings.

Correspondingly, Ashley read Angie Thomas’ *Concrete Rose*, a story about 17-year old Maverick who accepts the opportunity to make money through illegal acts to support his family. First, Ashley

commented on how much she enjoyed the author's writing style and that the book was accessible because "Thomas captured the slang that teens use in their everyday lives." Then she reflected:

> This story raises awareness on how racism goes deeper than being called a racial slur. *Concrete Rose* teaches you lessons on the disparity of wealth in America and how it directly affects people of color, especially Black teens. It addresses the importance of compassion, which I think we, as a society, need to be taught again.

Lastly, Ella also shared her insights on Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed's *Yes No Maybe So*, which follows Maya, who faces the harsh reality of growing up Muslim in a predominately white city, and Jamie, who struggles with anti-Semitism within his own home. Ella discussed, "Both characters are discriminated against just for being themselves, but they tackle the problems head-on and fight to fix the problems in their communities as activists." Overall, to Ben, Ashley, and Ella, their books served as both mirrors and windows; my students identified with the teenage characters who face parental and societal pressures and struggle to fit in, and they experienced the life of another person and their culture, which deepened their empathy and broke down any biases they may have initially had.

Small Group Discussion: Our Takeaway

My students' reflections in their podcasts and reading conferences revealed the advantages of allowing students to read books that serve as mirrors and windows. On the last day of our independent reading unit, I asked my students if they found these culturally inclusive books valuable. Benjamin claimed:

> Culture and race are part of one's identity. Reading my book helped me to see through Xiomara's eyes and walk in her shoes. If you find yourself only reading about people like you, you can't see what it's like for someone not in your situation. In order to form good relationships in our progressively globalized society, you need to step out of the group that you're only comfortable with.

Ashley agreed:

> These books representing diverse cultures are important in American classrooms. Not everyone's experience in America is the same as the characters who are White in the books we read in the classroom. It's important to address stereotypes and learn to deconstruct them.

Dania concluded, "The characters we read about are predominantly Caucasian. It sets the standards of what is normal. White is normal. It diminishes another's culture and American experience." As educators, we are responsible for ensuring that *all students* feel visible and a sense of belonging in the classroom. By giving students opportunities in class to read culturally inclusive books, both teachers and students can honor their own and others' cultures, gain authentic perspectives, deconstruct stereotypes and any prejudices, and learn from each other to promote equitable and culturally responsive experiences.

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