

Diversifying Your Classroom Library (and Teaching)

A Teacher's Guide for Change

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Diversifying Your Classroom Library

Making changes to your classroom library and teaching can be daunting. You want to make sure that you bring in new books and materials, and also use those materials to engage students in discussions around issues of social justice and diversity. Where do you start? And, once you bring new texts into your classroom, what do you do with them? The goal of this Teacher's Guide is to give you suggestions on how to choose new and diverse books for your classroom, where to find them, and how to incorporate them into your curriculum.

When you start to think about how to create diverse libraries and curriculum, ask yourself these three questions:

- **Do you have a classroom library that builds understanding of diverse cultures and experiences?**
- **Do you have diverse books that are not just about racism, prejudice, or immigration?**
- **Do you have as many books by authors and illustrators of color as you do by white authors?**

By asking these questions, you can start to examine your library more critically and make changes to better diversify your classroom.

WHERE TO START

The first place to start is to see what you already have in your classroom library. This works best by being in your classroom. (You can do this with your curriculum as well.) Look at your books and do the following:

1. ***Start with what you have:*** Pull out all the books that have characters with diverse ethnic backgrounds.
2. ***Eliminate white authors:*** Once you have the pile of books that have diverse characters, pull out the ones written by white authors.
3. ***Remove books that reinforce stereotypes:*** Do you have books left that reinforce stereotypes? If so, remove those from your pile as well.
4. ***Look at the publication dates:*** Pull out any books that are older than 5 years.

By doing these four quick steps, you can start to see what books you already have and where you might want to add to your collection.

From there, make sure that you have both mirror and window books. You want books where students can see themselves (mirrors) and books where students can see worlds and characters that are different than them (windows) (Fleming, Catapano, Thompson, and Carrillo 2016).

CHOOSING BOOKS

There are so many books out there, how do you decide which to choose? Where do you start? You can use some of the techniques you used in analyzing your library. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you choose books.

1. **What is the agency of the child?** Move away from the single narratives or images of young people. We want diverse positive characters where the children have the ability to make decisions and changes in the books.
2. **Who wrote the books?** Knowing the author and their experience and knowledge is important. Although there are many well-meaning white authors who write about black and brown children and teens, often they can reinforce stereotypes without meaning to. Look for authors that represent a wide array of ethnic, cultural, and gender diversity and bring those books into your classroom.
3. **When was the book published?** You want to choose recently published books to get books that are addressing contemporary issues and diverse families and social structures.
4. **How accurate is the narrative?** Make sure that you are choosing books that accurately represent history, culture, and settings. Choosing more recent publications is one way to address this issue.
5. **What is the dominant narrative of the book?** Make sure you are choosing books that have diverse characters and diverse families and children. Don't just choose books that deal with learning about other cultures, choose books where children are children.
6. **After reading the book, does it fit my guidelines for new books?** Don't just skim through a book to purchase. Read the book if it's a picture book. If it's a long book, pick a chapter and read it to make sure that addresses the guidelines you have created for bringing new books into your classroom.

Tough Questions to Ask Yourself

When choosing books, there are also some tough questions to keep in mind when you are looking for books.

1. Does the book perpetuate a stereotype?
2. Does it have a conflicting message?
3. Would it be inappropriate in light of what is happening in the world right now?
4. If there are illustrations, are they free of stereotypes or bias?

These questions can also be helpful when looking through what books to keep in your classroom library (or curriculum) and what to pull.



INCORPORATING BOOKS INTO YOUR CLASSROOM

It's not enough just to have diverse books and resources in your classroom. You also need to think about when and how you incorporate books.

Questions to ask yourself

1. Do you only read authors of color when it is Black History Month (or another ethnic month)?
2. Are you equally including voices of color with the white authors you read?
3. Are you talking about how the children are portrayed in books?

How to change your teaching and reading

1. **Move away from teaching diverse books only certain months of the year.** This is so important. Don't just read books by Black authors or about Black History during Black History Month.
2. **Think about how you diversely represent people.** If you were a student in your class, would you want the ONE book that has characters that look like you to be about slavery? Or internment camps? Or the Civil Rights Movement? These are important historical events, but historical events shouldn't be the only representation of students in their classrooms and libraries. Students should not only have to read books about things that teach lessons or are historical. They need to read books about having lives and adventures.
3. **Don't only choose to read books that deal with learning about another culture.** If the only books you use in your classroom teach students to learn about other cultures, then children aren't seeing all the ways that children have the same feelings, thoughts, and dreams no matter where they live, what language they speak, or what religion they practice.
4. **Discuss difference.** Engage students in discussing the differences among characters in different books around the same topics or themes.
5. **Stop being an expert.** Often, when we teach books over and over we become the expert. When we teach books from the perspective of white narrators, we are still the experts. When we move away from books with white authors, we start to learn with our students and can have richer discussions.
6. **Look for topics you can cover with the titles you have.** Move beyond just talking about cultural diversity. Can these titles also be around taking a stand, kindness, caring, etc.? Think about how you use a variety of books and authors for your class themes and topics.
7. **Label book boxes or bookshelves by themes.** By using themes that are not just diversity, you can make sure that you have diverse authors throughout the library. Don't just have all the books about Black and brown children in the same bin. Make sure they can exist throughout your library.
8. **Ask students for suggestions.** Students always have great suggestions. Find out what they're reading and what they want to read about.
9. **Make sure your books are contemporary.** Contemporary books talk about contemporary issues.
10. **Distinguish between realistic fiction and historical fiction.** Make sure students know which books are working to be historically accurate and make sure that they are.
11. **Start with one book.** You don't need to have dozens of books to start to diversify your library. Start with one book and keep asking for more. Use resources and suggestions to get more books for your library.
12. **Hang posters that represent diverse authors.** Let students know that they can be authors (and illustrators) as well. Let them see all the people writing books.

Discussion Starters for Using Critical Literacy to Examine Texts

from Alisha White, PhD

1. Consider the social contexts represented in the text such as values, interpersonal relationships, and social institutions.
2. Who has/wants power? Who makes decisions in relationships and social institutions? How do characters act in ways that establish or shift power dynamics in relationships and social institutions?
3. What symbols, signs, and rituals of power are used to establish or shift power dynamics in relationships and social institutions?
4. What social issues are represented in the text (social, economic, political, cultural, etc.)? How does the author use language to portray social issues? How do characters act in ways that contribute to or break stereotypes about the social issues represented?
5. Analyze the characters looking at which characters are multidimensional or stereotypical. Who can speak and act? Who has agency? Who is silenced? Whose reality is represented? Whose reality is ignored?
6. What values are celebrated or denigrated? How does the author make moves in their writing present a positive or negative view of values held by the characters in the text? Look at how language is used to describe the characters' values and evaluate it for tone and point of view.
7. How does the text portray literacy and the importance of using literacy to empower marginalized groups?
8. Examine the role language plays and how the text positions the reader to take on a particular stance.
9. Research and consider details about the author's life and publishing career. What experiences have they had to make this an authentic or #ownvoices text? How do they identify themselves on book covers, press releases, websites, and social media? What have they said in interviews and articles about how their experiences influenced the writing of the text?
10. What is the author's social stance toward the text's subject? Assent: (reinforce), Advocacy: (support), or Attack: (denounce)
11. How can students take action and promote social justice in their local communities? How can students use reflection to examine social issues in their local communities? How can students use their voices to alter power relationships?

One Last Reminder

Even if you're not in a diverse area, it's important for children to see positive images of people who look different than they do. The more children and young adults read books by people and about people who look different than they do but have the same worries, concerns, dreams, joys, and interests, the more empathetic they become. They start to accept those differences. Books can change the way we see and interact in the world.

SOURCES FOR FINDING BOOKS

Websites

Lee and Low: The Open Book Blog (<https://blog.leeandlow.com/>)

We Need Diverse Books (<http://weneeddiversebooks.org>)

Diverse Book List (<https://tinyurl.com/yarlpbe4>)

Book Awards

[Coretta Scott King Book Award](#)

[Pura Belpré Award](#)

[Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature](#)

[American Indian Youth Literature Award](#)