

FIRST PERSON

# Literacy, literature, and diversity

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We see ourselves as teacher educators committed to helping future teachers merge literacy, literature, and diversity in their efforts to encourage students to become lifelong readers. We owe our pedagogical stance to teachers who shared multicultural literature with us during our formative years. We often wonder why—despite the research that suggests the importance of culturally relevant texts for students of color—the idea of multicultural literacy continues to be contested and in some cases ignored.

In our opinion, children's literature textbooks that are more commonly used in teacher education courses in the United States continue to pay scant attention to multicultural literature (Cullinan & Galda, 2002). Many local U.S. libraries and bookstores devote shelves to the Newbery and Caldecott winners but rarely display Coretta Scott King or Pura Belpre award winners. Book clubs such as Scholastic or Children's Book of the Month, which reach large numbers of teachers, parents, and young people, infrequently feature books about parallel cultures. Perhaps this makes it easier for multicultural literature to be overlooked and appear unimportant.

Why is it that some educators embrace multicultural literacy while others do not? As teachers

of color teaching preservice and inservice teachers who are often reluctant to teach multicultural literature for various reasons (e.g., fear of difficult topics such as racism; little, if any, use of such literature in their districts; or fear of parents' responses), we decided to look reflectively at our personal experiences to see what made it important for us to teach literature from a multicultural standpoint. We hoped that taking this journey would help us trace the steps we took toward realizing the impact multicultural literature had on us during adolescence. By doing this, we hoped we might help others see the urgency in using this type of literature in their classrooms.

As we began to reflect on our own literacy development, we found that our love of literacy and multicultural literature stemmed from our interactions with former teachers who made a difference in our lives. As a result, we began to see that our commitment to teaching multicultural literature probably began to take form when we were students. As novice teacher educators passionate about literacy and literature, we hope that, by sharing what reading multicultural literature meant to us as students (and more recently educators), we will contribute to discussions concerning the importance of culturally relevant

texts in the lives of people of color. In our stories, we discuss how former teachers influenced us and helped shape our pedagogies, as well as our love for literature and literacy.

## KaaVonia: Reading for my life

Lerone Bennett, Jr., in his controversial book *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (2000), indicated that as a child he read for his life. Reading this statement in the first line of the preface of the book caused me to contemplate my own experiences as a young reader and student in the public school system in a rural North Carolina town. Like Bennett, I too read for my life and, as a result, chose to make a lifelong commitment to save not only my life but also the lives I hoped to one day influence as an educator. From the very beginning I was a voracious reader, but it was not until I reached the eighth grade that I learned the lifesaving power of literature and the teacher who teaches it.

When my eighth-grade teacher, new to the profession and to our district, shared Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) with the class and added several pieces of black literature to the classroom library, it was a pivotal moment for me. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was not alone in the world. There were other black girls having experiences similar to mine, and some had grown up and written them down. I began to write mine down too with hopes of becoming a writer. No one in my family had ever gone to college, but after reading Maya Angelou's autobiographical series, I began making plans. Pursuing an education suddenly became relevant to me—no longer something set aside for girls in Judy Blume's books.

This one simple act—handing me a book written by and about blacks—changed my life. Seeing myself in the literature made an indelible impression on me. Reading the books my teacher made available to me helped me discover other books that would be equally important to my socialization. Through literature, particularly black

literature, I realized that regardless of my socioeconomic status, my race, or my gender, I have a place in this world and the potential to make a positive contribution to society. Because of my eighth-grade teacher, my love of literature, and my respect for its power, I decided to become an English teacher.

As an educator, my primary objective is to teach from a multicultural perspective. For me, this means encouraging transformation, critical thinking, and social change. I believe it is important to include literature in the classroom that is representative of a variety of cultural and ethnic groups. Bishop (1992) maintained that students who do not see their culture reflected in the literature they read may believe that they have no value and little or no importance in society and in school. As a result, students may become uninterested in school, and their grades may suffer (Spears-Bunton, 1990). According to Spears-Bunton, African American students may be reading at low levels because of what she called “a cultural mismatch” between the students and the books they read (p. 567). Likewise, Menchaca (2000) maintained that Hispanic children will do better in school if they are provided with a culturally relevant curriculum. Anaya (as cited in Margerison, 1995) echoed this sentiment when he claimed that “part of the cause for our alarming dropout statistics is this narrow, circumscribed curriculum in language and literature” (p. 259). Thus, multicultural literature can play an important part in saving the lives of students by validating their existence. In addition to having multicultural literature, I believe it is equally important that students learn to analyze literature critically; question themselves to find out what they believe about race, class, and gender differences; and read literature closely to discern the meanings given to difference in our society (Hade, 1997). I view helping students understand issues of identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) as a construct in the fight against social injustice. It is my goal to help students realize the importance of confronting and speaking out against social ills. Above all, I want my students to know that I am

teaching multicultural literature because I believe it will help us become, as Banks (1993) suggested, “knowledgeable, caring and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized nation and world” (p. 23). My eighth-grade teacher started me down this road, and my university teacher education program provided the tools I needed to confirm that it is a viable pedagogical stance.

## Theodorea: Lyrical movement in diversity

For most of my life I have been an avid reader and writer. Reading and writing have been my avenues of escape, my venues of relief, and the vehicles I use to express my emotions and ideas. I have taken refuge in my imagination through books. I’ve sought solace and understanding through prose and poetry created by my own hands. In essence, the written and spoken word has held much meaning for me.

For most of my life, I have also been a musician. I learned creativity through music. I’ve found empathy and compassion through the lyrics of songs, and I’ve felt power and empowerment in the compositions of rap. I discovered my (internal) rhythm, my musical flow in hip-hop, and my escape to worlds unknown through the melodies and harmonies of European classical music. The melodious sounds I have experienced have always given me a sense of peace.

Acquiring literacy did not come easily to me. In my early days of schooling, I struggled to read and write. I remember the process was a painful one because I longed to make sense of the symbols on the page and their meanings. My parents put forth their best efforts to assist me, but to no avail. Fortunately, one elementary school-teacher’s love for teaching and persistence paid off. She helped me find words and their meanings by linking them to the musical gifts and talents I possessed and expressed outside of the classroom. That experience left a permanent mark on me, an intangible handprint on my spirit that conveyed

the importance of teachers, particularly elementary schoolteachers, to students’ lives. It also helped me realize that teachers must engage in multiple and alternative pedagogical strategies in order to teach all children literacy skills. For one who advocates for and subscribes to a social-justice education, this realization also means teaching literature based on what children need as well as who they are. In other words, as research suggests, students of color benefit from a more culturally diverse curriculum rather than a culturally disparate one (Lee, 1993; Smith, 1995; Spears-Bunton, 1990).

I do not recall reading anything that featured African American authors or characters in elementary school. In fact, I don’t recall reading anything that featured anyone of color as an author or a main character until I reached fifth grade. My fifth-grade teacher introduced me to Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. During Black History Month, each student could select a poem from one of those two authors to read aloud to the class and then explain its meaning. I selected Langston Hughes’s “Mother to Son” (1994). Unfortunately, my schooling did not provide another opportunity to read such literature until college.

After fifth grade, literature in school emphasized standard American and classical readings. My classes included prose by Jane Austen, Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, and F. Scott Fitzgerald and poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman. Although there were opportunities to draw parallels between the characters presented in the stories or the situations presented in the poetry and our lives as students, there were few, if any, opportunities to connect issues of diversity or social justice to these works in the classroom setting.

It is often said that teachers teach the way they are taught (Ridgeway, 2004). If that is true, then the schooling experiences of future teachers are, indeed, important. The teacher education experience is critical in the development of ideas as well as practices. In the teacher education courses I

teach, I use what I call “alternative literature”: song lyrics and spoken word poetry. Both exist as a body of written works of a language or culture. However, they are rarely viewed as works that speak to or inform readers or listeners about cultural diversity. I use literature in this way because I believe that I must not only “provide a vision of teacher preparation for diversity grounded in principles of social justice” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. viii), but I must also “prepare teachers to find pathways that help all of their students learn in much more powerful ways and to create community among cultures where there is now dissension” (p. ix).

## Not alone

Because we include multicultural literature in our classes, we have had students from various cultures (African American, Cambodian, Chinese, and Indian) share similar sentiments with us. One student from China expressed a feeling of pride when Chinese and other Asian American literature was discussed, and another student from Cambodia spoke extensively about feeling valued after reading and discussing An Na’s *A Step From Heaven* (2001). The student explained that even though *A Step From Heaven* is a Korean immigrant story, it was the first time she had been assigned a book about an Asian American experience since she had come to the United States. She went on to describe how she felt when discussing with her classmates the personal experiences she shared with Young Ju, the protagonist in the story. Another telling observation we have made involves white students. Nearly every semester we try to include a variety of voices in our classrooms, and without fail someone in our predominantly white classrooms will complain that the multicultural literature on the reading list is “overkill.” Among other things, we often conclude that students who feel this way are like us—they enjoy reading books that connect to their own experiences. We use an overkill reaction as a teachable moment, and we challenge the future teachers in our classrooms to consider how their own students might react to a curriculum filled

with literature that is removed from their cultural experiences.

## Final reflections

Our own experiences as students of color were in settings where issues of importance, such as race, class, and gender injustice, were seldom taken up. Knowing what was lacking in our formal education encouraged us to consider how we might help teachers incorporate the type of instruction we believe was important to our literacy development.

Our purpose in sharing our stories has been to provide additional testimonies to support the significance of multicultural literature in literacy classrooms. Applebee’s (1993) study of the English curriculum in public schools revealed that few texts by and about people of color and women were taught in English language arts classrooms. Applebee’s findings suggested that teachers might not be meeting the literacy needs of students of parallel cultures. A recent inquiry project assigned to nearly 40 teacher candidates in KaaVonia’s young adult literature classroom further prompted us to share our stories. The teacher candidates were asked to interview an English language arts teacher to find out the titles and authors of texts the teacher had or planned to teach during the academic year. The results were surprising in that they seemed to mirror those found by Applebee over 10 years ago. Although we realize these findings are derived from a classroom assignment rather than a formal research study, we (and KaaVonia’s students) believe they should not be ignored. We hope this was an isolated finding, and we want to believe that today’s students have a number of teachers across their educational experiences who—as important teachers in our own lives did—share literature that empowers them.

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