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# Building Bridges: Culturally Relevant Teaching with Literature Circles and Multicultural Literature

by Amber Lawson

Although public schools in the United States are more racially and culturally diverse than ever before, with more than 53% students of color (National Center of Statistics, 2021), typical curriculum tends to uphold colonial views (Au, Calderón, & Banks, 2016; Dumas, 2014). This mismatch between racially and culturally diverse students and typical curriculum and instruction illustrates the dire need for culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2012). Culturally relevant teaching empowers students by including their cultures and experiences throughout their schooling (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1995) found students of color advanced their academic success and built their cultural competence when they were able to bring their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti & Gonzalez, 1992) into the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy also allows students to develop a critical consciousness to challenge the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy holds that students' education should be inserted into students' culture as opposed to culture being inserted into education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally relevant teaching is important because when students of color do not see themselves in the classroom, there is a disconnect between the value they place on their learning, how they view themselves in society, and their overall experience with education. This disconnect prevents students of color from receiving an equitable education. In this article, I suggest that teachers can create culturally relevant learning experiences by creating a diverse classroom library, using culturally diverse literature for their read-alouds, and adding literature circles as a routine for literacy instruction. Literature circles around culturally diverse books offer students opportunities to discuss texts and expand their meaning-making and comprehension



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skills. In the last section of the article, I share a sample unit, "Building Bridges," from my first-grade class, which allowed my culturally diverse students to make connections to their lived experiences and historical events in the United States while developing foundational literacy skills.

## **Creating a Diverse Classroom Library**

Many students from culturally diverse backgrounds develop literacy skills using children's books centered around White, middle-class, American norms that either omit them or rarely mention their lived experiences. Students of color need access to "mirrors." "Mirrors" allow readers to see their reflections in texts (Bishop, 1990). Children's literature can affirm multiple aspects of students' identities and expose them to others' values, beliefs, histories, and experiences (McNair, 2016).

When teachers include diverse books in their libraries, they support their learners' literacy development in powerful ways. They engage learners personally by making the content meaningful and create an inclusive learning environment (Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Carter, 2007). Studies have shown that when culturally diverse students make personal connections with culturally diverse characters or themes in stories, they increase

their meaning-making of the texts and enhance their literacy development (Bennett, Gardner, Cartledge, Ramnath, & Council, 2017; Cartledge, Keesey, Bennett, Ramnath, & Council, 2015; Cartledge, Bennett, Gallant, Ramnath, & Keesey, 2015; Fain, 2008; McNair, 2011; Pilonieta & Hancock, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2009). Research has also suggested that culturally diverse literature allows children to include their cultural and experiential knowledge and promote students' thinking in ways that are essential for reading comprehension (Clark & Fleming, 2019).

At the same time, literature can transform how students perceive human experiences. When it enables students to see their lives and experiences as part of the broader human existence, reading becomes a means of self-affirmation. Classrooms should be places where all students can see themselves in books while developing literacy skills, especially considering reading is essential for school success (Cartledge et al., 2015).

While building a diverse classroom library contributes to equity (Harris, 2012), creating one can be challenging. It is helpful to start by understanding your students' demographics and experiences. In addition to cultural diversity, students come to school with diverse languages and social experiences (Pilonieta & Hancock, 2012). While it is often easy for teachers to limit diversity to race and ethnicity, other differences should be equally embraced. Teachers should go further and include a range of social classes, disabilities, social experiences, and genres (McNair, 2016).

Also, it is important to seek out books that represent diverse topics and characters *positively*. It can be helpful to consider the authors and their perspectives (diversebooks.org, 2021). Authors who write from their own identities and experiences are often better able to represent those identities and topics positively and without stereotypes. It is important to select authors and books that respect the experiences of the diverse groups they are writing about without exploiting those cultures. For example, when looking for a book about a low-income community, look for stories that find the joys within low-income communities, rather than ones that focus

only on what low-income communities lack compared to middle and upper-class neighborhoods (McNair, 2016).

Some organizations and individuals help make the process easier for teachers by compiling lists for educators and communities of color to access culturally diverse children's literature. (See Table 1)

It is not enough for teachers to place the books in the classroom library; they must read the books and share their enthusiasm with students (McNair, 2016). Teachers should incorporate diverse books into their read-alouds and integrate the books into lessons across content areas. Of course, bringing diverse books into the classroom may mean raising some important and complex issues. While some educators feel they must protect children from adult issues or fear that adult issues can corrupt children's innocence (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998), that is not the case for all children. Researchers have found that primary-grade students are more than capable of discussing issues of oppression, access, and diversity, and can become advocates for social justice while advancing their literacy development using culturally diverse literature (Pilonieta & Hancock, 2012; Fain, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009).

### **Literature Circles as Culturally Relevant Practice**

Not only should teachers be conscious of the selection of books they put in their classrooms, but they should also be mindful of the practices they implement as well. One pedagogical practice that allows students to include their funds of knowledge in the classroom is discussion. Literature circles (Daniels, 1994), instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1993), dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999), book clubs (Raphael, Pardo, Highfield, & McMahan, 1997), grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), and dialoguing to learn (Barnes, 1993) are small-group literature discussions that allow students to share and listen to multiple ideas to continually shape and reshape the meaning of texts (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt & Miller, 2010) during or after reading. Some teachers may implement this practice in small groups, while others may occasionally hold meaningful

Table 1

*Resources to Find Culturally Diverse Children's Books*

Resource	Type of Resource	Description of Resource
We Need Diverse Books	Non-profit organization	We Need Diverse Books is a non-profit organization that advocates for the publishing industry to publish and promote literature that includes all communities. Consider visiting their website at <a href="http://diversebooks.org">diversebooks.org</a> or <a href="https://twitter.com/Weneeddiversebooks">#Weneeddiversebooks</a> .
#WeNeedMirrorsAndWindows: Diverse Classroom Libraries for K-6 Students (McNair, 2016)	The Reading Teacher Vol. 70 No. 3 pp. 375 - 381	In Dr. Jonda McNair's article, she recommends several culturally diverse children's books. Consider starting an Amazon wishlist of the titles that may interest your students the most and begin adding the books into your classroom.
Book Awards (McNair, 2016)	Coretta Scott King Award Pura Belpre Award Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature American Indian Youth Literature Award	These awards were created to honor diverse authors' work. Visit the websites of the various book awards for the winners and nominated books. Consider starting an Amazon wishlist of the titles that may interest your students the most and begin adding the books into your classroom.
Professional Development and Scholarly Articles	In-person or virtual  Academic and Leisure Reading	Whenever you come across children's book titles, consider adding the title to your Amazon wishlist. You may consider purchasing the book later. You may also consider checking out the book from your local library.
YouTube	Online resource	While buying new books can become expensive, teachers may have virtual "guest readers" join the class and read books listed within the resources above. This is a virtual resource to include culturally diverse books in the classroom. Students can listen to the read-alouds while watching videos of culturally diverse books.

conversations in whole group during instruction. Some teachers may include a combination of the two. These dialogic discussion styles support young learners' literacy development (Certo, 2010; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Fain, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009).

Of course, literature circles are not necessarily inherently culturally relevant; they have the potential to be culturally relevant if teachers organize them around culturally relevant texts for students to discuss, if students can discuss the texts using their home languages and dialects, and if teachers differentiate for students of various abilities (McIntyre, Hulan, & Layne, 2010). Literature circles are culturally relevant if teachers keep their students at the center of their classroom, to maintain a rigorous curriculum and hold high expectations for their students and engage learners in high-level thinking (McIntyre et al., 2010).

For culturally diverse students, research has found that combining culturally relevant texts with literature circles benefits students' academic growth (Clark & Fleming, 2019; Fain, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009). Fain (2008) found that first- and second-grade students were able to examine oppression from multiple perspectives, including their own lived experiences and others' while holding meaningful whole group discussions about culturally diverse read-alouds. Moreover, Souto-Manning (2009) found that her culturally diverse students recognized linguistic differences and formed analogies to explain their reasoning by engaging them in meaningful whole group discussions about multiple versions of the same story. Additionally, many teachers shared that discussing culturally diverse texts provided their students with critical opportunities to make personal connections to an experience by using their schema (Clark & Fleming, 2019). Educators also found that students could make significant connections by combining culturally diverse texts within small group literature circles that facilitated comprehension by pairing them together (Clark & Fleming, 2019).

Not only have researchers and teachers found small group literature circles beneficial, but so have elementary students. Students in first-grade, third-grade, and

fifth-grade who participated in small group literature circles during a school year shared pure joy and enthusiasm for the activity (Certo et al., 2010). One third-grader stated, "I learned how to talk about a book in a group, and I never got to do that before. Only in gym and lunch do we get to talk this much!" (Certo et al., 2010, p. 243). Students referred to the activity as fun, they enjoyed talking to each other while learning, and it was the best part of language arts. Students' engagement in literature circles also fostered an interest in books so much that many children began reading other books on their own for enjoyment. A first-grader shared, "I want to read more. I want to read a chapter book like in literature circles" (Certo et al., 2010, p. 251).

The transition to including small group literature discussions such as literature circles may be challenging for some teachers. Teachers may initially consider assigning students roles, especially for young learners. In small groups, each person in the group may have a specific task to complete by the end of the discussion. In a whole group setting, it may be helpful to give multiple students the same role to collaborate and work on the same task. By assigning roles, students are accountable, and this keeps students engaged until children understand how to participate in literature circles more independently. Teachers may begin the routine by giving examples of roles (Noe & Johnson, 1999) and then allowing students to contribute to the kind of roles they should use in their discussions. (See Table 2)

Teachers may rotate roles for students to understand all the roles and responsibilities of members in literature circles for meaningful and engaging small group and whole group discussions. Teachers should provide students with choices in the literature they will discuss as well. This will allow students to select books that include characters and cultural themes with which they can identify. Researchers found culturally diverse students pick books that are relatable (Cartledge et al., 2015). By implementing literature circles as culturally relevant pedagogy, you can attend to classroom discourse in numerous ways by providing students with sufficient wait time, providing students with opportunities to take on different roles within literature circles,

Table 2

*Examples of Student Roles in Literature Circles (Daniels, 1994)*

Role	Description of Role
Summarizer	The student prepares a summary of the reading at the beginning of the discussion.
Discussion Director	The student prepares questions about the texts for students to discuss.
Connector	The student connects ideas from the text to real-world experiences.
Illustrator	The student creates visuals to represent the visuals the students made while reading or listening to the text for meaning-making.
Travel Tracer	The student notes or draws the different settings throughout the text.
Vocabulary Enricher	The student writes and defines new words that stand out in the text.
Literary Luminary	The student finds interesting sections in the text for the group to discuss.
Create Their Own	The student creates additional roles while discussing the text in groups.

allowing students to ask different types of questions, and scaffolding instruction for each student (McIntyre et al., 2010). Teachers can provide explicit instruction tailored to individual students to ensure that each learner reaches their fullest potential while engaging in dialogue discussions (McIntyre et al., 2010). It is important to model and explain what students are expected to do until young learners feel comfortable and can run literature circles independently and successfully (McIntyre et al., 2010). Teachers may begin implementing this practice once a month and increase implementation to biweekly, weekly, to two or three times a week or as frequently as teachers believe the routine will support their students' literacy development.

### **A Culturally Relevant Unit with Literature Circles**

As a Black elementary educator, one of my favorite units to teach my first-grade students every year was our Ruby Bridges unit, which I titled "Building Bridges." The unit incorporated diverse books and literature circles to support my culturally diverse

students' academic success. In this unit, we focused on the first young civil rights activist who desegregated an all-White elementary school at the age of six. It was an opportunity to talk about the history of segregation, the beginning of racial integration in the United States at the elementary level, the bravery of a six-year-old African American girl, and our classroom culture, all while advancing my students' literacy development. I taught in southwest Detroit, Michigan at an elementary school in the Detroit Public Schools Community District. Students in my classroom identified as being from many backgrounds, including Arabic, Black, Latinx, and White. It was a unit that invited our diverse histories and lived experiences into our classroom in engaging and meaningful ways using various literacy skills.

Our unit started with one of our usual routines. I began by inviting students to the carpet to collaborate on a task, making sure all students' voices were heard. We created a list of all the characteristics that made us unique with elbow buddies, a friend sitting to the left or the right, before developing a class list. After,

students used a range of materials to create a self-portrait to represent the identities and characteristics they believed made them unique. Portraits included their identity markers, native languages, and interests as students were able to reference the list we created as a class. Students used a combination of images and words to identify their characteristics and shared their portraits with the class.

Next, we discussed how years ago, people in power separated individuals by some of those differences. We learned that if incredibly courageous individuals had not worked very hard for people to not be judged by those differences, we would not be able to come together to be a part of the same learning community we called our class. After engaging in a powerful discussion, we read children's books about Ruby Bridges, including *Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story* (Bridges, 2009) and the Scholastic News My Weekly Reader, *Brave Ruby* (Scholastic, 2018). Both texts provided many students with mirrors, while also addressing first-grade Common Core State Standards in literacy which integrated social studies content. I aimed to deepen student's meaning-making of the texts by inviting them to make personal connections by applying their real-life experiences as part of a diverse classroom community to historical events that desegregated elementary classrooms. While engaging with the texts, students participated in whole group discussions and literature circles. Through their observations and conversations, it was evident to me that students were thinking critically about the past and present.

Then we watched a video clip of Ruby's visit to the White House with President Barack Obama. He showed her the famous painting of her walking into the elementary school with federal marshals hanging outside the Oval Office, and I read excerpts from an online news article (The White House President Barack Obama, 2011). We concluded the unit using the writing process to write individual letters to Mrs. Bridges expressing our admiration of her bravery at six-years-old and addressing remaining inquiries students had of her experiences.

This was a special unit for me for a few reasons. Throughout the lessons, my students were actively engaged in discussions, literature circles, read-alouds, and the writing process to compose and finalize their letters. Students were listening, speaking, writing, and reading, although their attention was not on the literacy skills themselves. Their attention was on the meaning-making of the content of the unit. Simultaneously, students were connecting historical events to our current learning community. They were able to make real-life connections to what they were learning in school. They demonstrated cultural competence by reflecting on their experiences as members of a culturally diverse classroom community in the present as it related to historical events. Students could share their ideas in writing and during discussions using their home languages while learning about a culturally familiar topic. This is one way students can have access to culturally and linguistically relevant educational experiences.

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