Reviews and Questions for a Multicultural Classroom Library:
Empowering Your Students, Raising Reading Scores, and Having Fun Doing It!

Sonja Kay Olson

Alejandro's infectious energy made everybody smile. No matter how I arranged the seating chart, he would make friends with the student next to him and start cracking jokes. Alejandro loved school, not homework or his GPA, but he loved his wrestling team, the girls, and the fact that if he wore a giant neck brace for an entire day, people would ask him questions and listen to every word he said. Unfortunately, Alejandro was only doing enough in my class to stay eligible for wrestling, and he needed to finish his independent book report before the end of the quarter. He wasn't the only reluctant reader I'd had since I started my first year at an urban school in 2007, and even though my bag of tricks had grown since I started teaching, I still didn't have a text that challenged him and held his attention. I tried to give him a book by a Mexican author about a famous soccer player, but since Alejandro didn't play soccer, and wanted to avoid overt displays of his Mexican citizenship at school (he didn't have a visa), he looked at the cover, then discarded it to flip through a magazine.

A multicultural classroom library has the potential to improve a student's literacy dramatically. I couldn't just let Alejandro slip by without reading. Not only did I believe (and still do believe) that reading is the gateway to the rest of education, my tenth grade class was preparing him for his MCA reading test in the spring. My classroom library should be the place for all my students to find books in which they find genuine connection, and therefore, a greater appreciation for reading. Alejandro couldn't just idly pass the time.

One Friday, I began with independent reading, pulled four books, and walked over to Alejandro to try (once again) to get him to read. "Listen to this one. You don't have to read it if you don't want to," I said, and I started reading *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena, a coming of age novel about a Mexican American boy in the California legal system.

> "I'll put it to you like this: I'm about ten times smarter than everyone in Juvi. For real. These guys are a bunch of straight-up dummies, man. Take this big black kid they put me in a cell with, Rondell, [. . .] three nights ago he stepped to me when I was writing in my journal.
> He said: 'Yo Mexico, wha'chu writin' 'bout in there?'"

Alejandro started listening when I read the part about feeling smarter than his peers, and by the time I had read a section of de la Pena's spot-on dialogue, Alejandro took the book, saying, "Okay, lemme see that."

Alejandro embraced this book. We would exchange a few words during passing time about how neither of us believed the narrator when he said that he was in Juvi for stealing a bike, or I would agree that it was pretty messed up that the narrator's grandpa wouldn't talk to his grandson. Alejandro's constant talking came in handy when he started selling reading to *other* kids, turning my day into a perfect 10 when I overheard him saying, "Dude, books are like little movies playing in your head!"

Alejandro's story embodies the best parts of a dynamic multicultural classroom library. He raised his reading level by more than one grade level at the end of my class. He saw a multi-faceted representation of his culture. He found success in a class where he had previously struggled. He had space for a positive conversation with his teacher about content. He even helped to make my classroom a place for students to discuss books with passion and excitement. It is incredibly challenging to find genuine ways for all students to enter a meaningful text and connect it with their lives, yet these high ideals of opening the world to our students are at the very core of our calling as English teachers.

We know that the movers and shakers of the world must be able to read, connect, and respond to texts. While the MCA Reading test indicates a student's proficiency on skills such as summarizing, comparing, and decoding vocabulary, in order for students to put these skills to work, they must have a personal drive for literacy. Colleges are looking for students who have high-level skills in connecting what they read with the problems and solutions that they see in the world around them (Burke).

Classroom libraries are the best tool for growing literacy. In his book *Readicide* as well as his other writings, Kelly Gallagher wants students to gain real-world skills without killing the love of

reading. A culture of reading is one that surrounds students with texts, a culture that finds books with which students connect (Warren-Gross). Warren-Gross's goal of a reading culture is in tandem with Danalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer*. Miller advocates matching kids with books that they are personally motivated to read, and while it takes longer to find the right book, students don't usually need to be reminded to read. Miller's work lines up exactly with my classroom experience; during reading time, I can recommend a stack of books to a student, and he or she may reject them within minutes. While still in my classroom, I can immediately recommend another round of books for this student. This instant response forces me to listen to my students, know their strenghts, their weaknesses, and especially their interests, so that I can do my best to recommend a book to them. While listening closely to students, one consideration is their racial and cultural self.

The rhetoric of respect that all teachers talk about in their classroom can be affirmed or voided by the materials provided. Authors of color need to be on our shelves (Meyer 23), even if they are harder to find (Endo 236), or non-traditional and outside the literary cannon (Lujan 18). Wayne Au, editor of *Rethinkging Multicultural Education* implores teachers to not provide diversity for diversity's sake, but to provide a multicultural classroom because it validates a major part of a student's identity: "Multicultural education should be grounded in the lives of students, not only because such a perspective provides a diversity of viewpoints, but also because it honors students' identities and experiences."

High school is often a time when students develop their racial identity (Tatum 97). Unlike a student's choice of music, or favorite sport, race cannot be altered at a moment's notice, and racial identity carries with it a long history that contains sterotypes, expectations, cultures, and privileges. Isolating race, instead of the hundreds of other things that make up a student's identity, allows the student to "authentically recognize the intersection of race and other aspects of human diversity and culture" (Singleton 88). I choose books and authors specificially on the racial make-up of the author or characters, not because it's the only important thing, but because race affects so many other aspects of human culture.

This vicarious exploration of race through characters and authors is a safer way to process race instead of becoming vulnerable. For example, while I sometimes find a frank conversation about race with my Asian American male students hard to come by, I have given *American Born Chinese* to similar students, and they often read it and respond to the themes of race and dominant American culture in a written book report, instead of a conversation that involves more people.

Students who read about cultures different from their own also benefit from a broad multicultural library (Boyd 481). Books from unfamiliar cultures give students a chance to see differences in a positive, relatable context. (Landt 691). Instead of potentially awkward or hurtful face-to-face conversations about differences, reading allows humans to experience a different culture with no risk of embarrassment. If a student isn't ready for a different culture, he or she can try a new book. Students who wonder about a culture can prepare a few intelligent questions through reading a few books. As McIntosh and Style first wrote, our curriculum is both a window and a mirror. A classroom library should reflect the lives of students back to them, while also showing them a world beyond their neighborhood.

Questions to Ask of Your Classroom Library:
These are some questions that I ask when I start shopping, along with my reviews of some books that my students love.

Who in my classroom is missing from my library?
I teach in St. Paul, and I have a lot of Hmong students in my classroom, but when I started, I had zero books with Hmong protagonists. If you have students who aren't represented on your shelves, add voices like theirs to the library! This is a great way to show them that they belong in your classroom (and academic spaces as a whole). If I'm not sure about a book, because I haven't read it or I don't know much about that culture, I'll ask my student to read the book for me and tell me what he or she thinks. Students have never turned down the chance to be experts on their own culture. Sometimes they don't finish the book, but it's never a negative experience for the student or me.

> *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*
> by Mai Neng Moua
> Moua both edits this anthology and contributes to it, doing both jobs well. The stories in the book range from the adrenaline-filled "Mrs. Pac Man Ruined My Gang Life" to the introspective "My Dad the Mekong and Me the Mississippi," to the funny "Hmoob Boy Meets Hmong Girl." I've had many students check it out of my library, but I've also pulled stories from it to compliment my curriculum.

Are the non-white characters in the books I'm choosing relegated to the role of a sidekick, or similarly, is there a white "savior figure"?

Empower ALL your students to be strong leaders, not sidekicks, in the field of their choice. While a blend of cultures is wonderful, far too often students of color are tokenized. A quick look at the back of the book or the illustrations can usually give you a clue. Instead of picking *The Blind Side*, a story that tells of a wealthy White family in Tennessee taking in a homeless black teen, choose *I Beat The Odds*, the same story written by Michael Oher, the teen who went from homelessness to the NFL, with lots of help along the way. Better yet, buy both books and let the football player in your third hour compare the two.

> *47* by Walter Mosley
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> This book is part fantasy, part historical fiction, it takes place in the South, pre-civil war, and is told from the perspective of a young African-American boy. While it's not for everybody, those who enjoy it appreciate how the themes of science fiction and slave revolts combine for a dynamic social commentary. The audio version is spot on.

Does the book that I'm considering perpetuate stereotypes?

Look for books that undermine stereotypes, not reinforce them. This can usually be solved by having several different types of stories. As I began to expand my collection, I worried that the stories in my library featuring African American males were all about life on the street. While they were often popular, I knew my selection needed to be broader. I asked a basketball coach for a list of books that my students would like--or at least a list of current stars, so I could buy their biographies. I found a story on positive peer pressure, instead of negative: *We Beat The Street*, a non-fiction story about a pact three young African American men make to become doctors.

> *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena
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> This fast-moving novel set in California shows de la Pena at his best. He lets you really get to know the intellegence and emotions of the main character, and you're over halfway through the novel before you find out what landed him in Juvi (unless you're good at foreshadowing). The dialogue is slangy and filled with swearing, using a journal format to let the narrator to be as emotional as he needs to be. Two secondary characters, Rondell and Mong, add a fuller picture of incarcerated teens.

Is this book written by someone with an intimate knowledge of the culture?

Good writing shows nuance, relies on details, and records authentic dialogue. These things are really, really hard to portray in a borrowed culture. Yes, it is harder to find multicultural books when I narrow my search to books written by members of that culture, but it's worth it, because the books are better. This derth of books published by minority authors is all the more reason we need to empower our multi-cultural students to read, write, and publish their work.

> *Game* by Walter Dean Myers
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> With age comes wisdom. Myers was born in 1937, and at times this book acts like a big brother passing along important stuff about life. So, if the cultural references aren't up-to-the-minute, forgive him and look instead at the subtlety, often about how race may or may not be affecting a situation, how family and dreams can make all the difference in this game of life. Myers writes a plot-driven novel, detailing the main character's basketball season. Myers doesn't rely on any romantic relationships, but deftly draws secondary characters in a little sister, an assistant coach, neighbors, and teammates.

Is the book I'm choosing historically accurate?

Reading should inform students, not mislead them. Check to see who's telling the story, or from whose perspective the book is told. A disenfranchised group may have a different narrative about a topic that is often discussed. Look for those stories. Try reading Louise Erdrich's story *Game of Silence* back to back with Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House In The Big Woods*, and look for the differences that two young girls see when they hear their fathers talking about life after 1850. As an Anishinabe writer, Erdrich is a wonderful author to look into when teachers are looking for materials that will match with the MN Common Core English standards that ask specificially for literature from Minnesota American Indian writers.

> *Down Garrapata Road* by Anne Estevis
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> This quick read about the Mexican immigrant families of Garrapata Road is small but sharp! Each section is about a different family, and then within those sections are several short stories. Some are funny, some just give you a snapshot of life, and at least one made my eyes well up.

Are the stories on my shelves relevant?
When looking for books that empower a specific cultural group, the first thing I usually find is non-fiction (Often a How We Came To America story) or historical fiction. I had two books, both by Korean authors with Korean narrators on my shelf. One was Linda Sue Park's book *A Single Shard,* a story about a 12th century Korean potter, the other was An Na's book *The Fold,* a story of a Korean American with a major crush and the possibility of plastic surgery. Guess which book is beat up and worn out because it's been passed around to so many backpacks? Well, it's not about 12th century pottery. Historical fiction is GREAT! Quality, contemporary fiction can be just as thought provoking and stimulating.

> *The Fold* by An Na The first page shows us the main character popping a pimple and wondering how to get her crush to sign her yearbook. The book ends with much bigger issues, such as coming out in a Christian community, plastic surgery to make eyes open wider, and the differences between first and second generation immigrants.

Will this book work for the ages of my students?
While it's important for books to be available in a broad range of reading levels, the content needs to interest the age level of your students. Even though *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis passed every other question on this list, my students didn't read it, because the main character was too young for them. Even the kids who were reading at a low enough level to be challenged by the book didn't pick it up. It's equally important to find challenging books for high-level readers, even if they're not interested in college-level themes.

> *Flight* by Sherman Alexie
> While the Lexile level is a managable 550, the themes of death, destruction, and disenfranchisement make this a book for a high school aged reader. The narrator's background could make readers feel sorry for him. Instead, Alexie weaves in Native American history and respected adults to show that the narrator is not someone to pity, but someone to listen to, learn from, and respect.

Does this story empower my students?
It's not enough to avoid being racist. Your classroom library at its best can break down barriers, raise up leaders, and give students not only the reading skills for their future, but the vision that it takes to achieve their greatest dreams. Genocide, war, slavery, marginalization, and other tough truths should be balanced by biographies of great inventors and athletes, love stories, graphic novels, and other texts that show life being lived well.

> *My Life as a Rhombus* by Varian Johnson
> This protagonist likes math, and she's really good at it. In fact, she tutors other kids. Rhonda has some past choices that still haunt her; high schoolers will quickly recognize the choices of alcohol, sexuality, and responsibility. Math and academic language pepper this story of an African American female. Maturing relationships are demonstrated on several levels: parents, friends, and romantic relationships.

Should I take any books off my shelves?
If you want your classroom library to be THE place where kids can find terrific books, cut out the deadwood. I finally took out my yellowed copies of *Julie and the Wolves* and *Walk Two Moons*. I wanted to hold on to them--they were classics, stories that had strong Native American characters, and were easy enough for a struggling reader to get through. But after another semester of students passed the books by, I realized I needed to save my shelf-space for the best books.

If you're ready to make your classroom library realize its potential, start browsing in your favorite bookstore! Get help financially if you can. Print some research and ask your principal first, with today's tight budgets, try writing a grant or using a website like Donors Choose. I've even asked the alumni club for money. If you use personal money, remember to save your receipts, because the money is tax deductible, up to $250 per year. Ask your librarian if he or she has any resources like book reviews, access to cheaper books, or barcoding technology. Sites like the English Companion Ning or like listmania on Amazon are great places to get ideas. I've found my local bookstore often strikes the best balance of being prompt, cheap, and helpful.

It's hard to get a good classroom library, and harder still to keep it up, but I contend that it is worth every dollar spent, every minute used for organizing, every meeting to fit independent reading into the curriculum. I have personally found this experience very rewarding. It teaches me about my students, and opens unexpected conversations with them. It lets me spend time browsing in bookstores, and libraries, or my colleague's shelves. It works for the students too! I've had many students say that independent reading is their favorite part of the class.

Alejandro's reading level jumped way up in my class, and he passed the state reading test in the spring. Happy reading!

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