

# Teaching with Diverse and Global Literature

By Jennie McDonald | Categories: Diverse Literature

## A Conversation with Jane Bean-Folkes

I recently sat down with Jane Bean-Folkes to talk about her experiences as a researcher/ practitioner working on literacy issues. She is an assistant professor of literacy in the Education Department at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY. Professor Bean-Folkes participated in a Collaborative Classroom-sponsored panel discussion at the ILA 2018 Conference in Austin this year.



*Tell us about your current role within the world of education as a researcher and a teacher of teachers at Marist College, and your work in elementary school classrooms.*

One of my recent projects entailed working with teachers and students on the challenges of reading diverse and global literature in elementary classrooms. I believe strongly in preparing teacher candidates to teach in diverse settings by actually holding my classes and teaching my teacher candidates in diverse school settings for their course work. One course I enjoy teaching immensely is a content area literacy course that focuses on nonfiction reading and writing. Why? This course is taught in a diverse school setting where the population is low income and over 50 percent of the school consists of students of color. As a result, I spend several days a week teaching my teacher candidates about literacy and working directly with students and teachers to become stronger readers and writers in schools.

Over the past year, I have also had the privilege of working with students and teachers in second- through fifth-grade classrooms exploring the use of diverse and global literature in order to better understand how classroom teachers use the literature and its impact on students. The term *diverse literature* refers to multicultural books published in the United States. Global literature are books published outside the U.S. and written or translated into English. My research on this topic infused diverse and global books into classroom collections so deeply that they become a natural and familiar part of the bookshelves; and it fostered a joy of reading in

children who currently find a narrow spectrum of people and places in the pages of the books they (sometimes reluctantly) read.

During a biography unit at the end of the year, one of the teachers shared, “Without these books in our collection, I doubt I’d see a white girl writing about a black civil rights hero or black boy embracing an Asian athlete hero. Having a variety of biographies, they [the students] have really come to know these individuals at a level I have not experienced in the past.” This was so striking to the teacher because at the end of the unit the students dressed up and made a presentation as their person to the school community. Research shows that there are numerous benefits from exposing children to multicultural and global literature, and include a deeper insight into and understanding of how people live, feel, and think around the world, strong emotional connections, and lifelong empathy.<sup>[1] [2] [3]</sup>

*Could you share your thoughts on the current research into the link between building literacy and the use of diverse books in the classroom?*

The notion of diverse and global literature is rooted in the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy originally theorized by Gloria Ladson-Billings in her pivotal work, *Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*. Ladson-Billings talks about the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy as:

... premised on three things. One, a laser-like focus on student learning. Two, an attempt to develop in all students cultural competence. What I mean by that is you help kids understand assets that are part of their own culture, while simultaneously helping them become fluent in at least one more culture. So it would mean youngsters of color have to learn the mainstream culture, but at the same moment youngsters in the mainstream need to learn some other cultures. Youngsters of color also need to value the culture they have. And the third piece is what I call socio-political consciousness. Kids say, “Why do we have to learn this?” And what I’m saying is a culturally relevant teacher has thought about this and has answers for why a subject or topic is important.<sup>[4]</sup>

Research into the *sociocultural relevancy* of literacy instruction has shown that students need to see themselves in texts!<sup>[5]</sup> The access and the availability of diverse books impacts student achievement, which leads to a more engaged and improved literacy.<sup>[6] [7]</sup> In addition, students’ *exposure to global societies* supports expanded empathy, compassion and knowledge of others living outside the U.S.<sup>[8] [9] [10] [11] [12]</sup>

In S.F. Said’s 2015 article, titled “Can Children’s Books Help Build a Better World?” he said: “The idea of ‘us and them’ lies at the root of many problems in the world. When a group of people see themselves as ‘us’, and reject everyone else as ‘them,’ prejudice, exclusion and violence often follow.” As educators, we need to help students develop self-awareness and grow in the area of intercultural understanding. Teachers have the power to enhance student achievement by acquiring knowledge of their students’ cultural backgrounds and translating that knowledge into effective instructional practice. So, teachers should inquire into students’ cultural backgrounds and investigate the languages spoken in the classroom. Encourage all students to embrace their incredible strengths and assets.

*Tell us about your experiences at the ILA 2018 Conference and the highlights of the “Classroom Libraries as Mirrors and Windows” panel discussion.*

Collaborative Classroom brought together a group of literacy educators and researchers to ponder the impact diverse and global literature has on students in the classrooms. The panelists discussed their experiences in schools with students grades K–12, explored teacher concerns about their ability to find and select diverse and global texts for classroom libraries and curricula, and shared ideas about how to create a more equitable and inclusive classroom. I was happy to participate in a conversation on this hot topic among literature fanatics and educators like myself.

The energy in the room among the panelists and the participants peaked for me when it came time to look closely at piles of texts. The conversation between the panelists and the participants touched upon issues like the validity of illustrations, or the authenticity of the author with regards to book selections and equity—it is important to be sensitive to authenticity by investigating whether the books

about people of color are written by people of color. Teachers want more diverse books in their classrooms. However, we must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of believing a book is representative simply because it has an image of a person of color on the cover. We need to be alert to this type of shallow representation that lacks true substance about the diversity of people and place.

The notion of windows and mirrors that framed the ILA session and the panelists' conversation comes from the work of Rudine Sims Bishop. In 1990 Sims Bishop wrote:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.<sup>[13]</sup>

In her work Sims Bishop drove home the fact that books are the windows into other cultures and the mirrors in which to see people with whom they can identify via various identity markers, such as race, socioeconomic class, gender, and language. That's the beauty of literature. It allows students to see themselves in their own culture. In addition, it allows students to see positive and authentic representations of people who may not look like or talk like them. So be careful when gathering books even though a student of color might be on the cover because it may be more window dressing than a true window into a culture. This gets to the point of why we need texts written by diverse authors with authentic storylines for students to understand how people live, feel, and think around the world, with strong emotional connections in order to develop lifelong empathy for others.

#### *What did you learn from the panelists? From the attendees?*

This "windows and mirrors" concept was a big takeaway from our conversation. As participants looked over collections of texts in small groups, it became evident that it is not enough for students to see themselves on the cover or as part of an illustration. It is far more important that students see themselves as the main character in the text. An illustration or two is not the same as having a story from the lives of students within their lived context. In addition, books need to be believable within the cultural context of the students' lives.

The link to mirroring cultural beliefs allows students to identify with the texts and encourages them to read which leads to increased literacy. Too often, teachers find it challenging to engage students in literature because some students do not see themselves in the classroom literature and thus they feel the text is not relevant, and that limits engagement. This is an issue of equity. Engagement is rooted in the ability to make connections to the texts. The connections lead to increased desire to want to know, which leads to academic success.

#### *How will what you learned at the conference inform your work in education?*

The conference reaffirmed for me the need to consider ways to develop a diverse and global literary repertoire for all students. We do not want to fall into the trap of selecting texts that lack true diversity. We want the mirror which allows students to see themselves and for others to see them as their peers. Peers can exist within the classroom or across the globe. Teachers might have a classroom that is low in diversity; however, bringing in peers from other countries allows students to develop more of a global perspective. This allows students to see their peers around the world as "us" rather than "them"<sup>[14]</sup>

#### *Where do you think we go from here in terms of increasing the diversity of children's literature in our classrooms and supporting educators in their use of those books?*

If we want to address the inequity currently witnessed in today's classrooms it is important for teacher candidates and teachers to expand the range of literature in classrooms beyond the preexisting canon. Too often teachers earn their certification with an incomplete tool kit for teaching. One invaluable tool is a classroom library filled with books within the reading range of the students.

Another tool that is often missing is knowledge of diversity and where to locate diverse and global literature [See Resources to help you build an inclusive classroom library]. It is difficult enough to get started with finding books to set up a classroom; it would be so beneficial to have support in researching what makes a book diverse and why.

#### *What are the challenges?*

One of the biggest challenges is how to start or to facilitate tough conversations that might be raised by the books in the classroom. Talking about immigration, for example, can be difficult: who belongs and who does not? While the topic is challenging, there are ways to direct the conversation in inclusive ways, e.g., “We are all people who deserve empathy,” or “Speaking more than one language is a valuable skill.” Conversations about family members who are incarcerated are also hard. Again, take care to avoid implying that one being is better than another and address what everyone can relate to: we have all experienced loving a family member from a distance, whether from camp or jail. It is important that we strive towards equity with students of color who are multilingual, multicultural, and from a variety of socio-economic domains. To begin a conversation, I provide both teachers and teacher candidates with a knowledge base from which we can work together because these conversations are important for all students. We read books on the topic such as *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai or *Visiting Day* by Jacqueline Woodson. And we talk! It is through our conversations that some of the toughest issues are discovered and shared safely.

#### *How do we encourage growth and understanding of what equity means in our school communities?*

If we really want to address the issue of diverse and global literature we need to start thinking—whose voice is missing? Seek out the voices of ordinary people, the perspectives of people who may not have a lot of power, and read, read, read.

Background References for “Teaching with Diverse and Global Literature” by Jane Bean-Folkes

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[11] Kathy G. Short, "Critically reading the word and the world: Building intercultural understanding through literature," *Bookbird* Vo. 47 no. 2 (January 2009): 1–10.

[12] Kyung Yoo Sung and Genny O'Herron, "Sliding Glass Doors That Open South Korea for American Children," in *Teaching Globally: Reading the World Through Literature*, eds. Kathy G. Short, Deanna Day, and Jean Schroeder (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2016), 139–160.

[13] Sims Bishop, "Mirrors."

[14] Said, "Better World."

Background References

Resources to help you build an inclusive classroom library