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# Toward Diversity in Texts: Using Global Literature to Cultivate Critical Perspectives

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# TOWARD DIVERSITY IN TEXTS: USING GLOBAL LITERATURE TO CULTIVATE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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*Abstract: Literature study in the 21st Century should be characterized by the inclusion of global texts that afford diverse students the opportunity to engage in their literacy development through and alongside authors, characters, and storylines that represent their own linguistic and cultural traditions. In this narrative analysis, I reflect on the importance of equity-driven literature study from my perspective as a teacher educator at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in the Southwestern United States. Following an introduction to the political and institutional contexts surrounding text selection in schools and a brief review of the literature, I situate myself and my students as striving to ensure that adolescents see themselves reflected in the texts they read. I then document the pedagogical moves made by preservice teachers to introduce global literature into school curriculum, both as primary works and as supplemental bridge texts. I argue that offering multicultural literature with critical literacy components is a culturally responsive choice that invites students from all backgrounds to participate in the academic community*

During my early semesters studying to become an English language arts teacher, I remember asking my father, who was born in 1950, what books he had read in his high school classes. I was surprised to hear him rattle off, *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and other familiars, near identical matches to what I had been assigned. When I entered the classroom in 2007, I was further alarmed by the static selection of texts. Though I worked with adolescents whose life experiences and identities were vastly different than mine, not to mention light years away from my father's, the curriculum guides and book closets I inherited included the same titles he had slogged through during the Eisenhower administration. Now, as a teacher educator, I help prepare candidates to teach in classrooms whose book shelves are stacked with many of those same, aging pillars of a dusty canon. Despite the ongoing globalization of our lives, many students, the majority of whom hail from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds, continue to encounter authors, eras, and traditions that fail to authentically speak to them. Continually striving for diversity in texts is a mission of social justice and equity, and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including school leaders as well as the families we serve.

## Understanding Diverse Text Selection as a Component of Social Justice

Teaching for social justice in the United States and beyond is defined broadly by a range of scholars, practitioners, and policy makers interested in transforming education through multiple channels (Zeichner, 2011). Some are motivated to reconstruct social paradigms, others aspire to counter anti-deficit approaches to teaching and learning, and many are driven to negate oppressive systems within institutions from pre-kindergarten to graduate education (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Giroux, 1992; Kumashiro, 2002; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009). Despite this variance in application, promoters of social justice in education are united in the purpose of eliminating inequalities among socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups (Zeichner, 2011). This objective of equity is often visible in the curriculum and instruction of teachers who are committed to offering a democratic education for all learners, especially those who have been traditionally underserved in schools (McDonald, 2008). In language and literacy settings, practitioners facilitating literature study can model justice and equity by featuring texts that celebrate diversity.

Affording adolescent and young adult readers experiences with characters and authors who reflect their linguistic and cultural backgrounds demonstrates a pedagogy that is responsive to the unique sensibilities of diverse learners (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). By diversifying text selection and encouraging literacy engagement outside conventional models, teachers acknowledge the subjectivity in their students' life stories, recognizing that the construction of academic knowledge and skills is determined largely by sociocultural backgrounds (Zeichner & Flessner, 2009). An increasing number of students are arriving at school as outsiders to the racial, ethnic, and cultural

mainstream of America, and more schools, both urban and rural, are reporting minority-majority shifts (Krauser, 2012; Gay, 2010). While schools are increasingly populated by students of color, conservative power structures are attempting to reinforce the traditions of a Eurocentric curricula, despite their growing irrelevance to today's learners (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Depending on the mandates of districts, along with the policies of institutions themselves, practitioners encounter a range of contexts regarding the books they teach, and many are left with very little autonomy to challenge the status quo.

## **Multicultural, Critical Learning Opportunities with Global Literature**

The persistent lack of variety in featured texts remains a significant issue in many classrooms. Perhaps more striking is the need for us to scaffold traditional texts, many of which are prescribed at the district level, with contemporary young adult (YA) works that engage students' multicultural and critical sensibilities. The debate over whether or not classic literature is stagnant or worth teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is often beyond our control. What we *can* do is choose *not* to teach literature in a stagnant fashion. Teaching culturally irrelevant works to students who live in a world with increasingly disappearing borders is even more damaging to their literacy development when we fail to offer responsive entry points and contextualize the material in ways that are meaningful. Broadening our students' global perspectives and promoting intercultural awareness through literature is only half of the battle. Equally vital is the cultivation of a critical lens through which students see the world and understand themselves. These sensibilities can be inspired by incorporating global literature into academic spaces, either as primary material within the curriculum or supplemental texts designed to connect today's young readers with standard works.

In their recent report on the work of global literacy communities, Corapi and Short (2015) describe global literature as a "window for readers to see and experience cultures outside their own personal contexts" (p. 5), and as a mirror, "reflecting back human experiences and helping us understand ourselves and our lives better" (p. 5). Corapi and Short's (2015) guidelines outline a number of important approaches including integrating global literature with existing curriculum, engaging students in global literary discussions, creating cross-cultural units, and developing home-school partnerships. Though the seminal texts in our curricula may be fairly scripted, minimally intrusive, cost effective strategies such as literature circles and online book clubs allow us to offer alternative texts to students, not as a deterrent from the canon, but as a way to invite new kinds of readers into the academic discourse. Poor and minority students who are challenged not only academically, but disadvantaged in terms of racial and linguistic capital, hail from cultural backgrounds that are almost categorically left out of the curriculum in many of our nation's schools (Rodriguez, 2013). Diverse texts help us bridge these gaps.

Using global literature helps teachers offer students numerous onramps for active participation in the literacy community because the skills developed during literature study, such as written composition, reflection, analysis, and communication, are more accessible when students see their lives valued within the institution. By making content relevant for young people, we empower their identities, communities, and social resources as rich spaces for academic achievement (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Environments where all participants have an equal stake in the learning and are encouraged to forward meaningful contributions in and alongside multicultural texts support democratic education across student populations.

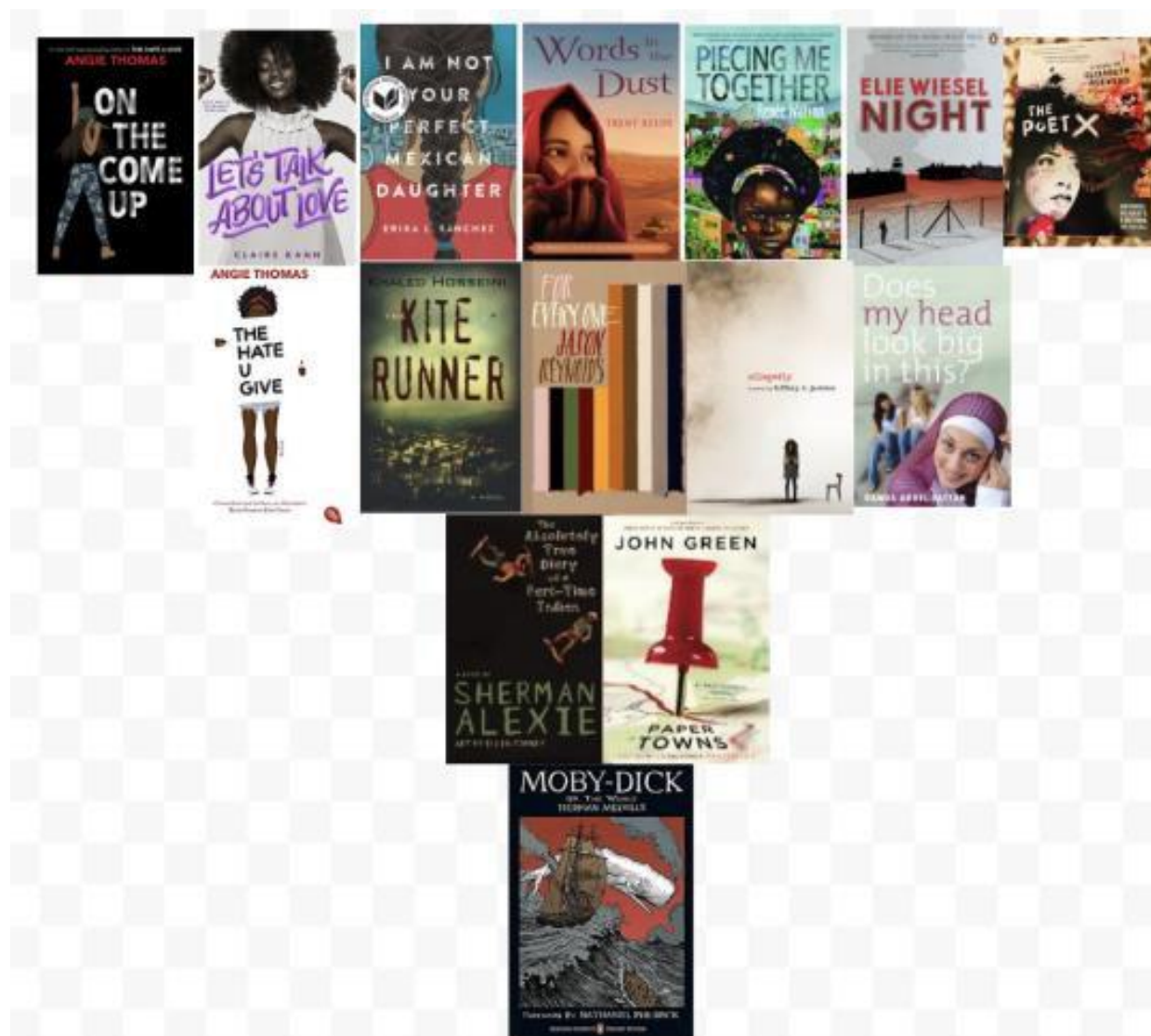
Multicultural texts help us actualize the notion that knowledge and skills students master in their homes and social lives can support their literacy and learning. These efforts target academic achievement but expand toward impacting families and communities now and into the future.

## **Curriculum-Inventory-Exploration**

Local contexts help teacher educators determine impactful strategies for helping preservice teachers incorporate global literature into their curricular and instructional design. At our large, land-grant university in the Southwestern United States, we serve the educational needs of our state's diverse population. We are a Hispanic-Serving Institution working in cooperation with our city's school district, which serves a student population that is over 75% Hispanic and nearly 75% economically disadvantaged. The need to resist outdated, misrepresentative texts without scaffolding is significant here and throughout the region because such works fail to reflect students' linguistic and racial backgrounds, complicating opportunities for success in literacy, and tend to reproduce cultural structures that have caused many students and their families socioeconomic adversity (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Our preservice teachers must be equipped to navigate the sociocultural contexts of the classrooms they are about to enter, and this readiness includes a framework for incorporating global literature.

With our preservice teachers, I model a curriculum-inventory-exploration (CIE) method. Anyone interesting in integrating global literature in their teaching should first closely examine their curriculum. *Are there certain books you must teach? Where is there room for discretion? Do you have complete autonomy?* Understanding the institutional and academic structures within which we are situated makes for a great beginning. Secondly, an inventory of what is already available to us and our school allows us to make immediate impact with our offerings. Knowing what we have on hand and what may be lacking allows for efficient use of time and resources. Once we understand our contexts in terms of expectations and materials, we are positioned to explore varieties of texts which are connected across cultures and histories, through similar thematic elements and storylines. Using CIE, candidates in our methods course recently created text trees (Figure 1) that showcase a number of global alternatives to seminal works.

**Figure 1. Sample Text Tree.**



While the implementation of global literature expands our worldview and outlines a pathway toward greater academic achievement, a critical component must underline our approaches to texts if we are to help students develop cross-cultural perspectives. The specific works we teach are of little impact if we do not model critical interactions with texts for YA readers and encourage them to engage with literature by pressing analytical questions and pursuing new realizations. To sophisticate our literary instruction, Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis (2015) offer us the Youth

Lens (YL), a nuanced perspective of YA literacy that reconsiders how adolescents are represented in literature. Combining theories such as feminism and post-structuralism, the YL posits that the labels used to define youth are assigned by disillusioned, politically motivated power structures. In order to impact critical global awareness, we must understand that our conceptions of adolescence are often socially constructed and inverse of the lived experiences of our students. The YL dispels the notion that there is any single way to read a text or to become literate and encourages us to consider alternative stories of adolescence as inhabited by ethnically diverse, immigrant, and working-class youth.

The YL helps preservice teachers formulate critical approaches to helping students achieve success in literacy through multicultural literature. Developing ready-to-use strategies to accompany diverse texts is essential in teacher education, especially for candidates participating in practicum placements where they may initially have intermittent instructional contact with students. As a follow-up exercise to accompany their text trees, our language arts methods students modified the literary analysis questions in their cooperating teachers' study guides to reflect a YL approach. Their objective was to spark critical thinking and agency among readers while reframing traditional paradigms for teaching literature. Teacher candidates applied the YL (Figure 2) to well-known and alternative texts using a number of techniques such as Socratic seminars, interactive blogs, and autobiographical writing.

**Figure 2. YL Questions for Literary Analysis**

<i>Macbeth</i> and <i>Monster</i> through a Youth Lens
What is the role of youth and how is youth portrayed in these works?
How do the protagonists' stories corroborate or complicate the journey from adolescence to adulthood?
In what ways do the characters' life stories mirror or deflect your own?
Is there such a thing as a moral compass, and how is it developed?

Numerous paradigms for designing impactful literature study in today's classrooms have been explored in the research. For our contexts in the Southwest, the global literature framework (Corapi & Short, 2015) in conjunction with YL perspectives (Petrone et al., 2015) helps our teacher candidates position themselves to enact democratic approaches to curriculum and instruction. While many teacher educators promote the ideals of social justice and equity, delving into exactly what those aspirations look like in classrooms and pinpointing how they can be achieved for students is important for preservice teachers who are preparing to impact the literacy and lives of young people. Critical reconsiderations of the literature we offer in schools is a socio-political issue with significant implications for education and society moving forward and helps us articulate a broader understanding of diversity.

## Conclusion

The windows and mirrors afforded by global literature study grants us the ability to see outward and inward, and our perceptions in all directions can be sharpened by reframing how we think about the stories of our students. Many literature teachers thrive in positions with complete control over their curriculum while others prefer an established format to work within. Some new teachers arrive with a blank slate, and others are handed a script diagrammed down to each day's activities. The majority of us likely fall somewhere in the middle. Within this range of contexts, we are united by the need to help YA readers develop literacies to become socially responsible, critically conscious global citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Having a plan of action that combines the curricular inclusion of multicultural texts with critically engaged instructional practices positions both novice and veteran practitioners to meet these needs. The diverse stories of our students should be reflected by equally diverse literature, and our approaches to texts should represent the futures they construct, rather than the pasts we often preserve.

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