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# Children's Literature Guide

For Educators & Parents

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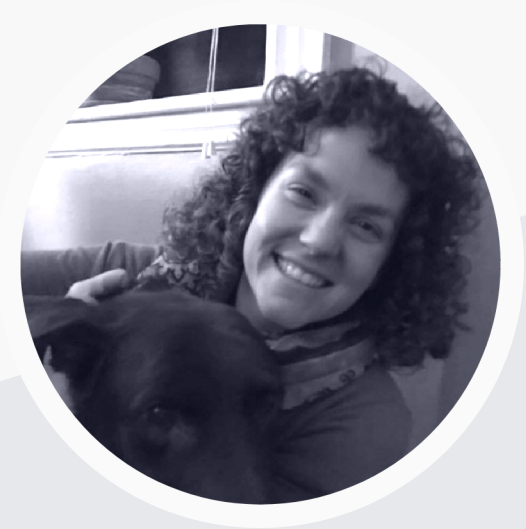

# About The Author
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Cassie Sheets holds a master's in sociology from University of Montana and a master's in children's literature from Simmons University.

She teaches sociology at University of Montana, manages the Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards, and freelances as an editorial assistant for Charlesbridge Publishing. She does consultant work for Cultured Kids—a multicultural education nonprofit-and is a facilitator for School Library Journal's Diversity and Cultural Competency workshops.

Her research interests include prejudice-reduction teacher training and inclusive children's literature curricula.

# Introduction

Cultured Kids provides resources to educators who consider cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness when choosing the literature that they suggest for program curricula. Therefore, it is important for educators to consider particular questions that spark self-reflection of one's own implicit biases and allows for a systematic approach to decreasing those biases.

Because we know that educators are busy caring for their students, we've made this guide to help them achieve the above goals and choose literature in an effective, inclusively-mindful way. We encourage educators to read through the proceeding "Best Practices" section to better understand the current theoretical discussions taking place in multicultural education forums. Because literature, education, and society are continuously evolving, considering best practices is more about creating a lens of critical thinking than it is about offering concrete and/or timeless "answers" to complex problems. To guide that critical lens, the "Questions to Ask of Literature" section poses questions that educators should ask of the literature that they choose to include in curricula. These questions aid teachers in assessing a range of variables regarding literature and how literary choices could be better aligned with educational goals.

Additional resources, such as blogs, websites, and organizations that lead the way in inclusive and diverse children's literature are listed in the last section. We encourage teachers to track those literary and cultural conversations as they develop, as a sense of continual professional education.

Thank you for journeying onto the path of inclusive and diverse children's literature advocacy. We hope that this guide supports your pursuits in providing the best education to all of the students in our global community!

# Best Practices

When educators introduce students to literature, they need to consider not only the “quality” of the written work, but also the representations that the work puts forth through discourse, images, values, messages, cultures, etc. Therefore, it is important to look at various dimensions of a piece of literature when determining what it can contribute to a larger unit of curriculum. At Cultured Kids, our educational programs attempt to increase students’ understanding of cross-culturalism in terms of life experiences and people’s identities.

We encourage you to address the following questions when determining which cross-culturalisms to focus on in your curricula: who is in your classroom?; who makes up your local community outside of the classroom? If you want a "diverse" collection, you need to consider which types of diversity you're attempting to reflect and what lessons you’re trying to share with your students. Assessing the particular types of cross-culturalism in each classroom will help teachers determine how to incorporate mirrors—art that reflects students’ lived experiences—and windows—representations that show lives different than the readers’. (See Rudine Sims Bishop’s “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” in “Additional Resources” section to further explain these concepts.)

It's okay to not incorporate all types of diversity within a single curriculum, because it's impossible to do so—humans are far too complex, and there is a never-ending potential combination of different identity categories, not to mention unique lived experiences. Because each curriculum is inherently limited, it is important to consider diversity in every unit, to allow students a varied representation in literature throughout all of their educational experiences.

If you have international students in a classroom, how about considering diversity in nationalities of the characters, themes, and creators of literature that you choose for your classroom? If you have ethnic and racial diversity, do the same for racial and ethnic representation. However, even if your classroom is "not diverse”—for instance, students identify within the same ethnicity, race, ability, socioeconomic background, etc., it is important for those classrooms to also have diverse literary representation. Otherwise, without “windows,” how will students learn about people who are different than them? Dangerously, seeing only literature that is a mirror distorts students' understanding of their place in the world and others' places who are different than them. (See “Picture This: Reflecting Diversity in Children’s Book Publishing” in Additional Resources for more details on these concepts.) Therefore, if your classroom is particularly homogeneous, you should create curriculum that includes diverse cultural representations so that students have a more accurate understanding of their wider world community.

Moving beyond superficial representation—for instance, drawing a character with dark skin but changing no cultural connections to deepen that character’s identity—there are a multitude of questions you can “ask” of the literature. The next section will help you determine how to do that in a more comprehensive manner.

# Questions To Ask Of Literature

1

***What types of identity diversity is this literature representing? Consider characterization, setting, imagery, literary structure, etc.***

- Ability (physical, neurological)
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Family structure: divorced, blended, married, multi-generational
- Gender: boy, girl, gender queer, transgender
- Geography: rural, urban, suburban, domestic, international
- Immigrant status
- Language: English (or nationally dominant language), bilingual, multilingual, geographical differences amongst a singular language
- Nationality
- Race
- Religion/non-religion
- Sexual orientation

These categories and subcategories are not exhaustive. Identity has endless potential descriptors. Educators should consider their student body when considering which of these identity categories should be prioritized to align with the learning goals of a particular unit. Also remember that there is vast diversity within these categories; intersectionality creates very different experiences for people based on their combination of identity categories.

2

***Who created this literature, and how does that play into the representations of identity?***

- illustrator
- author
- publisher
- editor
- designer

Although these may not seem important to the content of the book, they affect whether or not the literature represents an authentic perspective that aligns with the identity categories the book is trying to represent. Consider the following questions:

# Questions To Ask Of Literature

- Are the creators part of the experiences that they're writing about, especially in terms of minority experiences?

Examples:

- Is the author writing about a Black child's experience but is not Black themselves?
- Does the illustrator have a Vietnamese identity of some sort, while they draw about the Vietnamese immigrant experience?

A book without direct representation from a creator may be enjoyable or even beautifully crafted, but it will never—politically—reflect a reality of a minority experience. If you cannot align all literary choices with #ownvoices direction representation, at least ensure that most of your literature aligns. (See more details about the #ownvoices movement in “Additional Resources”.) Also, discussing these creator and representation issues with students can spark important discussion about art, power, social justice, and inclusion. Even if a book's creator is #ownvoices, that doesn't mean they speak for the entire world of minorities associated with that identity category. Consider the pressures of group representation laid on the shoulders of minority groups that are not placed upon majority groups. Also, classroom discussion will be more robust when we acknowledge the diverse experiences of characters (and students) within similar identity categories. For instance, two Vietnamese immigrant students may have differing perspectives on how they define themselves within a broader Asian identity; one might identify as Vietnamese, while the other considers themselves Asian American.

No educator will have an in-group identity within every identity category. Therefore, educators need to do research and listen to voices of people who have different experiences than their own. In the next section, “Additional Resources,” blogs from librarians, educators, activists, and children’s literature critics are listed. We highly encourage educators to follow these individuals and organizations on social media. These resources include #ownvoices critics assessing depictions of marginalized experiences in children’s literature; being informed by their research can efficiently inform teachers’ and make classroom content more accurate and intentional.

3

***How do my cultural lenses affect the way I interpret this literature and therefore how I help students interpret this literature?***

Because educators do not necessarily have the same cultural identity and experiences as the characters in the literature that they expose their students to, it is important to understand our blind spots as individuals helping young people make meaning. For instance, if a teacher is white, they may not notice hurtful and inaccurate stereotypes and tropes of an Asian American character. If the inaccurate and hurtful representation is not critically assessed for its pitfalls with the students, the class might believe that the representation is an accurate reflection of the real world, and Asian American students might feel disempowered by the curriculum content. If a straight educator unversed in LGBTQ cultures fails to identify and acknowledge the stereotypes present in the text, they could be replicating those prejudices onto their students.

Everyone has personal and implicit biases; it is just the way our brains are wired to organize information. To address these personal biases, we must actively work to challenge them. By asking critical questions of themselves and literature they interact with, educators can start changing the prejudices that their brains have processed in the past and be more inclusive and accepting individuals and teachers. The “Additional Resources” section is an important starting point for teachers to learn how to incorporate these critical thinking skills into their everyday instruction and course planning.

# Articles & Essays

**Bishop, Rudine Sims.** "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, vol. 6, no. 3*, Summer 1990. https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf.

**Derman-Sparks, Louise.** "Guides for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books." https://socialjusticebooks.org/guide-for-selecting-anti-bias-childrens-books/.

**Jensen, Karen.** "Doing a YA Collection Diversity Audit: Understanding Your Local Community, Part 1" http://www.teenlibrariantoolbox.com/2017/11/doing-a-diversity-audit-understanding-your-local-community/.

**Jensen, Karen.** "Doing a YA Collection Diversity Audit: Understanding Your Local Community, Part II" http://www.teenlibrariantoolbox.com/2017/11/doing-a-ya-collection-diversity-audit-part-2/.

**Parrot, Kiera.** "A Diversity and Cultural Literacy Toolkit". https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=diversity-cultural-literacy-toolkit

**Peréz Celia C.** "You Arroz con Mango: and the Need for #ownvoices." The Horn Book Magazine, March/April 2007. pp. 44-48.

**Van Reken, Ruth.** "Cross Cultural Kids." 2017. http://www.crosscultural kid.org/.

**Brinkley, Nicole.** "#ownvoices." 11 September, 2015. http//www.yainterrobang.com/ownvoices.

# Additional Resources

## Blogs

**Brown Bookshelf, The.** https://thebrownbookshelf.com/.

**Open Book, The.** http://blog.leeandlow.com/.

**Park, Sarah Dahlen**. "Picture This: Reflecting on Diversity in Children's Book Publishing." September 14, 2016. https://readingspark.wordpress. com/2016/09/14/picture-this-reflecting-diversity-in-childrens-book-publishing/.

**Reese, Debbie.** "American Indians in Children's Literature." https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com.

## Books

**Sipe, Lawrence, R.** *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom.* Teachers College Press, 2008.

## Organizations

We Need Diverse Books. https://diversebooks.org/.

## Peer Review Articles

**Brooks, Wanda and Susan Browne.** "Towards a Culturally Situated Reader Response Theory." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 43, 2012, pp. 74-85.

**Damico, James and Laura Apol**. "Using Testimonial Response to Frame the Challenges and Possibilities of Risky Historical Texts." *Children's Literature in Education,* vol. 39, 2008, pp. 141-158.

**Dolan, Anne M.** "Intercultural Education, Picturebooks and Refugees: Approaches for Language Teachers." *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 92-109.

**Tatum, Beverly Daniel.** "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 62, no. 2, Spring 1992. pp. 1-24.