

Research into Practice. Literature as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

We love our lit and fortunately, the impact a book can have continues far beyond the rituals we delight in as we settle in and begin turning pages. The concept of books being windows and mirrors for readers resonates with many of us and we see this phrase often in blog posts, tweets and comments from authors, educators and librarians. Despite being nearly thirty years old, Rudine Sims Bishop's words have not lost their importance, and one could, in fact, argue that they are now more essential than ever.

"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" (Bishop 1990, p. 1).

Bishop goes on to explain mirrors are essential because "when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop 1990, p. 1).

Having diverse books in your collection doesn't mean they'll be sought by a wide range of readers. However, Bishop explains windows are just as important because "books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves" (Bishop 1990, p. 2). Author Jacqueline Woodson brings up an interesting benefit of providing windows. Not only do they introduce us to new experiences, they help us "find a place in those people and in the story where they are, [where we and] they share a common ground" (Weatherford 2018).

As stewards of the reading experience, we owe an honest, impassioned effort to guarantee this happens for the students who walk through our doors, and it goes beyond multicultural literature.

We need to go a step further and focus on other groups that we may be leaving out. An excellent source to begin this process is We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), an organization with a simple mission of "putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children," and an honorable vision, "A world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book" (2018). WNDB defines diversity as "all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities" (2018). Their website (<https://diversebooks.org/>) has a helpful list of books that allow readers to see themselves or have empathy for others.

As our school districts continue to draw our attention to trauma-informed care, we may even consider looking for books that will appeal to homeless students or those who live in poverty, children whose parents are incarcerated or suffer from addictions, and those who have witnessed gun violence.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>) publishes Choices, an annual, annotated list dating back to 1980 of what their librarians on staff consider to be the best books. CCBC librarians are experienced in evaluating multicultural literature and are committed to providing teachers and librarians with a diverse collection of titles. Furthermore, each publication of Choices includes an essay on trends they have observed over the past year in the publishing industry which includes statistics on multicultural literature and books about diverse topics.

As you continue to develop your school library's collection, remember you are curating mirrors and windows for your students. You are empowering them, through their love of literature, to become part of a rich and diverse global community. As Jacqueline Woodson says: "We're trying to figure out how to connect with people and work together and make a better world. I mean that's what education is, [it] is about understanding" (Weatherford 2018).

Works Cited

Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 1-2.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. "Transcript from an Interview with Jacqueline Woodson." Reading Rockets. July 4, 2018. <http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/woodson/transcript>

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