

Editorial

Reading Diversity: Engaging with Picture Books in Culturally Relevant Summer Literacy Programs

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This past summer, I had the privilege of serving as a researcher and literacy coach at the Purdue Freedom School. Freedom School is a nationally recognized program rooted in the 1964 Freedom Summer project (see childrensdefense.org/programs/cdf-freedom-schools/ for more information). This initiative is a free summer literacy program designed to spark a love for reading and learning through a culturally diverse curriculum. It aims particularly at supporting children in grades K-3 who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, many of whom are marginalized.

Within the vivacious and energetic confines of the classroom, my role extended beyond that of a passive observer. I actively engaged with the vibrant dance of teaching and learning unfolding before me, deeply involved in the dynamic interaction between the lessons imparted and the varied responses these evoked from the children. One of the moments that punctuated my experience occurred during a read-aloud session centered on a picture book discussing injustice. A little girl, her eyes wide with innocence and intellect, turned towards me and remarked with surprising understanding, "You know, a long time ago we couldn't vote, like you and me."

Her simple yet powerful words resonated with the depth of understanding, reflecting the nuanced and sophisticated perceptions children often have regarding complex issues like injustice and discrimination. Her statement was not just a collection of words but a mirror reflecting the sensitive and discerning views children innately possess, showcasing their ability to comprehend and reflect on the complex social issues around them.

At the Freedom School, these young learners, referred to affectionately as scholars, walk into their classrooms bearing the weight and the wealth of their cultures, languages, and experiences. They arrive with expectations—of being acknowledged, of having their voices not just heard but truly witnessed, and of navigating through their learning journey in a way that allows their identities to flourish and evolve.

This enlightening experience over the summer subtly but significantly altered my perspective on teaching literature and reshaped my identity as a scholar in the field of children's literature. It led to the conception of this issue's theme: "Diverse Picture Books in Culturally Relevant Summer Literacy Programs." The books explored in this issue aren't arbitrarily selected; instead, they are

carefully chosen from the Freedom School reading curriculum, with authors contributing to this issue being active members of the Freedom Schools community, serving in various roles—teachers, founders, literacy coaches, researchers, and volunteers. Each one is devoted to the cause of empowering children’s voices.

The featured books span genres such as historical autobiography, historical fiction, superhero fiction, and contemporary realistic fiction, touching on themes like injustice, race, education, diverse families, disability, dreams, and courage. Reviewers provide their interpretations, underscoring why these books exemplify culturally relevant teaching.

This issue opens with a review by Jorge Daniel Perez de Jesus, paired with Breanya Hogue's review of "Because of You, John Lewis." Both delve into the legacy of the renowned civil rights activist. Jorge highlights the poetic and narrative voice that recounts a young boy's desire to meet his hero, while Breanya discusses strategies to engage students, whose reading levels span from pre-K to sixth grade, with this evocative tale.

Michelle Fry's review of "Me and My Family" focuses on the concept "Everyone in the world has a family tree." She offers insights into this tale of culturally diverse families by juxtaposing two editions of the book—one from 1999 and the other from 2018. Notably, she emphasizes the enhanced representation of cultural diversity in the illustrations while critically discussing the cultural inclusivity challenges that both versions grapple with.

Subsequent discussions on strength, courage, and dreams are presented by various authors. Rose Mbewe and Maria Eloisa (Lisa) Nuguid and Sapkota Muna's reviews of "Be Strong" delves into the intricacies of emotional resilience, perseverance, and kindness, fostering a profound dialogue among parents, caregivers, and children. Luoxu Wei and Teagan Drumm's take on "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever: The Courage to Dream" affirms that, much like the protagonist Assata, everyone has the potential to triumph over their circumstances.

The issue wraps up with Alicia Robinson and Michelle C.S. Greene's exploration of "Lift as You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker." Alicia depicts how the book resonates with students who identify with Ms. Baker's background, offering others a window into new perspectives. Michelle illustrates the nuanced classroom dynamics at a Freedom School during read-aloud sessions of this story, highlighting the delicate balance between student engagement and addressing sensitive topics.

The collective insights shared underscore the transformative role these books can have, not only in promoting critical literary discussions but also in fostering dialogues on justice and race, amplifying children's voices, and nurturing empathy, respect, and appreciation for diversity in young minds. These selected picture books encourage young readers to reflect, comprehend, and

connect with the multifaceted world around them. They are not just stories but catalysts for curiosity, understanding, and the celebration of diversity and inclusion.

As you turn the pages of this issue, we hope you find inspiration in the critical discussions and insights presented by our reviewers, each one committed to fostering a love for literature that mirrors the beautiful diversity of our world. Here's to envisioning a future where every child can see themselves in the stories they read and understand the power of their unique voice in the grand, captivating narrative of humanity.

About the Editor

Mengying Xue is a doctoral candidate in the Literacy and Language Education program within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University. Her research primarily focuses on the use of postmodern wordless picture books as counter-narratives to empower students to engage critical thinking skills. Additionally, she explores how picture books can be used effectively to construct multicultural-friendly classrooms that promote and encourage children to build self-identity and an awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. She is also the teacher of young children at a Montessori school.