

CHALLENGING READING: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDUCATION WITH CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

STRAND 3: THE CRITICAL CHALLENGE OF AVOIDING THE SINGLE STORY

Nurturing dispositions for critical reading through diverse literature

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Our lives are a series of multi-faceted stories—stories that meet and overlap, yet that also have distinctly unique aspects. How are these stories represented in literature for children, and what does that representation mean to the child reader? In particular, how are stories that are outside the mainstream depicted? What impact do such representations have on children whose stories are typically not included in the books available for reading at home or in school? With the rising call for diversity in literature amidst the increasing momentum of our intertwined societies diversifying, numerous campaigns are paying attention to the need for diversity as a characteristic of literature for children. Yet, it isn't enough to merely be included; also crucial is how diversity is represented.

Authentic depictions through both texts and images are expected goals, but how is authenticity defined when individual variances within cultures are often greater than similarities? When child readers are faced with outdated or otherwise misrepresentative depictions of cultures, it creates for them impressions of inaccurate worlds. It is often the case that such works are well-intentioned, but unintentionally misguided, or simply outdated perceptions and interpretations. But no matter what the intention behind the book, problematic depictions typically lead to stereotyping or worse—condescending and patronizing attitudes. What impact does continuously being confronted with such misrepresentations or under-representations have on children's understandings of themselves and others, their attitudes, and their behaviors?

Critical Race Theory calls for the recognition of power relations among races, and how literature can offer inclusive and even corrective impressions of culture. It is a lens through which literature is analyzed; but more importantly, it is a way for children to learn to recognize bias through identifying how words and illustrations convey beliefs and attitudes, and to interpret that bias for what it means. This presentation explores the role of Critical Literacy in learning to read with an analytical lens. Beyond analysis, recognizing the role of literature in impacting reader response is central. A key area to consider is the need for recognizing dispositions as readers, and how dispositions color the ways in which child readers formulate views of themselves, others, and their relationship to others.

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