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# BUILDING A LENDING LIBRARY

**Our commitment to diverse books in every classroom**

By **Melissa Brooks-Yip, Candice Huddleston, Caroline Jacob, & Rhoshawda Miller**

*Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. 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 a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.*

—Rudine Sims Bishop

**b**ooks act as mirrors that affirm, validate, and celebrate our students' identities and lived experiences and the contributions people like them have made to the world. Books also act as windows that expose students to the diversity of the broader world and can help students and educators interrupt bias and prejudice.

When we say “diverse books,” we mean books that show everyday life experiences, the historical and current oppression and discrimination, and also joy—not just books explicitly about the *celebration* of diversity and difference.

In what they read, hear, and see on social media, teachers get the message that they should have diverse books in their classrooms, but even with good intentions, choosing and purchasing high-quality books can be a challenge. We must ensure that the term *diverse books* is more than just a catchphrase.

As members of a public education service agency for a county of 46,500 students and 3,500 teachers in the state of Michigan, we are committed to supporting students and teachers with an equitable and inclusive education. Our educational service agency serves nine school districts comprising 62% White students. Among our efforts to ensure diversity in books, authors, topics, and thought: creating a Diverse Lending Library to show all students windows to the world.

## Choosing and organizing diverse texts

In choosing books for our Diverse Lending Library, we first needed to educate ourselves by doing our own personal work to overcome blindness related to color, class, gender, ability, and identities. We had to know how to pick a balance of books that address various social identities. A simple rule we followed was to be able to answer the following question about each book affirmatively: Is it written *by* who it is *about*?

We decided to thematize the books in such a way as to be relatable year-round, getting away from advertising the library as a way to have something in a classroom just for Black History Month or Women’s History Month, for example. With six to eight books per set, we chose the themes of Biography, Art, Finding Your Place in the World, Family, Friendship, Jobs, and Far Away Places.

Teachers can check out a bag of books for four to six weeks at a time, with the suggestion of using them for interactive read-alouds, free reading offerings, unit or lesson launches, or

mentor texts. Knowing that teachers know their students best, we also offer a journal with each set of books to collect teacher feedback on the books and additional suggestions for use.

## Setting up your own library

We offer the following suggestions for setting up a diverse lending library for your school or district:

- **Set your *why* and communicate it.** We came to an agreement on the central purpose of our library: not just a goal for having more books, but really living out our belief statements. This *why* also serves to support conversations with fellow educators, families, and community members who ask questions about our diverse library.
- **Make a list of quality texts.** With each text considered, you must first be able to answer the question “Is this text *by* who it is *about*?” affirmatively. Then consider the range of selections you are offering. Do you see everyone represented in your collection?
- **Get the texts.** Small grants, funding sources, and donations have helped us to start our

library. We also discovered that once fellow educators and the community learned about our mission, they started donating books.

- **Determine how to organize the texts.** We chose the themes detailed previously in the article, but you might have other ways that would make sense for your students.
- **Make the texts available on a rolling basis.** Our Diverse Lending Library is meant to be accessed all year long. Diverse books are not just tokens for monthly celebrations but should be part of our everyday reading in the classroom.
- **Keep growing your library.** Realizing that we continually educate ourselves on the books available that can and should be part of this library and knowing that many mainstream books for K–12 students are still written by White authors about White people, finding quality books that represent our world takes constant dedication. Staying committed to our belief statements helps us continue to look for books to grow our library. ■

## WE BELIEVE

The following are our belief statements, which could help others begin their own library.

We believe:

- Students should see themselves, their loved ones, their peers, and their languages represented in the books they are learning to read.
- Access to diverse books will work to interrupt bias and prejudice in our classrooms.
- When students see themselves in books, they gain a sense of ownership and accountability to their classrooms, their school system, their community, and the world.
- When students see others in books, they gain empathy and an awareness of their community and the larger world.
- Literature provides the perfect opportunity for students to learn new terms, ideas, cultures, and languages. When students can make personal connections to the literature, they are more engaged, inquisitive, intrigued, and invested in their learning.
- Libraries can and should play a crucial role in empowering diverse populations for full participation.