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STEPS TO **AUTHENTICITY**

How authentic are your culturally relevant texts?

By **Sharroky Hollie**

*a*ll culturally relevant texts are not equitably yoked. Meaning that to simply have books that feature people of color (dare I say the *d* word: *diverse*) or that have content related to social, political, and civil issues is necessary but not sufficient. There needs to be a parsing of your culturally relevant texts, a screening if you will, that indicates levels of authenticity.

The premise is the more authentic the texts, the more equitable and culturally responsive they will be for not only students of color but also all students. The question then is, what are the steps to cultural authenticity?

There are three primary steps:

Step 1: Give students access

Today, finding a legitimate argument against ensuring access to texts that represent traditionally and historically underserved students would be a challenge. In 2019, having diverse books should be a given, a basic right, not a choice or a privilege.

Yet there are too many instances where students of color can matriculate from grade to grade and not be exposed to core texts, and in some cases supplemental texts, that are reflective of who they are culturally and linguistically. The first step toward cultural authenticity is grounded in a commitment to guaranteeing access to culturally relevant texts.

Question: Is your school/district committed to giving students access to books that are mirrors and windows?

Step 2: Know your brand of culturally responsive teaching

Whether teaching in a very diverse school setting or with a homogenous population, cultural and linguistic responsiveness is necessary for any classroom, especially as it applies to increasing academic literacy for all students. Variations of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) include culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, cultural proficiency, cultural competency, and culturally sustaining. Regardless of the name, CRT pushes teachers to recognize their own cultures and the cultures of their students.

When it comes to selecting culturally relevant texts, knowing your brand of CRT is imperative. The brand that fits best with seeking cultural authenticity is cultural and linguistic responsiveness (CLR), which focuses specifically on going to where the students are culturally and linguistically for the purpose of bringing them to where they need to be academically.

The basis of this brand is four words: *validate*, *affirm*, *build*, and *bridge*. To validate and affirm means making legitimate and positive that which historical institutional knowledge, research, social media, and mainstream media have made illegitimate and negative about traditionally marginalized cultures and languages. Students have been told their cultural and linguistic behaviors are bad, incorrect, insubordinate, disrespectful, and disruptive. In CLR, educators refute this narrative when

talking to, relating to, and teaching students.

An equal part of validating and affirming is building and bridging. This is where the focus on school culture or traditional behaviors occurs. These behaviors are reinforced with activities that require expected behaviors in traditional academic settings and in mainstream cultural environments. Ultimately, the goal is for all students to learn situational appropriateness, which is determining what the most appropriate cultural and linguistic behavior is for the situation and to do so without losing one's cultural and linguistic self in the process.

Questions: What is your brand of CRT, and is it conducive to cultural authenticity?

Step 3: Know the three types of culturally responsive texts

The capacity to be authentic is hinged on how texts are selected and purchased. The selection process must include an awareness of the three types of culturally responsive texts to decide which materials are most authentic and appropriate. The three types of texts are *culturally authentic*, *culturally generic*, and *culturally neutral*.

Culturally authentic texts are the preferred type of text for the culturally responsive educator. A culturally authentic text is a piece of fiction or nonfiction that illuminates the authentic cultural experiences of a particular group—whether it addresses religion, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or geographic location. The language, situations, and illustrations must depict culture in an authentic manner. Examples are *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (Balzer + Bray), *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds (Atheneum), and *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales (Neal Porter). For more examples of texts, visit responsivereads.com.

Culturally generic texts feature characters of various racial identities but contain few and/or superficial details to define the characters or storylines. Culturally generic texts tend to focus on mainstream cultural values but with the use of nonmainstream

characters. Many culturally generic texts qualify as “multicultural.” A current example is *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon (Ember) and a classic example is *Corduroy* by Don Freeman (Puffin).

Culturally neutral texts feature characters of “color,” but the stories are drenched with a traditional or mainstream theme, plot, and/or characterization. Culturally neutral texts are the least preferred texts because they are essentially race based. The only aspect of these texts is the color of the character's skin. Note, however, that there are always exceptions, as there are many quality texts that build literacy skills but are still culturally neutral. What you need to avoid is using a culturally neutral text thinking it is culturally authentic. Examples are the Randi Rhodes, Ninja Detective series by Octavia Spencer (Simon & Schuster) and *The Season of Styx Malone* by Kekla Magoon (Wendy Lamb).

Question: How many culturally authentic texts are in your library?

When does the road to authenticity begin?

Now! Granted, these three basic steps are easier said than done, but they are the prerequisites to equitable outcomes for your students. A commitment to have culturally responsive texts is a necessary ingredient.

Knowing the brand of culturally responsive teaching you are using will determine your level of authenticity. Understanding the types of culturally responsive texts will give you focus and precision in your journey to responsiveness. ■

ILA Intensive: Nevada

Sharroky Hollie will be a keynote speaker at ILA Intensive: Nevada, a two-day event focusing on equity and access to literacy taking place June 21–22, 2019, in Las Vegas, NV. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org/nevada.