

## Chapter 13

# Curated Conversations: Transferring Diverse Literature to the K–12 Classroom

**Jessica A. Manzone**

*University of Southern California, USA*

**Rebecca J. Peeples**

*Los Angeles Unified School District, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*The transfer of knowledge and skills to the K-12 classroom is a central objective for any teacher preparation program. This chapter highlights how the skill of developing critical conversations around diverse literature can be woven into the coursework of any teacher preparation program. Theories such as Rings of Culture, Authentic Text, and Implicit Learning anchor this chapter. This chapter provides a practical strategy for building the capacity in teacher candidates necessary to transfer the authentic application of diverse literature to promote social justice and action to the K-12 classroom. The authors articulate how the high-leverage practice of developing Curated Conversations can be used to create environments that foster student voice, student choice, and student interest in any classroom. When modeled for teacher candidates, this strategy can become internalized into their practice and promote the development of professional educators committed to social justice and action.*

### INTRODUCTION

“There is no such thing as a neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.” ~ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The words spoken by Paulo Freire in 1970 feel especially poignant and timely in today’s educational context. In his thesis, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire articulates that curriculum must focus on student experience, promote social action, and the solving of real problems of practice. A curriculum that is disconnected from the learner quickly becomes ineffective and is, therefore, unable to provide students with the opportunities necessary to invent and reinvent their world (Freire, 1970). Amidst the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7375-4.ch013

many and compounding factors impacting contemporary education, it is easy to overlook that of the curriculum. Disconnected, antiquated, and culturally biased curricula have been problems plaguing education for decades and have become magnified in light of contemporary social, political, and health crises. In 1921, American Educational Research Association President Harold Rugg stated that “existent curriculum largely fails to deal with problems, vital either to contemporary society or to the growth of our national life” (p. 698). In 2020, almost 100 years later, educators are still struggling to develop an invigorating curriculum that responds to issues of social justice, engages all learners in genuine inquiry experiences, and considers diverse perspectives. Curriculum for the future must be designed for flexibility, for a nimbleness in execution that can expand and extend to incorporate diverse literature that explores divergent perspectives and includes opportunities to promote social justice and action.

Conversations related to the application and integration of diverse literature are occurring at all levels of the educational arena, from teacher preparation programs at universities to state departments, district offices, and K-12 classrooms. McNair (2016) highlights how simply including diverse literature in the reading lists on our syllabi, using these books in our lesson plans, and placing them in our classroom libraries is not enough. The transfer of HOW to use diverse literature as the catalyst to engage in critical conversations that promotes social justice and action is needed. This chapter attempts to address the following essential question: *How can diverse literature be presented in a teacher preparation program in ways that will prepare our teacher candidates to promote social justice and action in their K-12 classrooms?*

According to Boyd et al., (2015), *diverse literature* is defined broadly to include books portraying different socioeconomic conditions, racial and ethnic identities, gender identities and expressions, sexual orientations, religions, cultures, family structures, and abilities. Diverse literature refers not just to the diversity of the authors of a text, but how the genre, characterization, and structure of text itself are reflective and relevant to the students in the classroom. Fiction, non-fiction, biographies, myths, legends, and narrative books that present factual content are just a few examples of the many forms that diverse literature can take. Although they may differ in medium and style, every piece of diverse literature conveys a dominant message. It is incumbent upon teachers to ensure that their libraries and lessons represent a range of messages, and use the messages found in diverse literature to promote social justice and action. *Social justice* is defined as the actions taken to treat all people with respect and dignity while affirming and honoring the culture and groups with which people identify (Nieto & Bode, 2018). Under this definition, diverse literature can be used as a catalyst to critically examine issues of identity, diversity, inequity, and power inherent in any content or context. *Social action* in the classroom examines how the curriculum promotes cultural competence and “sociopolitical consciousness” in learners (Howell et. al., 2019, p. 186). Learning experiences that are social action-oriented raise awareness about local, national, and global issues, and encourage students to take action to address and solve them. When diverse literature is used to access content in ways that help students view differences as assets rather than deficits, “strength-based collaborations” that promote social justice and action are formed (Yu, 2020, p. 542). How to authentically and purposefully use diverse literature to foster social justice and action in young learners are the skills-sets educators in a teacher preparation program must model, support, and demand of their teacher candidates.

The authors of this chapter contend that more work needs to be done in teacher preparation programs to *model* the authentic application of diverse literature. The high-leverage practice (HLP) presented in this chapter is designed as a tool to help faculty in a teacher preparation program move teacher candidates through three levels of “knowing” related to the authentic application of diverse literature. Titled *Curated Conversations*, this HLP uses the lens of social justice to engage candidates in the authentic analysis of

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