

## Chapter 14

# Cultivating Pedagogical Proficiencies for Facilitating Discussions About Diverse Youth Literature

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### ABSTRACT

*The effective facilitation of discourses about diverse youth literature (DYL) is dependent on teachers' application of vital instructional approaches. This has implications for how pre-service teachers (PSTs) are prepared to involve their students in relevant dialogues that critically examine how DYL mirror authentic life experiences. Hence, the author undertook this action research to execute a methodology model which illustrated instructional processes that may be employed in training PSTs to make conscious decisions about planning, designing, and guiding discussions in a lesson. The participants were 20 PSTs who pursued a literature methods course at a teacher training institution in Jamaica, and studied the texts "Bright Thursdays" by Olive Senior and "Barbie Doll" by Marge Piercy. The application of the model provided insights into the benefits and considerations for training PSTs to practice how to facilitate discussions about DYL during lessons and how to use their literature classes as opportunities for developing social responsibility among their students.*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary literature classroom has to transcend the traditional archetypal space dedicated predominantly to honing students' critical interpretations of writers' manipulation of formal literary conventions. This becomes necessary if students are to reap the benefits of studying literature which include their learning from characters' experiences as they attain a greater self-awareness, gain opportunities to explore solutions for local and global challenges, and develop empathy while accessing the lives and thoughts of others (Alber et al., 2009; Down & Baker, 2020; Gillespie, 1994; Sylvester, 2008).

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In a bid for students to garner a global understanding of varied experiences, perspectives and real life issues, adolescents should be exposed to writings that represent diverse people who have alternate interests, identities, and persuasions, and are from a variety of socio-cultural spaces. Otherwise, students may have a limited view of the world consequent to the insularity created in learning environments that expose readers only to familiar and converging voices and experiences that serve to confine awareness, and promote bigotry.

Yokota (2009) highlights that “in the 21st century, we can no longer afford to merely look inward, reading and learning only from literature that reflects who we are and our own corner of the world [because] students grow up in a world that allows them more direct contact with diversity than ever before” (p. 66). Hence, one of the critical approaches to teaching literature that has been gaining increased attention is the inclusion of diverse reading material that challenges adolescents to have a wide-ranging viewpoint of the world. Diverse literature encompasses a representation of different people and focuses on issues relating to race, ethnicity, language, disabilities, socio-economic status, religion, family structures, sexual and gender identity (Boyd et al., 2015; Colvin, 2017). The ones categorised as youth literature would contain adolescent characters to whom young adults can relate, and contain themes and conflicts that are of interest to them (Pramesti, 2015, p. 2). As more attention is given to including diverse literature in the classroom, Tschida et al. (2014) note the importance of balancing students’ exposure to “mirror” and “window” texts that respectively allow learners to see representations of themselves and feel validated, as well as provide them with “vicarious experience[s] [that] supersede the limits of the readers’ own lives and identities and spend time observing those of others” (p.29).

While many guidelines have been given for the selection and evaluation of diverse youth literature (DYL) to include consideration of authenticity, appeal to adolescents’ interests, fusion of cultural diversity, and enabling readers to not only see themselves, but also having the opportunity to gain crucial awareness and compassion for others (Adam & Harper, 2016; Beach et al., 2011; Mikulecky et al., 1996; Sulzer & Thein, 2016), more thought needs to be given to how teachers apply instructional principles to facilitate students’ meaningful interactions with DYL. Researchers (e.g., Louie, 2006; Mustakim et al., 2014; Showalter, 2003; Smith & Wilhelm, 2010) have offered general strategies and approaches that may be employed to teach literature in seeking to hone students’ interpretative abilities, develop self-understanding through connecting with characters, and garner critical insights into diverse people’s identities and ways of life, which are crucial pre-requisites for encouraging empathetic understanding. However, there is a need for more specialised focus on how teachers can effectively facilitate discussions about DYL as they undertake a procedural approach to planning and executing literature lessons.

A key place to begin is at the teacher education level where pre-service teachers (PSTs) are engaged in courses aimed at developing their pedagogical aptitudes, and preparing them to cater to students’ individual needs and interests. Dana and Lynch-Brown (1993) highlighted the need for more research that provides ideas about how to prepare pre-service teachers to function effectively in multicultural classrooms. One suggestion is that pre-service teachers should engage in reading multi-cultural literature which they would also include in their teaching as they gain an understanding of diverse cultures and prepare their students to live in a global society (pp. 46, 48). Glenn (2014) agrees that a primary step to preparing PSTs for diverse classrooms is for them to develop their reading repertoire, and be taught how to engage their students in discussions about DYL (p. 90). These suggestions convey the need for PSTs to not only advance their own awareness, but also hone the teaching expertise necessary for engaging their students with DYL. Therefore, it is quite relevant that more research offers suggestions

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