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*Literacy, literature and diversity*

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As black Americans, the authors believe that there is no cultural connection to the literature students who are of different ethnicities or cultures read in school today. Because most of the literature in the textbooks is written by white authors, those students who are from different backgrounds have a difficult time relating to the texts. The results of this disconnect are a disinterest in school and poor performance.

The authors contend that teachers teach what they know and use their own backgrounds as a basis for their instruction. As a young student, Hinton had her eyes opened by a teacher who gave her a book written by a black author. Seeing girls like herself portrayed in a book gave Hinton an identity she had not had before this experience. She believed that she could one day become a writer and had an example to follow, which she had not previously realized existed. Now, as an educator, Hinton feels she has the responsibility to teach her students literature from a multicultural perspective. It is her contention that if students can relate to the literature on a personal level, they will be more vested in their education and more willing to learn because of the connections they will establish. By learning about other cultures through the writing of authors from those cultures, Hinton believes that teachers will open up not only another world to their students, but also a deeper understanding of those cultures which, in turn, will help their students become more tolerant of those around them.

The co-author of the article, Berry, was able to connect to literature through her music. She had an elementary school teacher who recognized Berry’s talents and found a way to use them to relate to others. As a result, the author uses “alternative literature” to teach her students. It is her belief that conventional methods of learning are not always the best and do not work for everyone. She believes that literature should be taught based on the needs of the students and what can help enlighten them as much as what the curriculum expects them to know.

Both authors feel that teachers teach what they know based on how they were taught. Thus, a white teacher will favor traditional white literature. While this has been the norm for many years, it is important to recognize the changes that need to occur to reach all students.

Using a variety of literature in the classroom is both realistic and necessary. While I have always assigned readings from different cultures and backgrounds, I never did so with the intention of making sure that students who were from those cultures could relate. It was not until I read what these authors said that I realized the importance of assigning multicultural literature.

As I look back on last semester, I can see now how involved one of my Indian students was when we read an excerpt from the *Mahabharata.* Realizing it was the cultural connection to the literature, and not just the literature itself, makes me want to be sure that I can include as many students as possible in the selections I choose.

Knowing that students will relate more intimately to literature that involves their beliefs, how do I find out what my students can relate to and what is appropriate that would also teach and not alienate other students in the class?