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Culturally Diverse Literature and Social Inclusion in Elementary Classrooms
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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the **use of culturally diverse literature** in correlation to **social inclusion**, which is crucial for students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. The purpose was to identify if culturally diverse literature could effectively promote social inclusion in diverse classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

Culturally Diverse Literature → Social Inclusion → Student Well-Being

Culturally diverse literature may act as mirrors and windows in a way that could promote intrapersonal and interpersonal social inclusion in the classroom. Social inclusion may then improve students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

Culturally Diverse Literature

Operational definition: Children's literature that has a primary character from a parallel culture, meaning an ethnicity other than or in addition to White (Cromwell, 2018; Hamilton, 1993).
Literature as mirrors and windows: Students can read stories that either act as a mirror reflecting into their own lives or a window into the life and experiences of others (Bishop, 1990).

Social Inclusion

Socially inclusive schools "broadly foster positive social experiences for all students (e.g., characterized by less victimization, loneliness, and discrimination; more safety, belongingness, and positive cross-group attitudes), regardless of ethnic background" (Nishina et al., 2019, p. 306).

Intrapersonal: Less loneliness, more safety, more belongingness
Interpersonal: Less victimization, less discrimination, more positive cross-group attitudes

Social inclusion promotes and protects students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

- Fulfills neuroscientific need for **connection and social engagement,** perhaps more fundamental than food and shelter (Lieberman, 2013; Maslow, 1943).
- Protects against **ethnic-racial discrimination**, poor mental health, low school belonging, and behavioral issues (e.g., substance use, physical aggression) (Umaña-Taylor, 2016).
- Protects against **disidentification** from school, which contributes to the achievement gap (Steele, 1992).
- Protects students' ability to **succeed academically** and leads to higher grades (Hymel & Katz, 2019; Umaña-Taylor, 2016).

Theme 1

Levels of Choice Based on Availability
Students read culturally diverse literature when it is both **available** and **chosen** on three levels.

1. **District** (curriculum, district-provided literature)
2. **School** (classroom library, PTO funding)
3. **Student** (free reading from classroom library)

Theme 2

Literature as Mirrors and Windows
Culturally diverse literature acts as mirrors and windows in a way that promotes intrapersonal and interpersonal social inclusion.

Intrapersonal social inclusion through mirrors:
Diverse literature allows students to "see themselves in that story" in a way that "helps with their social-emotional [well-being], just **makes them feel wanted**."

Interpersonal social inclusion through windows:
Literature "**opens up some of the kids' eyes**" to understand the tangible differences they notice among their classmates in a way that "gives people knowledge."

"If we start them out with all of that **knowledge** at a beginning level before they start making those opinions, then when they do form opinions, hopefully it would be a **more positive opinion** than just 'You're different, and I don't want to associate with that', or 'I don't understand it, so I'm not going to understand it.'"

"If we develop classrooms that not only accept but embrace and encourage these cultural aspects…we're going to develop students who are **aware not only of their peers in that immediate setting**, but…**more aware as individuals growing up on the global scale**."

Theme 3

Literature as a Tool for Culture Sharing
As students use diverse literature as a tool to share their culture with their peers, the experiences of mirrors and windows converge for an **interconnected impact on social inclusion**.

This mutual exchange of culture "**wasn't just the sharing of a book**. …Oftentimes the most important or impactful moments were that students were sharing their own personal connections." Students realize it "isn't just in a book. **This is somebody's real life. These are real people**."

This "led to students…wanting to understand others and taking a moment to learn about those in their classroom that are different from them. …**you can most definitely link that to literature**."

Methods & Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select four full-time elementary teachers who have taught reading for at least three years. Participants were from two suburban schools in the Northeastern United States The participants, two female and two male, were aged 30 to 60 with 10 to 25 years of teaching experience. Participants responded to questions in individual, **semi-structured interviews**. **Thematic analysis** was used to highlight key words and phrases and identify themes that emerged based on their frequency, depth, and relevance.

Discussion

The findings **support** the literature review and conceptual framework to suggest that **culturally diverse literature could effectively promote social inclusion in diverse classrooms.**

Implications include informing stakeholders in education of the potential for culturally diverse literature to impact social inclusion and promote students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. They could extend to reducing discrimination, lessening the achievement gap, and providing an equal, quality education.
Limitations include collecting teacher perceptions of social inclusion and diversity in the classroom instead of measurements and interviewing only four participants with minimal diversity.
Future research could examine other types of diverse literature, curriculum, culturally authentic literature, student perceptions of social inclusion, and other age groups beyond elementary.

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