

Practitioner Perspective

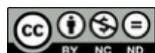
Indigenous Literature in Middle Grades Classrooms: Evaluating Classroom Libraries and Reflecting on Book Clubs

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the teacher's efforts to promote an equitable literacy classroom that encourages diversity and inclusivity in a predominantly white classroom. One 6th-grade teacher, Ms. Smith (pseudonym), reflected on and evaluated her classroom library to make it more inclusive of diverse backgrounds, with a specific focus on Indigenous voices. This paper reports how she evaluated Indigenous children's and adolescent books to build a diverse, inclusive, and equitable classroom library. Additionally, the teacher shares her experiences facilitating book clubs and how these enhanced students' critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are increasingly emphasized in elementary and middle school classrooms. As primary and middle school students begin to develop their understanding of themselves and the world, understanding DEI becomes an important focus in their education. Recent research addresses incorporating DEI-focused and culturally informed practices and their impacts. These practices enhance students' engagement and social-emotional learning, foster a sense of belonging, support the development of perspectives, and support the development of critical thinking skills (Gay, 2018; Ialuna et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2021). Culturally informed practices are based on frameworks such as culturally relevant, responsive, or sustaining pedagogy (Kelly et al.). While these practices are important in racially diverse classrooms, they are equally essential in predominantly white classrooms. The absence of racial diversity does not lessen the importance of DEI. Rather, it emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that can expand students' perspectives beyond their homogeneous contexts.

The purpose of this article is to examine one teacher's efforts to design a literacy classroom that promotes inclusivity and critical engagement with multicultural literature in a predominantly white setting. Its purpose is not to represent culturally responsive teaching in classrooms serving Indigenous students. Rather, it illustrates how one teacher in a predominantly white context tried to develop instructional practices aligned with culturally responsive aims.

Conceptual Framework: Culturally Informed Pedagogies and Multicultural Literacy

This work is grounded in culturally informed pedagogies and a multicultural literacy framework. First, it is guided by culturally informed pedagogies, which include culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustainable pedagogies. Culturally Relevant Teaching is "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitude" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp.17-18). According to Gay (2018), culturally responsive teaching is "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (p. 6). Culturally Sustaining Practice is "more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Its goal is "supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers" (Paris, p. 95).

In culturally informed practices, cultural referents include students' lived experiences, values, beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and languages. Teachers use these to connect academic content with students' lives, making students' learning more relevant and meaningful. Culturally informed practices help students develop cultural awareness, challenge stereotypes, and build the empathy and critical

thinking skills they will need to engage with a diverse society.

Next, a multicultural literacy framework, also known as “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass door” literacy (Bishop, 1990), was used. Books with diverse protagonists make students feel seen, valued, and understood by representing a range of intersectional identities. Bishop emphasizes, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (p. ix-x). To support an inclusive classroom environment, teachers should provide diverse books that represent identities and lived experiences of students.

These frameworks guide how a 6th-grade teacher in a predominantly white classroom uses multicultural and diverse literature and literacy practices to promote inclusivity, equity, and critical thinking. The teacher shows how culturally informed pedagogy can be incorporated into literacy practices in a racially homogeneous context.

Setting the Context

Ms. Smith, a 6th-grade teacher, works in a small rural New England school with 225 students. Her public school is 91.7% white, 4.4% Hispanic, 1.5% Black, 0.5% Asian, and 1.5% two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). In the demographic breakdown, 0% are identified as American Indian, and 67% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Ms. Smith’s 6th-grade classroom consists of 12 students (11 white, one biracial). Ms. Smith is a white woman who grew up in a largely white suburb and now works in a largely white rural community. Her coursework and experiences have allowed her to see that it can be sheltering to have limited exposure to cultures and backgrounds that are different from her own, so this bias could have impacted the decisions made in her classroom.

Within this context, Ms. Smith designed culturally informed literacy activities and reflected on her students’ need for exposure to texts and stories from cultures represented and not represented in the classroom. Through teacher training, she gained confidence in including diverse and multicultural books and using strategies to promote inclusive learning environments. Although her class did not include a highly diverse student population,

she emphasized the importance of establishing a classroom culture that values diversity and promotes equity for all learners. So, she took the first steps toward incorporating culturally informed teaching practices. She evaluated her curriculum materials and classroom library in a deliberate effort to be more inclusive of diverse backgrounds. Ms. Smith implemented a critical book club model. Students read their chosen book over five weeks and met weekly for 15-20 minutes in groups of 3-4 to discuss the reading.

Reflecting on and Evaluating the Classroom Library

Ms. Smith has consistently maintained that her students need texts that reflect themselves and others who are unlike them. She has expanded her classroom library to reflect her students’ interests and identities while selecting books about characters from diverse backgrounds. When Ms. Smith evaluated her classroom library, she realized that it did not reflect this philosophy across cultural groups. She found that one group, in particular, was underrepresented: Indigenous authors and perspectives.

Many researchers (Bradford, 2007; Quigley, 2016) have noted that children’s literature has historically excluded Indigenous Peoples, themes, voices, characters, and authors. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC, n.d.), of the 3,451 books published in 2022, only 2% were by Indigenous authors, and just 1% had an Indigenous primary character. With so few children’s books being published with Indigenous characters, it is likely that students are not being given the chance to read widely from Indigenous perspectives. Without the determination to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into the classroom library, these voices will likely remain excluded. Additionally, Reese (2018a) writes that several of the most recent children’s publications written by Indigenous authors that include Indigenous characters are being challenged by school districts around America and are being banned from schools. The American Booksellers Association (2024) backed up this claim, stating that Indigenous books are often targeted in book bans due to the claims that they are “divisive.” In 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) reported that 2,571 titles were challenged for some level of censorship, with the majority of these titles being written by or about the LGBTQIA+ or BIPOC communities (ALA). There are already so

few Indigenous children's books being published, and since 58% of targeted books are reported to be in school and classroom libraries or curricula, many of them will never reach some schools (ALA). Because Ms. Smith's classroom library mirrored these statistics and her school had no American Indian students, she realized she needed to update her library.

Bishop (1990) indicates that simply having books that include characters from diverse cultures is insufficient. If those characters reinforce negative or racist stereotypes, they will do more harm than good. With this in mind, Ms. Smith followed these steps to evaluate her classroom library:

Step 1: Investigate Problematic Representation. Ms. Smith investigated books that are not recommended by Indigenous groups. These book lists generally compile titles that reinforce negative stereotypes, use negative or inaccurate language, present inaccurate information about tribes or Indigenous histories, or portray Indigenous groups and individuals negatively (Gutierrez-Gomez, 2023). In the American Indians in Children's Literature blog, Reese (2018b) is critical of Indigenous literature and provides insight into why each book is or is not recommended. Also, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction published a list of "not recommended" texts with rationales (see Appendix A). Based on these lists, Ms. Smith removed several books from her library, including *Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth George Speare, *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson, and *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. She found several copies of these books in the curriculum closet in her school. This likely means that these books were once integral to the curriculum taught at her school.

Step 2: Critically Evaluate Existing Library Titles. After investigating books not recommended by Indigenous groups, Ms. Smith examined those she could not find on any such lists and evaluated them. One of the most important aspects of evaluating Indigenous literature is assessing authenticity (Gopalakrishnan, 2011; Peterson & Robinson, 2020). This means

that if a book about Indigenous Peoples is written by a non-native author and does not contain accurate information about Indigenous lives, it should be removed. Ms. Smith referenced a checklist from the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI, n.d.) when evaluating the remaining books in her library. The checklist by NMAI comprises the following categories: authority (is it written or illustrated by an Indigenous Person?); accurate representation; tribal specificity; language (is it realistic and free of inaccurate or problematic terms?); and contemporary life (does it reflect Indigenous people engaged in everyday activities?). Ms. Smith set a personal goal to acquire highly praised Indigenous books to replace the outdated books and those that did not meet the NMAI checklist criteria.

Creating a Multicultural and Culturally Inclusive Classroom Library

Through this process, Ms. Smith realized that the text sets her school provided for her students were unacceptable. Her small, rural school lacks sufficient funding to update its books. These books were offensive, included racist stereotypes, and none depicted Indigenous Peoples doing everyday activities. Through this evaluation process, Ms. Smith realized that her philosophy as an educator was not being upheld, despite her belief in her own good intentions. Her students deserve access to diverse literature in which they see themselves and others depicted authentically and without stereotypes.

Ms. Smith used her budget to purchase book sets to run book clubs that honored Indigenous voices. She prioritizes students' interests and choices to increase engagement, so she purchased four sets of books across genres. She purchased only five copies of each book, rather than a full classroom set, to make it more cost-effective and to support her goal of providing student choice. The titles are:

- Fantasy: *Eagle Drums* by Nasugraq Rainey Hopson or *Race to the Sun* by Rebecca Roanhorse
- Realistic Fiction: *We Still Belong* by Christine Day
- Historical fiction: *Indian No More* by Charlene Willing McManus and Traci Sorell.

These books are highly praised by Indigenous voices and meet the NMAI's criteria. After hearing the summary of each book and reviewing the books, students ranked the two books they want to read. Book clubs were formed based on these rankings, prioritizing student interest and choice.

Introducing Book Clubs with Multicultural Literature

For culturally responsive teaching, teachers need to provide diverse literature to students, emphasize cultural themes and perspectives, reflect on personal connections, and encourage students' discussion and collaboration. Ms. Smith implemented a book club that addressed these components of culturally responsive teaching. Although none of her students represented American Indian cultures, Ms. Smith used these practices to build cultural awareness. Book clubs can foster an environment in which students engage with the diverse literature provided by the teacher and extend the content taught in class through personal connections, discussions, and opportunities for collaboration. A study conducted by the National Reading Panel in 2000 concluded that the following are effective strategies for teaching reading comprehension: comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, using graphic and semantic organizers, answering questions, generating questions, using text structure, and summarizing (Alvermann, 2002). When designed carefully, book clubs have the power to include all or most of these strategies. Aligning these comprehension strategies with diverse literature selections allows students to develop the comprehension skills they need to engage more critically with texts, and with the world around them.

Carefully planned critical book clubs have been suggested to promote students' development of critical thinking (Chisholm & Cook, 2021; Jocius & Shealy, 2018) and to positively impact middle school students' reading attitudes (Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Ms. Smith carefully designed her book club discussions to be centered on the lessons taught throughout the week. Each Friday, clubs of 3-4 students who were reading the same book would meet while Ms. Smith observed and took notes on the discussion. These small book clubs would sit in a circle, with Ms. Smith outside the circle, allowing students to facilitate their own discussion. Ms. Smith always ensured that the lesson taught connected to what she asked students to write about

(see Appendix B). Notes were taken throughout the week based on the lesson material and the reading. Students use sticky notes to stop and jot, to track evidence of an idea they generated about the reading, or to use other strategies such as questioning or connecting. Notes were also taken in their reading notebooks, especially when students wanted to write at length about an idea or create a graphic organizer to represent their thinking. Writing about ideas before book clubs helps students develop analyses and questions for group discussion.

Students also brought their own set of agreements that they developed at the beginning of the unit. These agreements include student-generated ideas such as ensuring that weekly reading goals are met, that everyone participates and has a voice in the discussion, and that students take notes on the text to be prepared for discussion. Before sending students into their book clubs to brainstorm group agreements, Ms. Smith shared a video that depicted what it looks like and sounds like to be engaged in a productive book club. Students analyzed the clip and brainstormed as a class what they noticed the book club in the clip did, both positive and negative. Seeing a model allowed students to create mindful group agreements. These co-created agreements also allowed students to feel a sense of group agency and to build trust before engaging in book discussions, which can be a vulnerable task (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, 2026). An essential part of creating these group agreements was related to Anchor Standard Action 18 from Teaching Tolerance's Social Justice Standards: "I can respectfully tell someone when his or her words or actions are biased or hurtful" (see Appendix A). As a class, Ms. Smith and her students agreed that this is a non-negotiable when reading about and discussing cultures that are different from our own. She taught her students how to be inclusive and kind when speaking about various cultural backgrounds and histories, and if someone is not holding to that agreement, how to kindly address it.

Ms. Smith balanced instruction in plot, characterization, setting, and theme with opportunities for students to develop text-based ideas before book club discussions; especially because she provided time for them to write and organize these ideas, students were able to critically think. In addition, Reese (2007) recommends teaching about the specific tribes in the text to show who that tribe is as a group rather than teaching

overgeneralized ideas or even stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples as a whole. When this culturally relevant instruction was integrated into reading lessons, students gained context for their characters' cultures. They could then apply this background to their ideas about what was happening in the text.

At the end of each book club discussion, students self-assessed their performance in three categories: preparedness, discussion, and group agreements using a rubric (see Appendix C). After students self-assessed, Ms. Smith left her own score and comments on what students did well and what steps they can take to improve. All students had the opportunity to review this feedback before their next book club discussion so they could prepare. To improve her rubric and to maximize student reflection on learning, Ms. Smith plans to add a section that targets whichever Social Justice Standards she selects in the future. This would lead to a more culturally relevant environment because students would have clear learning targets and reflection opportunities related to social justice.

Because no students in the classroom were identified as American Indian, Ms. Smith recognized that she had to be careful and intentional in how she introduced Indigenous perspectives. She knew that the inclusion of diverse texts alone would not promote cultural understanding, so she took a step to incorporate a reflective process aligned with culturally responsive teaching. In selecting texts, Ms. Smith first made sure that the books were authored by Indigenous writers or were presented in authentic representations of Indigenous experiences. She also examined the texts to avoid overgeneralizations or stereotypical portrayals. So, she carefully examined how characters, cultures, and histories were represented in each book. Third, the book discussion prompts and questions were carefully selected so that students were guided to engage critically with the texts. She intentionally planned her book club discussions to consider multiple perspectives. She also reflected on issues of the representation of Indigenous tribes. By taking these steps, Ms. Smith provided more thoughtful opportunities for students to engage with perspectives that were not represented within their immediate classroom context.

After leading the book club, Ms. Smith identified one key strategy she plans to implement in future sessions: incorporating a dialogue tool shared by

the NMAI (n.d.) to support student discussions about Indigenous Peoples (see Appendix A). This tool is designed to help both children and adults engage in respectful, honest conversations about Indigenous stories (NMAI). It serves as a valuable scaffold for fostering culturally responsive and thoughtful dialogue, aligning with the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards. There are four steps: community building, sharing the diversity of experiences, exploring perspectives beyond our own, and synthesizing and providing closure. When developing questions for students to answer, following this four-step order will enable students to consider their own perspectives and apply their thinking and understanding to Indigenous perspectives, all within a safe, community-centered environment, such as a book club.

Reflection on the Middle Grades Book Club Experiences

Ms. Smith's students responded enthusiastically to the Indigenous books they chose to read and readily applied the lessons they had been taught to their reading comprehension and discussion skills. They were motivated by the social aspect of the book club, and some students reported enjoying reading because they could discuss it with peers. Whittingham and Huffman (2009) discuss the importance of reading engagement and its contribution to motivation. If students are engaged through book choice and peer discussion, they will be more motivated to apply their learning more deeply.

Through notes collected during book club discussions and informal interviews with students at the end of the unit, the students made it clear that they learned more about Indigenous lives from these books. Some students reported that they had previously read only books in which Indigenous characters were portrayed in stereotypical ways, such as during the first Thanksgiving or in stories about westward expansion. Some students stated that they had never read about Indigenous characters who attend school, have hobbies, and experience universal challenges in life. Through books featuring Indigenous voices, students recognized that Indigenous Peoples are an essential part of the world today and that their voices, experiences, and cultures matter.

After the book clubs, Ms. Smith reflected on her goal of including stories of Indigenous Peoples

engaged in everyday activities. Listening to her students' discussions made it evident that many held severe misconceptions about entire groups of people, indicating that they needed diverse perspectives and multiple voices. Once they had that exposure and a safe environment to discuss the books, they left the book club with a fuller understanding of Indigenous perspectives, yet they still had much to learn. Ms. Smith recognized the power of deep engagement in book clubs, combined with the power of quality, diverse texts, allowing her students to make sense of the broader world around them by gaining awareness of perspectives that have largely been excluded in her school. Ms. Smith intended to bring authentic Indigenous voices into her classroom, and she did so. It is critical to note that this is only a starting point and far from the deepest learning students can achieve; more remains to be done to reach this level. This learning experience came from a concerned teacher who recognized missing voices in her classroom and sought to ensure that Indigenous stories were available, read, and discussed.

Limitations

As she engaged in her work, Ms. Smith called what she was doing "culturally responsive teaching." It became evident to her that culturally responsive teaching is more about responding to the cultures represented in your classroom and community rather than exposing students to the voices that are missing from that space. Although this was a misconception, Ms. Smith found value in practices aligned with culturally responsive teaching. These practices encouraged her to share Indigenous literature so students could develop understanding and respect for different experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Another limitation is the possibility of tokenism that can arise when children discuss diverse cultures in which they have minimal background knowledge, and possibly stereotypical assumptions about certain groups. This danger is greater when no one in the room represents the culture being discussed. Ms. Smith's work with her students mostly fell into the

"identity" and "diversity" categories of the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards. This helps students recognize that cultures around the world have similarities and differences to the cultures of the students in the classroom, and that we can be kind, respectful, and inclusive of all. The standards associated with "justice" and "action" were not addressed too explicitly in Ms. Smith's classroom. Without direct instruction in the standards associated with "justice," students might not know how to identify a stereotype, bias, or injustice, and without "action," students will not know what to do when they identify these. It is critical to teach all components of the Social Justice Standards to ensure that students have the tools to respectfully discuss diverse cultures.

Conclusion

Ms. Smith reached two conclusions regarding culturally informed practices in the middle grades literacy classroom. First, it is essential to evaluate the books in the classroom library. This is where students have regular access to literature, so the books they encounter matter. Teachers need to evaluate their collections and ensure that books are culturally relevant and of interest to students. Second, book clubs can boost student engagement and critical thinking. Using multicultural and diverse books in book clubs exposes students to new perspectives while helping them feel seen. At the same time, providing multicultural books in book clubs alone is not a culturally responsive practice. Examining the identities, backgrounds, and cultures represented in authentic texts promotes the critical thinking and reflection central to culturally responsive and relevant teaching. Book clubs allowed Ms. Smith's students to gain awareness of Indigenous cultures that they otherwise would not have known about. This gave these middle school students the opportunity to develop a deeper sense of cultural awareness that they will need to engage with a diverse society. Nevertheless, more of a focus on "justice" and "action" is necessary to demonstrate that book clubs can be a driving force in culturally relevant and responsive teaching.

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Appendix A Resource List

- 1) American Indians in Children's Literature (AICL), blog by Dr. Debbie Reese:
<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>
- 2) "Debbie Reese on Book Bans and Native Representation," an article on the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice website: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2022/debbie-reese-on-book-bans-and-native-representation>
- 3) National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) - Dialogue Toolkit for Educators:
<https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/NMAI-Americans-dialogue-toolkit.pdf>
- 4) National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) - Worksheet for Selecting Native American Children's Literature: <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/pdf/Native-American-Literature-in-Your-Classroom-Worksheet.pdf>
- 5) North Carolina Department of Public Instruction - Resources for Teachers and Instructional Leaders:
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/student-support/american-indian-education/resources-teachers-and-instructional-leaders>
- 6) Social Justice Books, a Project of Teaching for Change: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/>
- 7) Social Justice Standards: The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework:
https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/TT_Social_Justice_Standards_o.pdf

Appendix B Sample Writing About Reading Prompt

We just watched "[The Art of Storytelling: Robert Lewis \(Cherokee Nation\)](#)" from the National Museum of the American Indian. Storytelling is an important part of cultures around the world, including Indigenous cultures. How has storytelling played a role in your life? How is storytelling playing a role in your book club book? Discuss how storytelling is impacting your character's decisions or how it is giving you clues as to the kind of person your character is.

SmithsonianNMAI. (2021, February 6). *Art of Storytelling: Robert Lewis (Cherokee Nation)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c5RqUsT4KQ>

Appendix C Book Club Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Preparedness	I do everything to score a 3 and I come prepared with specific lines from the book to look closely at with my book club.	I come to my book club prepared with my book, notes, and any other materials I may need. I come with many ideas ready to discuss and am caught up with the reading.	I come to my book club prepared with my book and some notes. I come with some ideas from the book to discuss. I am mostly caught up with the reading.	I am unprepared.
Discussion	I do everything to score a 3 and I make connections beyond the book, hinting at the deeper importance of what is happening in the book.	I can make comments about important events in the book and can pose and respond to questions in a way that flows. I elaborate on what I say by using the details in the book. I am on topic the whole time.	I can talk about the book by making comments and posing and responding to questions. I elaborate occasionally. I am mostly on topic.	I don't add meaningful talking points to the discussion. I am often off-task.
Book Club Norms		I can follow our agreed upon book club norms. I set reading goals at the end of every book club.	I can mostly follow our agreed upon book club norms. I set reading goals at the end of every book club.	I struggle to follow our agreed-upon norms.

Comments: _____
