Teachers who build on the worlds of children inhabiting their classrooms make a difference in children’s lives. In doing so, their teaching practices shift from implementing methods to facilitating thinking through innovative, hybrid strategies, ensuring that instructional techniques proven effective yesterday will help each and every child in their classrooms learn today. Despite the long-standing research on using children’s experiences and cultures as foundational to effective literacy instruction (Au, 1998; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Dyson, 2003; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gay, 2000; Hull, 2001; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lazar, Edwards, & McMillon, 2012; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Nieto, 1999; Purcell-Gates, 1995), only minor progress has been made in revamping curricula to reflect the needs of children historically marginalized by standard schooling. Mandated curricula hold an inherent bias against children and families living in poverty, learning English as an additional language, and/or possessing cultural norms or developmental ways that differ from standard curricular practices. Shifting the balance of power from a single standard curriculum to a multifaceted curriculum designed to develop and strengthen the resources all children bring to school will help grow a multicultural global citizenry better able to compete and collaborate internationally. The texts reviewed below will help readers become curious about worlds different from their own, challenge inherited instructional practices, and inspire teachers to create curriculum with children while nudging them toward larger goals.

Bryant Jensen and Adam Sawyer’s edited volume Regarding Educación illuminates, through personal stories, the daily and educational struggles faced by many Mexican American, Mexican-origin, and American Mexican students. These stories support teachers in learning to create spaces that foster positive identity and agency. Stuart Greene’s Race, Community, and Urban Schools: Parenting with African American Families invites teachers to reconsider the dominant narrative in which low income families are blamed for their children’s poor academic performance and offers educators a framework to promote social justice and develop parental relationships focused on children’s learning. In ReWRITING the BASICS: Literacy Learning in Children’s Cultures, Anne Haas Dyson juxtaposes mandated curriculum with children’s experiences to suggest that mandated curricula devalue the literacy resources inherent in both young writers and their teachers. Finally, Naidoo and Dahlen explore some of the most culturally diverse US communities in their edited volume Diversity in Youth Literature: Opening Doors through Reading. They offer readers a multitude of children’s literature to affirm diverse identities and expand readers’ understandings of dominant power structures carried through children’s literature.

The collections of books reviewed in this column illuminate the cultures and experiences of non-mainstream children while suggesting that effective instructional change must begin with collaboration, understanding, and a spirit of inquiry if educators hope to address issues that equate mandates and standardization with equity.
The power of Regarding Educación, edited by Bryant Jensen and Adam Sawyer, stems from hearing the stories of Mexican-origin (children with a Mexican-born grandparent or great-grandparent), Mexican American (immigrant children from Mexico living in America), and American Mexican (children who have attended American schools but are currently enrolled in Mexican schools) students, their families, and their experiences in schools. Each chapter presents researchers’ work in a forthright manner, with supporting visuals including graphs and tables. Authors provide a full historical context beginning with the 19th century that establishes a foundation to better understand diverse students and families and the educational struggles they face daily. Regarding Educación is divided into five parts with 14 chapters, each written by different researchers. Each section presents facts and examples that will lead readers to understand their obligation to continue dialoguing with researchers and teachers in order to shift practices with Mexican-origin, Mexican American, and American Mexican students. The prospect of hope for the future and the tools for turning that hope into a reality offer readers possibilities to better meet the needs of diverse students and families.

The first section of the text, “Challenges and Dilemmas,” includes three chapters. Each chapter focuses on the specific struggles confronting Mexican American students in the classroom. One of those examples includes “racialization” (Telles & Ortis, p. 40) through discrimination and stereotypes that leads to academic disadvantages. Since 1996, issues of unauthorized migrant workers foreground the conflicts children encounter in school, such as how the daily stress to keep their family’s secret contributes to poor school performance. The final chapter discusses the problems and challenges specific to Mexican-origin children in the area of math that originate from their socioeconomic status, length of time in the United States, and English proficiency.

Part two is called “Mexican Origins” and delves into those factors that hinder Mexican American students’ classroom success. However, the authors start with a unique perspective—that of investigating issues of quality schooling in Mexico. Considering the socioeconomic inequalities of Mexico, the authors explored indigenous students by looking at those who attended indigenous schools and those who attended what are termed regular schools, including Spanish-only public and private schools in both rural and urban areas. Indigenous schools in this research comprise schools serving students from one of the 60 ethnic groups residing in Mexico who speak a language of indigenous origin. Another perspective included in this section documents in general the tremendous benefits of preschool for students. However, preschools in Mexico do not result in schooling advantages; the authors indicate that this fact may be attributed to lack of economic funding.

“Transitional Realities,” the third section, includes three chapters focusing on the transitional lives and migration of Mexican students. The first chapter shares the story of students who migrated from Mexico and now reside in New York City. The authors also include information about the educational attainment of students who come to the United States and the impact of parent education. Completing this section is a discussion of the challenges American Mexican children encounter, such as the one-size-fits-all curriculum, and the advent of collaborative educational strategies developed between Mexico and the United States (further examined in section five, “Bi-National Improvement.”

Language Arts, Volume 91 Number 6, July 2014
Possibilities”). The final chapter examines consequences of the educational challenges and opportunities of migrating students.

The fourth section, “Assets Orientations,” comprises three chapters. The first chapter focuses on Mexican students and their families in California and Mexico, examining data from studies that looked at family rituals, routines, and changes over time in daily structures. The subsequent chapter emphasizes the academic value added for Mexican students when teachers draw on the familial and cultural assets of their students. In the third chapter, the researchers revisit the support US Mexican students receive in New York City schools and discuss one way teachers provide support—planning.

“Bi-National Possibilities,” the final section, offers readers two chapters about the collaborative efforts of policymakers in the United States and Mexico. The authors explore ways the United States formed partnerships with Mexican universities and the Mexican government to highlight services, such as scholarships and online courses, that are often unknown to Mexican students and their families. The final chapter suggests viable options for teachers, offering theoretical explanations that illuminate the power of the instructional practices.

The concept for this book stemmed from the urgent need to provide a forum for examining the school struggles of Mexican immigrant students in the United States and Mexican students in Mexico. The authors share new perspectives into the lives and challenges faced daily by Mexican American, Mexican-origin, and American Mexican students. Insights from Jensen and Sawyer are critical for literacy educators who wish to create a culturally relevant curriculum. The stories they share will help teachers construct counternarratives to foster positive identities for these students and all stakeholders.


It goes uncontested that parents play a pivotal role in their children’s lives—whether academic, social, or emotional. What can be contested, however, is how those roles are defined and by whom. In Race, Community, and Urban Schools: Partnering with African American Families, Greene enters the conversation on parental involvement by adding insight into the ways the low-income African American families with whom he worked conceived of their roles in helping their children flourish in the context of race, urban development, and the economy. Greene uses these parents’ stories to shed light on the commitment that low-income African American families have to their children’s lives. Their stories challenge the notion that low-income African American families are disengaged, do not care, and are uninterested in their children’s education. He also uses the stories of children to offer insights into the ways that children perceive their parents’ involvement. Greene asserts that schools and homes are disconnected both literally and ideologically and that this disconnect reflects the social inequities, deficit theories, and mistrust that exist between low-income African American families and schools. Greene uses the life histories of several parents to detail their experiences with schooling to illustrate how schools can be exclusionary spaces for people of color.

Greene helps educators understand that parents demonstrate their involvement in ways that teachers do not always recognize or consider legitimate, and he avers that parents’ demonstrations of involvement are context-
specific. Parents’ roles shift based on the needs of their children, and their sense of agency is a reflection of the multiple worlds in which they live; it is not restricted to school-sponsored events. Greene invites educators to break away from the dominant narrative in which low-income families are often blamed for their children’s poor academic performance, and asks us to consider the ways in which discriminatory housing practices, employment, and educational disenfranchisement of low-income families limit the opportunities that these families can provide their children. He offers the stories of 17 families with whom he worked as counter-narratives.

Greene argues that parental involvement alone will not address issues of inequity that children from low-income backgrounds experience in schools, and he maintains that policies must be sanctioned that give all children and families advantages. He also maintains that teachers and families must engage in conversations that are dialogic in nature—meaning conversations in which there is a give and take—in order to develop relationships in which teachers and parents can learn from and with each other. He warns that these conversations are critical because teachers and parents occupy different social positions, and parents are often silenced in relationships where unequal power exists. Greene proposes a model of parental involvement built on a social justice framework that takes into consideration who parents are and what they want for their children and themselves.

In her most recent book, Anne Haas Dyson takes readers into two primary classrooms to highlight the complex ways in which young writers use language to negotiate the often conflicting worlds of the traditionally defined “basics”-centered school curriculum (p. xi) and the evolving language-filled world outside of school. This basics-centered curriculum often places literacy educators in precarious positions as they strive to create learning environments that help children construct and reconstruct authentic literacy understandings. Using voices of young writers and their teachers, Dyson’s multiyear ethnography invites educators to question if . . .

In a world—and among children—whose rhythms beat out varied languages and vernaculars, whose landscapes are strewn with multimodal and rhetorically designed texts (e.g., PIZZA, saveBIG), is it sensible, or clarifying, to treat written language as a static set of rules? (p. xi).

As children navigate through the linguistic and multimodal worlds of communities, families, and social circles, they interact with countless examples of text that do not align with the academically defined “basics” of good writing and proper language use. In the world outside of school, children see street signs written in all capital letters, while on television, proper nouns do not always begin with capital letters. Billboards may not contain any punctuation, and daily conversations reflect the grammatical diversity of children’s cultures. Yet when they enter school, children become participants in a standardized (and often regimented and regulated) curriculum that predetermines what, when, and how children must learn. This standardized curriculum is driven by high-stakes testing and often does not recognize the language learning children acquire in their lives outside of school and bring with them into their work as writers and language users. This divide between “unofficial and official” (p. 121) knowing often places the label of at-risk on children before they even enter school and pushes educators to reduce the complexity of language learning into a tightly defined scope and sequence for teaching.
the basics that does not always honor the complex, engaging, and social nature of language learning.

Dyson shares examples of how young writers work to merge their growing understandings of textual and social worlds with the official knowing valued in school, while at the same time highlighting how a prescribed and predetermined curriculum serves to narrow and simplify the complexities of language learning. Dyson advocates for both teachers and children by showing readers how an overly regulated curriculum can devalue the literacy resources available for both developing writers and teachers of writing. Dyson’s commentary stops short of openly criticizing the use of scripted programs and regulated curriculum. Instead, she asks readers to consider the pedagogical challenges created when a basics-centered curriculum is juxtaposed with the “ unofficial world” of children’s experiences and to reconsider what and who defines the basics. Dyson concludes by offering key principles for shaping a curriculum “from the children’s perspectives” (p. 175).

This book is for scholars, researchers, and practitioners who work to give voice to authentic literacy practices that value children as constructors of knowledge and teachers as collaborators in coming to know. Written with all the care, compassion, and attention that is classic Dyson, Re-WRITING the Basics is a timely and stimulating read for all educators who see individuality rather than standardization as the foundation of literacy learning.

Diversity in Youth Literature: Opening Doors through Reading

Diversity in Youth Literature, an edited collection, explores literature that highlights culturally diverse US communities. Throughout the text, reading is offered as a means of expanding and/or affirming learners’ worlds; as such, it acts to pursue social equity. The text addresses the presence of previously omitted groups within youth literature and offers new insights into cultures already present in youth literature. Moreover, the contributors extract the fullness of the metaphor subtitling the book, “opening doors,” by exploring youth literature portraying African American, Latino/a, South Asian, Chamorro, Multiracial, Roma, Muslim, Homeless, Differently-abled, Korean, Transracial and Transnational Asian adoptee, LGBTQ, and Filipino communities. Furthermore, the edition details numerous works and discusses how this literature can broaden children’s worlds and affirm their identities.

Two sections compose the book, “Overview of Diversity in Children’s and Young Adult Literature” and “Exploring Marginalized, Oppressed, and Under/misrepresented Communities in Youth Literature.” The reader enters the initial two chapters through an apt explanation of multicultural literature and cultural competence, and journeys through the experiences of multiple diverse communities portrayed in books. Placed throughout the second section are mini-chapters, called “sliding doors,” designed to address a particular aspect of youth literature, like “differently-able individuals” (p. xvi). The editors include chapters that explain at length and in depth both the failures and the triumphs of various works in portraying diverse cultures.

In the first section, Doll and Garrison a) establish a theoretical framework by citing Bishop (1997) and Temple, Martinez, and Yokota’s (1998) definitions of multicultural literature and b) discuss the broad scope and inclusiveness of US society. They also name books with which educators should fill libraries and classrooms and around which teachers and librarians should design inclusive services and curriculum for all children and teens. Engaging with such literature enables youth to develop cultural understandings that also support their expanding views of the world, offering
marginalized youth reflections of themselves in the mirror of identity-affirming and enriching texts.

In that same section, an outline of six themes serves to guide educators in evaluating multicultural children’s and young adult literature in terms of authentic portrayals of the pluralism within the United States. In Chapter 2, Dresang touches upon multicultural literatures’ expansive “diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, differing abilities, and any cultures that lack power and authority in society” (p. 18). Directing readers toward power structures at work within the inaccurate portrayals and invisibility of various cultures in literature, Dresang expounds literature’s potential power to transform society through ensuring representation and legitimacy of silenced voices and promoting a more socially equitable world among all humans. Educators can learn to recognize such literature by critically analyzing its cultural themes, for example, through means detailed in these pages.

In Chapter 6, Storie, herself from the Mariana Islands, flings open the world of Chamorro realistic fiction in works like Taimanglo’s *Attitude 13* (2010), in which oral tradition merges with local voices and experiences, thus emphasizing the “irrefutable values . . . inafa’maolek [prizing community, peace, and cooperation above self], family, and respect” (p. 86). Storie details the limited number of Chamorro stories published, whether through self-publishing or large publishing houses.

Likewise, in mini-Chapter 3, Gavigan describes the therapeutic uses of and tips for critically evaluating books that portray characters facing a wide spectrum of exceptionalities—Down syndrome, autism, and dyslexia, among others. K–12 educators may employ such literature therapeutically with students in literature circles, readers theater, and other multimodal engagements, whether among students with exceptionalities or all students. This bibliotherapy offers youth with exceptionalities a mirror in which to “identify with the characters’ experiences and frustrations” as well as provides all children a window into the “challenges” of being differently-able, which hopefully prompts “responsive[ness]” toward peers (p. 139).

Detailing suggestions for curriculum design, library collection evaluation, and critical textual analysis, this work is a resource for K–12 educators embracing a critical multicultural stance and for publishers, particularly editorial staff, who must carefully decide how and to whom they grant portrayals in the literature they publish. Readers, whether engaging with one or all chapters in Part 2, will open doors for themselves into the realities of US diverse cultural communities and into further possibilities for employing literature that will help learners critically read words and worlds to pursue social change.

References


Kelli Criss is a curriculum consultant in the Florida Panhandle and can be reached at kelliga@comcast.net. Amy Donnelly is an associate professor of Elementary Language and Literacy at the University of South Carolina and can be reached at ad@sc.rr.com. Marcie Ellerbe is an assistant professor of Literacy Education at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina, and can be reached at mlknox@coastal.edu. Melanie Keel is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina and can be reached at 1palmetto@msn.com. Michele Myers is a principal at Rivelon Elementary School in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and can be reached at knowingaka@hotmail.com.

Search for New Editor of Voices from the Middle

NCTE is seeking a new editor of Voices from the Middle. In May 2016, the term of the present editors (Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than August 29, 2014. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editor. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, in November 2014. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2016. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “Voices from the Middle Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.