

The Transformative Role of Diverse Children's Literature in Confronting Racism



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In the aftermath of the recent deaths of numerous individuals who have fallen victim to racial injustice, the United States is finally beginning to confront its deep-rooted racism. Bestseller lists are now dominated by books on anti-racism, while people take to the streets in protest and policies undergo revisions. Amidst this awakening, educators are realizing the importance of using children's literature as a powerful tool to explore race and racism within their classrooms. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison emphasizes the necessity for diverse literature to enable teachers, libraries, and, most importantly, children to gain a better understanding of the world they inhabit. However, it's essential to accompany these texts with meaningful discussions to prevent unchecked assumptions about race. For example, books can act as mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors, reflecting and affirming our own identities, exposing us to different experiences, and inviting us to immerse ourselves in alternative worlds (Sims Bishop, 1990). In this way, books can prompt critical conversations about race, identity, and acceptance. Despite these opportunities, some states attempt to limit discussions on race in classrooms under the "Critical Race Theory" label. This presentation will highlight the importance of open dialogue, drawing on research to highlight the transformative impact of diverse literature. By creating safe and inclusive spaces, educators empower students to become critical thinkers and empathetic leaders, essential for combating racism and fostering a more equitable world.

Biography:

Dr. Sonja Brandt resides in Grand Forks, North Dakota with her family. She was an elementary teacher for 15 years and is currently an Assistant Professor in Elementary Education at the University of North Dakota. Dr. Brandt teaches elementary, early childhood, and graduate courses at UND. She received the College of Education and Human Development's Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award in 2023. Her areas of research include literacy; teachers' nonverbal immediacy teaching behaviors; active learning and engagement in today's college classrooms; and teacher recruitment and retention. She enjoys traveling, photography, spending time outdoors, and is an avid reader.

Dr. McKenzie Rabenn, a resident of Eagle River, Wisconsin, shares her passion for education as an adjunct professor in literacy education at both UW-River Falls and UW-Superior. Additionally, she serves as a professional development facilitator for the University of North Dakota. Her extensive career in elementary education spans across the Midwest, culminating in the attainment of a Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning from the University of North Dakota (UND). Driven by a fervor for enhancing educational practices, Dr. Rabenn's research interests revolve around online learning, teacher professional development, literacy, and rural education.