

# Celebrating Cultural Diversity: Skyview Library



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Skyview Middle School celebrates a multicultural population of 1,129 students, 508 (45%) of which are represented by minorities. With so much diversity, the school embraces a variety of programs, classes, displays, and artwork that create an atmosphere of inclusivity, as well as learning experiences that foster appreciation for many different cultures. The library is a natural extension of cultural expression; an important place to link home cultures to school, provide opportunities for silenced voices to be heard, promote lifelong learning and achievement for all, enjoy linguistic diversity, and empower children to function in a global society (Diamond and Moore, 1995).

The library is not only a place to house books promoting culturally responsive learning, but an important space for cultural exchanges. During the first week of school, our library hosted a visiting delegation of Japanese students organized by our World Cultures teacher, Gary Heaston, in conjunction with the Japan-American Society of Southern Colorado. In a Fox news article, peer student leaders said the experience broaden their horizons (Mastrangelo, 2015):

“There’s a connection in the world, like there is a connection with us and them and we are not isolated from other things and to go out and travel in the world and experience different cultures.”

—Rece Rowan, eighth grade WEB leader.

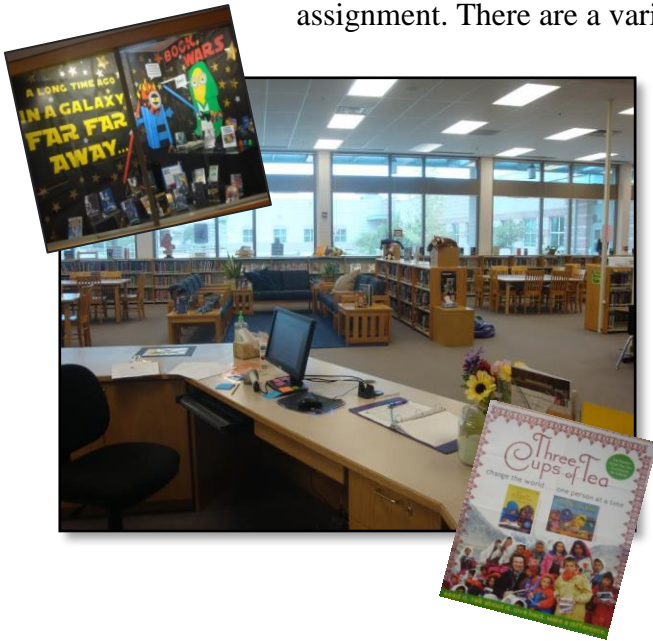
Interacting with students from other cultures fosters understanding of differences and serves to dispel misinformation on a country and its people. If students learn about other cultures exclusively through media, then this limited exposure can create perpetual stereotypes (Naidoo, 2014). Reading accurate literature and having meaningful exchanges can help replace those distorted images, facilitating acceptance and appreciation of other societies.



I hear a lot from students that the Skyview Library is their favorite place because it's quiet and peaceful and it has books. I spent time examining the posters and general décor as per this

assignment. There are a variety of ethnic representations on the wall that mostly

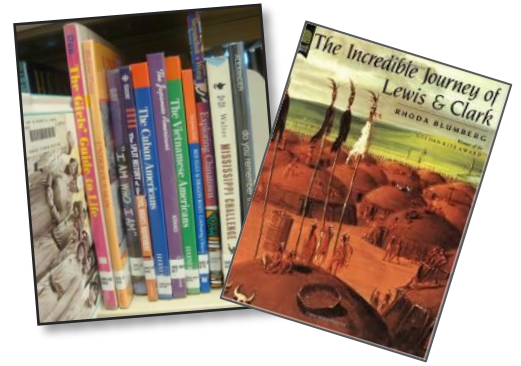
contain celebrities encouraging reading or general cultural references. It is true, that if a librarian stopped there, a very limited message would be conveyed as mentioned by Laura Summers (2010) in her article the Culturally Responsive Leadership in School Libraries. Interestingly, I do have conversations in the magazine sections with students, and I had one recently in light of the 9/11 observance



in the library yesterday with a young refugee from the country of Democratic Republic of the Congo. We talked about the newscast she had seen on the attacks, and since it was before her birth, she was trying to process it into her own experience. She looked up at me with a tremendous amount of maturity for her age and said, “I know how you (Americans) feel. People hated my father and my family was chased out of the Congo by rebels and my sister was shot in the eye. It has been very hard for us.” In that moment two countries built a bridge of understanding to each other.

Examining our collection closely, I discovered many things. First there is a great, albeit not big, section in the 300s on racism and cultural biases. There were titles such as *Desegregation* by Greenhaven Press, which contained an anthology of major developments and events in history. There was also *Indian School* by Michael Cooper, chronicling the good *and* the bad that came from forcing Sioux Indians into boarding schools and indoctrination of the white man's way.

Looking over these holdings, they appeared to be fair and balanced perspectives of injustice in America. In contrast, the 900s section had two books I found to be demeaning. First was the book *Black Indians*, whose author didn't seem to mind bandying about the color "black" and "red" when distinguishing interracial African Americans from pure blooded Native Americans. The copyright was 1986, so perhaps the time period lended itself more to those labels. The book was informative, but I found the word choices offensive. The second made me chuckle. It was *The Incredible Journey of Lewis & Clark* by Rhoda Blumberg, copyright 1987. The chapter on "A Troublesome Tribe" begins by stating, "The Teton Sioux were known to stop boats and force traders to forfeit cargo as a toll. Sometimes they compelled rivermen to sell goods at ridiculously low prices, then profited by reselling the goods to other Indians" (p.51). Could this resemble American capitalism at all? She could be describing Donald Trump here. And didn't the government take land from the Indians without compensation? The book is riddled with language that paints the Indian population as crafty and "bad," and the Eurocentric side is often described in light of the exploits of "the glorious expedition" (p127).



It is also worth mentioning that Skyview contains many classics that are known to contain controversial racism. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, for its description of the African Oompa Loompas who work for Mr. Wonka for free (slaves), *The Secret Garden*, where a character named Mary says that "blacks are not people." Then there's *Doctor Doolittle*, where in order for the African prince to marry the white princess, the good doctor bleaches his skin to avoid social stigma. The list goes on, but the point is, that certain perspectives are found in many works of classic literature, and instead of ruining my childhood thinking about them, I'd rather acknowledge their existence and move on in blissful reading ignorance.

Overall, Skyview’s library does meet Summer’s Level Three: The Transformation Stage: providing “colleagues and students (with) resources that offer multiple cultural perspectives and viewpoints, and teaches students to know and praise their own and each other’s heritage” (p11). There is even a map outside our door showing some of the literature we have represented from around the world:



But as the map shows, many continents like Africa and South America are sadly underrepresented. That would be an improvement I would make, and also increasing our Latinos language section, as well as perhaps adding some other world language translations, like Chinese since that would be our next largest ELD population.

In an attempt to help my students become more culturally aware and compassionate, I plan to build into our displays (we have four display cases!) a presentation on the subject of persecution around the world. There is an image that haunts me from the past, and a new image surfaced that reminded me of that very same picture just a few days ago. The first is a mother



and her children who became the “face of the Great Depression” from 1936. The second is a picture of a Syrian mother and her children, washed up on the coast of Greece to escape horrific crimes instigated by the Islamic State. And although the migrant mother isn’t a result of persecution,

the suffering etched in their faces seems similar to me. I want to build into the library culture the awareness of the helpless and the need to act to protect them.



Speaking the truth is a powerful thing. Right now world cultural institutions are under attack, targeted by fanatic militant groups. In a UNESCO (2015) news release from February, there are reports of destruction of thousands of books in museums, libraries and universities across Mosul. According to the UN agency: “The books—on topics ranging from philosophy and law to science and poetry—have been deliberately burned over the past several weeks in what may be one of the most devastating acts of destruction of library collections in human history.” I feel a very real pain in my chest when I read this because I feel in my deepest heart of hearts that the preservation of such institutions is a sacred duty. I have learned that this “cultural cleansing” attempts to blot out not just the lives of a people, but their souls too, when culture, knowledge, and memories are targeted for destruction.

I will end this essay with this: During this time in history, it is more important than ever to instill a love and appreciation for all people and cultures from around the world. And by teaching our youth the importance of valuing the intelligence and creativity of others through library institutions, we preserve the beauty of own cultural heritage.

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