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Exploring Multiple Identities in Children's Literature With Project LIT

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ANDEE ZOMERMAN is a newly endorsed Certified Librarian working at Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton as a Library Media Assistant. An advocate for school libraries, she dreams of a day when every student has access to a Teacher-Librarian.

See Me

Only in the last 20 years have we seen seeds of intersectional identities planted in children's/young adult literature. Even in this shift, the majority of authors writing books with diverse characters are white. In 2017, 31 percent of published Kidlit contained diverse characters, yet only 7 percent published were written by Black, Latinx, and Native authors combined (Jalissa, 2018).

Rudine Sims Bishop wrote in her essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" (1990):

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.

I work in the Beaverton School District. Forty-eight percent of our students are white, which means students of color are the majority. Yet, 87 percent of our teachers are white (Oregon Department of Education, 2018). The staff/student ethnicity ratio is problematic for most of our students needing "mirrors" in their learning environment. Until this balances out in districts around Oregon, literature can serve these students in reflective ways, as well as providing windows to peer into each others' lives and cultures.

As a librarian, it is imperative for me to display books in which every student at our middle school can see their reflections. In those same reads, different students will gain empathy for others. Which book will impact which student may not be easy to predict. Ensuring the library is stocked with encouraging stories emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion is under my control. How else can I provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to our learning community? I found a way using the Project LIT model.



Project LIT

Started in 2016 by Nashville high school teacher Jarred Amato, Project LIT (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/projectlitcommunity/about/>) began as a plan to bring culturally relevant books to the classroom and the community. Project LIT groups vary in size and how often they meet. The main rule is to focus on a given list of books highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion. By the beginning of the 2018–2019 school year, 400 schools in over 40 states (Amato, n.d.) dedicated themselves to the mission of developing diverse collections for diverse readers. As of this writing, the community registered to participate in the next school year has grown to over 1,000 schools in all 50 states, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

Project LIT in a Middle School

The beauty of running a Project LIT chapter is the flexibility to find what works for your group. When we started at Five Oaks Middle School, we met as an after-school club with sixth to eighth grade students. By winter break, we determined meeting after school hours resulted in inconsistent attendance and difficulty keeping the group accountable. When we returned to school in January, we altered the plan.

For the remainder of the school year, we met during lunch period every Thursday. We closed the library to all other students and Project LIT Book Club participants brought their meal into the space for a solid 30-minute discussion. This also required breaking up



one group into three separate groups due to each grade level having a different lunch period. The change worked to our benefit. Sixth, seventh, and eighth grades each chose a book to focus on for the month. Eighth graders would read more mature titles, Sixth graders focused on middle-grade reads, Seventh graders were somewhere in between, and the book discussions became more age-appropriate.

Club picks were chosen on the first Thursday of the month and discussion would take place on the last Thursday of the month. (If students finished before then, I asked them to choose another Project LIT title, or I would suggest books to complement that month's selection.) On weeks in the middle of the month, we would find current event topics to deliberate or craft fun activities relating to the topic at hand. For example, when we read Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ghost Boys* we had a discussion about #BlackLivesMatter. When we read Kwame Alexander's book in verse, *Rebound*, we created our own stories using blackout poetry. When the book discussion finished at the end of each month, I asked group members to either write a book review on a Google Slide or film a book review video on Flipgrid.

Readers and Leaders

Project LIT is a group effort. To become a chapter, at least two adults commit to mentoring the group. I was fortunate enough to have two teachers participate with me. But this doesn't mean Project LIT is labor-intensive for the adults. Once the group is established, students are expected to take leadership roles in the group. Obviously, tasks for a sixth-grader will look vastly different from those for a high school senior. Taking responsibility may look like students recruiting for the group, coming up with current event topics, or leading the book discussion.

We've heard the saying "Leaders are readers," but what about the kids who struggle with reading at grade level or shy away from books with lots of pages and small font? It hasn't been a negative issue in our group. In fact, where other book competition clubs focus on the trivia and plot points of the stories, lower level readers in Project LIT gain insight from the weekly discussions. Even if they don't complete the book as quickly as their peers, they press on, feeling comfortable with the topics and contributing their opinions. In the Project LIT group at a neighboring high school, a choice of three books is given per month so readers are sure to find a just-right-pick for themselves.

Project LIT Possibilities

I've mentioned the way Project LIT is run at our school. But what else is possible? Next year, we will partner with other district schools for Project LIT quarterly events. This may be a dinner with a guest speaker, a movie outing, or a Skype visit with an author. With so many titles offered, we plan on sharing the load, purchasing multiple copy sets, and swapping during the school year.

Public Libraries can join the fun, too! Mark Richardson, Young Adult and Reference Librarian at nearby Cedar Mill & Bethany Community Libraries, partnered with our two Beaverton schools. In addition to adding multiple copies of Project LIT selections to their shelves (complete with a Project LIT spine label), Mark hosted a Project LIT evening, open for students to discuss titles. He also set up a reading challenge where students logged completed reads for the chance to win prizes.



Becoming a Project LIT chapter means joining part of a nationwide community. Ideas flow in Facebook groups, Twitter chats, and Google Docs. While many of the chapter leaders are librarians, you will also find Social Studies, Language Arts, History teachers and others in the education field. The tips, hints, and lesson plans I've perused will help me with the curriculum beyond Project LIT.

The Beaverton School District does not employ Teacher-Librarians in their schools. Three District Librarians supervise Library Media Assistants in 53 locations. Because of the freedom in how a Project LIT Book Club is conducted, it's manageable in a paraeducator's schedule. In a certified role, co-teaching with Project LIT will allow topic discussions and activities to go even deeper. Our District Librarian supports us with book orders ready to go and facilitating idea discussions in district meetings.

Student Responses

I sing the praises of Project LIT and its diverse book introductions to anyone who will listen. But don't just take my word for it. These are a few middle school "mirror, window, and sliding glass door" responses to a few of this year's selections:

- "I related to Malú because I know what it's like to be scared to move to a new school." Ella, Sixth grade, reading *The First Rule of Punk* by Celia C. Perez.
- "My mom makes me mad, like Charlie's mom makes him mad." Diana, Eighth grade, reading *Rebound* by Kwame Alexander.
- "Many people I love have died and I relate to many of the feelings Charlie had." Journey, Eighth grade, reading *Rebound* by Kwame Alexander.
- "I learned that you should always have a best friend by your side and be nice to everyone around you." Gracie, Seventh grade, reading *Wishtree* by Katherine Applegate.
- "Thank you for always teaching us different types of genres with windows and mirrors." Oyin, Eighth grade, response to being part of the Project LIT group.

Host a Project LIT Chapter

To find more about the Project LIT Community, follow us on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/projectlitcommunity/> or on: Twitter [@ProjectLitComm](https://twitter.com/ProjectLitComm). Fill out the [Google Form Application](#) here. School libraries need diverse books. Offering students titles in which they can see themselves and step into empathy is the librarian's work toward a compassionate, educated future. 

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