



Let's Make Curriculum Connections with Students

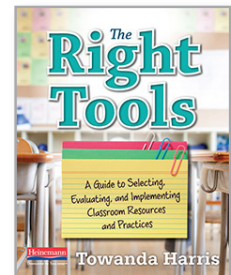
by DR. TOWANDA HARRIS



LITERACY CHAMPION: DR. TOWANDA HARRIS

Dr. Towanda Harris has been a teacher, staff developer, literacy content specialist, instructional leadership coordinator, and an instructional coach. Currently an adjunct professor of reading and writing at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, she brings almost twenty years of experience to the education world. Towanda is the author of *The Right Tools: A Guide to*

Selecting, Evaluating, and Implementing Classroom Resources and Practices. Educators rely on her wisdom about finding resources that meet their teaching goals and match their understanding of their students' needs. Teachers turn to her to learn how to employ those resources, blend them with best practices, and help all students reach their full potential. Towanda is a Heinemann PD provider, presenting One-Day Workshops, Webinar Series, and On-Site PD. Some of her workshops include the Wisconsin State Reading Association Conference, National Reading Recovery Conference, Indiana State Reading Conference, and the GDOE Impacting Student Learning Conference.



One to Know: Connect and Reflect

In [Adora Svitak's 2010 Ted Talk](#), at 12 years old, she said, "The students should teach their teachers. Learning should be reciprocal." In essence, she talked about the need for students to feel like they are genuinely a part of the learning experience. Making learning meaningful for both the student and the teacher is a continuous cycle. Educators are often thinking of ways to make learning engaging and relevant. Usually, the term "meaningful learning experiences" is associated solely with academics (e.g., reading, math, social studies, etc.) and can overshadow the need to ignite the learning and make a personal connection with students' lives. Instead, learning should be a beautiful dance of weaving students' life experiences and prior learning while connecting new knowledge of skills and strategies throughout the journey.

“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 in which they are a part” (Sims-Bishop, 1990).

Dr. Rudine Sims-Bishop’s work around [“mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors”](#) is a great reminder that there should be careful thought and effort to choose the best resources, curriculum, and materials for our students each year. The [2018 Diversity in Children’s Books study](#) compiled by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center revealed that there is much more work to do. The latest study showed that there continues to be a misrepresentation of underrepresented communities. In 2018, the dominating characters depicted in children’s books were white (50%) and animals (27%). Sadly, African/African American, Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific American, Latinx, and American Indians/First Nations totaled the rest. As a result, we must intentionally choose diverse titles to invite various perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences into our daily learning.

What to Do: Plan for Literacy Instruction

By rethinking how we plan for literacy instruction, we can choose the right tools to connect with an essential piece of the puzzle, our students. Here are some guiding questions that can support making curriculum connections with your students:

Choosing Resources:

- Do the resources provided allow students to reflect and connect with their identity?
- Are there specific students not benefiting from the use of the resource? Why or why not?

Facilitating Meaningful Learning:

- Is feedback 2-way, in which students engage in conversations among teachers and peers? How do you know?
- During the new learning, what resonates with students as they reflect on their life experiences?

Co-Creating Spaces:

- What opportunities are we allowing for students’ two worlds to meet in daily discussions (school life AND home life)?
- Which voices overshadow the other voices in your class? Are there multiple ways students can engage in learning (e.g., blogging, speaking, posting, etc.)?

More to Know and Do

Here are some ways that you can begin this work in your practice today:

Swapping Titles It's OK, I promise. We can teach about "community helpers" with titles other than the suggested list in a basal program. Don't get me wrong. Teaching thematic units helps make learning relevant, but if you preview the stories before the unit begins and find that it is a stretch to connect the individuals and experiences to your learners, then let it go. Instead, I suggest finding more relevant titles that your students can see themselves in and are more culturally responsive. By being more culturally responsive, you recognize the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Pairing Text Alright, I hear you. Some titles must be on the scope and sequence list; however, that does not absolve us from ensuring that we are inclusive in our instruction. Pairing a text with another text that reflects different experiences and perspectives helps our students make connections to the learning. For example, the story "Cinderella" can be paired with "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters" because of their similar plots; students can discuss the lessons that the characters learned while making connections to their own experiences.

Short Reads Try sandwiching a variety of short multimodal texts between longer texts in your units. Exposing students to articles, storyboards, picture books, social media posts, posters, and more give your students more opportunities to experience and discuss other perspectives while making connections to themselves and the world around them.

How to Reach Dr. Towanda Harris

Learn more about contracting services with Towanda and visit towandaharris.com.

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Towanda is the author of [*The Right Tools: A Guide to Selecting, Evaluating, and Implementing Classroom Resources and Practices*](#)

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