CAPSTONE PROJECT: CREATING A DATA STRUCTURE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT LITERATURE FOR USE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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The purpose of my capstone project was to create a resource that answers the question: What tools will help teachers and students access culturally relevant classroom materials for middle school students? The question was primarily motivated by personal experience working in diverse schools with materials that did not meet the academic needs and match the diversity of the student populations. Another source of inspiration was in working with a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to utilize diverse and culturally relevant resources in our classrooms to help students see people “like them” in literature. From each of these experiences, it became clear that finding such resources is a difficult task for many educators and led to the creation of my capstone project.

In order to help educators access culturally relevant literature for middle school students, I created a website and online data structure. The search tool utilizes five key components of culture to categorize books to help determine books that will match student’s interests based on one or multiple aspects of culture. The search categories are: race/ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, and nationality. The tool has five drop-down menus - one for each area of culture. Users are able to select various options for each of the selected areas of culture. Users may select subcategories within multiple categories of culture, continually narrowing the selection of books that meet the chosen criteria. Each change in the drop down menus produces a change in the available book selection, showing diverse books that qualify under the search.

The data structure is meant to be a tool to aid teachers and students in selecting appropriate, culturally relevant texts that meet the interest of students. It was necessary to have the product available for all to see so that conversations around diversity are able
to be shared between all members of the school community. Ideally, students and teachers use the tool together, as they find books that peak the student’s interest, open up dialogue for relationship building, and provide opportunities for discussions around books, leading to greater literacy and interest in reading.

Being hosted online allows the data structure to be put through ongoing revisions as needed to best serve the users, including additions of book titles and changes regarding where the books can be found. A protected form is accessible in order to add books to the JSON file as they become part of the media center’s collection. There is also a feature that allows items in the database to be edited over time if there are errors found in the information.

The primary audience for this project are the students and teachers at a diverse suburban middle school in the Midwest whose media center books were used to create the database. It is available for staff and students to utilize, as it promotes conversation, relationships, and collaboration around culturally relevant literacy materials. Further, giving students the ability to utilize the data structure gives them ownership in their reading and likely means that they are finding appropriate books based on their interests.

Book titles in the data structure range in reading level from upper-elementary through young adult and have a variety of topics. The books are generally appropriate for students are 10-15, although students outside of that age range may find the books interesting or may want to utilize the website to search for books of a particular cultural value, despite being above or below the reading level of the student. Further, teachers are encouraged to read the titles on the data structure in order to read diverse literature and continue building relationships with students through shared literature. Although linked
on one school website, the hope is that the audience would reach farther than the school community. The audience for this project could be as far reaching as a global scale, as the database is accessible on an independent website.

The accessible nature of the project will help educators best utilize the diverse books currently available. Even with the need for new titles from diverse authors and perspectives, educators must utilize what is currently available. There are many books from underrepresented viewpoints that have been published over a number of years that include diverse character and offer varied perspectives. As educators, we can speak to the need for more diverse literature, but we must take advantage of current books. From putting together this project I was pleased with the variety of titles available at my school, however, I was not familiar with many of the books until I began the research phase of the project. My hope is that utilizing this tool will allow educators and students to see the potential for connections in the books currently available.
Website Link: welovediversebooks.bitbucket.io

Website Description: The website’s main purpose is to host the data structure of culturally relevant literature and to serve as a way to search the compiled data. The main (home) screen is where the search categories are located and the results populate to show books that match the search criteria. The website also features the following pages: About this Project, About the Creators, Other Resources, and Contact Us.

Website Screenshots:

The home screen contains a welcome note, the search based on the categories of culture, and the data of all of the books in the data structure. The home screen contains the search capabilities described in the methods section (chapter three) of the capstone paper. Users can select one or more search categories. Once “search” is selected, the books in the database that meet the selection criteria will appear and the message on the screen shown above will change from “You have not selected any search criteria. Here is the complete list of diverse books available for the search once you select criteria from the left” to “Results”.
The “About this Project” page shares information about how the project was developed, what criteria was used, the target audience, and how the project seeks to benefit the teaching profession. There is an overview section that gives a brief story of how the project came to life, goals for the project, and shares thanks to people who helped the project come to life. There is also an FAQ section.

The About the Creators page shares information about myself, Courtney Ramirez, and
Marinda Phandanouvong. It shares our unique roles in creating the website. I am in charge of the content on the page. Marinda focuses on the coding of the website and its features.

The Other Resources page offers two types of resources. The first section gives resources to help users find diverse books. The second section gives resources used in the website creation.
The Contact Us page features a Google Form. Information submitted on the form is sent to the website’s designated email address.
Capstone Project Bibliography


