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Teaching diverse books to a diverse student population

What is this research about?

Few studies have investigated whether the books students read in North American schools reflect the increasing diversity of student populations in North America. The goal of this study was to explore what kinds of books English teachers choose to teach and what kinds of factors influence their decision to choose some books over others.

What did the researchers do?

Six female and four male secondary school English teachers from south western Ontario were interviewed. Teachers teaching within urban, rural and suburban contexts with experience ranging from 2 to 30 years were included in the study. All of the teachers had taught locally developed, applied and academic level English courses.

Teacher participants were asked to identify the factors that influence their choice in books for their English classrooms, including:

What you need to know:

While the student population in Ontario grows increasingly diverse, students may not be adequately exposed to diverse texts within English classrooms nor taught books from multiple perspectives.

- 1) What factors influence their choice of books for their English classrooms?
- 2) How do the expectations within their school influence what they teach and how they teach it?
- 3) How do they negotiate, resist or work around censorship issues?

What did the researchers find?

Holloway and Greig (2011), found that despite the efforts of some teachers to diversify the reading materials students are exposed to in class, few books have found their way into Ontario classrooms that explore and display perspectives that differ from those taught over the last fifty years.



The researchers found that teacher choices were influenced by factors such as: what books were available; what books teachers valued; what books teachers felt comfortable teaching; what kinds of support teachers received from administration; the opinions of their peers and the community; and what teachers believed was important for students to learn. Some teachers described how the condition of books influenced their decisions; for example, teachers may choose a book because many good copies of it are available to distribute to students in her or his classroom. Teachers also indicated that those responsible for purchasing new books may not be interested in buying texts that explore different perspectives or that financial constraints may limit their choice of books.

Principals, department heads and librarians were identified as the people most likely to be in charge of deciding which books were purchased. For this reason, teachers would sometimes turn to these individuals for support if they wanted to teach alternative books.

Teachers also described that not everyone at the school felt comfortable teaching new books, particularly if they dealt with issues of racism or sexual

orientation. Teachers indicated that they were worried about possible backlash from students, parents and colleagues.

Teachers suggested that they would be more likely to teach controversial issues if they believed they had the support of their principal, they felt it was an important issue, and if their students appeared to be enjoying and engaging in the learning experience.

Teachers also indicated that their choice in books was influenced by which books they felt boys would most engage with, since they believed that boys were less likely than girls to enjoy reading.

How can you use this research?

This research can be used to encourage administrators and educators to introduce students to diverse books, to teach books from multiple perspectives, and to introduce books to their students that touch upon controversial issues. It can also be used to encourage administrators to provide greater support for teachers attempting to introduce diverse texts and diverse perspectives into their classrooms.

This research can also inform professional development for teachers and administrators on diversifying the





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texts and perspectives that students are exposed to in English classes.

About the researchers

Susan M. Holloway (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. Her research focuses on critical literacy, feminist theory, and English Language Arts. She teaches English Methodology at the pre-service level and literacy in the M.Ed. program.

Christopher J. Greig, B.A. (Laurier), M. Ed. (Western), Ph.D. (Western), a former elementary classroom school teacher, is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Windsor, Faculty of Education. He teaches Language Arts methodology in the pre-service program and teaches Issues in Education at the graduate level. His research is primarily focused on gender and history, boys and boyhood, masculinities and schooling, and gender and literacy. He is currently involved in writing the history of boyhood in postwar Ontario, 1945-1960.

References

Holloway, S.M. and Greig, C.J. (2011). Literary text selections in secondary school classrooms: Exploring the practices of English teachers as agents of change. *Brock Education*, 20(2).

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About this summary

The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the [Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research](#), an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE's clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary reflects findings from this study *only* and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

This summary has been adapted from the [ResearchSnapshot](#) series developed by [York University](#) and [ResearchImpact](#) and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.