

# Centering the Literacy Lives of Young People of Color in Our Classrooms

by Kimberly Parker

# Reaching the Brilliant & the Bored

## I believe in rage, and I believe in action.

**Ze’Voun tells me that he never knew that reading books could matter so much, could be so enjoyable. He is a young man who is black, brilliant, and bored. He is a writer and a reader for whom many schools are not designed. When he disappears from my class without any explanation, I learn that he has been assigned to an out-of-school placement program, joining other boys who are—likely—as black, brilliant, and bored as he is.**

My most essential work is making classrooms spaces where kids like Ze’Voun can read and write in ways that matter to them—from diss tracks to letters to the local police department reminding them that black lives matter, too, and that wearing their hoodies is not a crime; to Tweets to favorite authors thanking them for books that seem to be written just for them; to reading books that affirm, reflect, and extend their existence as brilliant black boys. My rage helped me to realize that I needed to open spaces inside my classroom where students can speak a variety of Englishes as they explore the origins of Ebonics, where they can engage and delight with both canonical and multicultural texts, write about their understandings, and create texts that validate and stretch their identities. This is some of “the work my soul must have.”

## Into the classroom

What does this mean for the day-to-day teaching of high school English?

I work with young people who enter high school behind. They have had few positive reading experiences. They often have undiagnosed learning challenges. They have suffered from adults’ low expectations of them for too long. When we meet and I share my expectations, it’s no wonder that they look at me incredulously. I tell them that this year they will love reading (or, at least like it a lot), that they will read at least forty books of their choice, and that their writing will be driven by their interests.

Some even laugh at me. Others glance at classmates, roll their eyes, call me some inaudible name I’ve heard before.

(Note: I’m pretty sure Ze’Voun did *all* of those things at some point in our history.)

My school tracks students heavily. Typically, students of color and other underserved young people are placed in the euphemistically named “College Prep” track, while their white peers are placed in Honors and Advanced Placement classes. For the most part, students remain in those tracks for the duration of their high school experiences. I’ve come to understand, after fifteen years of teaching, that my students have no reason to suspend their perceptions and realities that have brought them into my classroom.

Initially, I taught only Honors classes (and predominantly white, privileged students). But, as I frequently interacted with young people who were not in my classes (predominantly students of color and economically diverse), I knew I wanted to use my classroom to create an intentional literacy community that explicitly focused on eliminating the achievement and opportunity gap that was not getting any narrower despite the hours my faculty spent discussing it.

Out of that rage came the action: Honors Prep.

My hunch is that explicitly naming the academic strategies and behaviors required to succeed in an Honors/Advanced Placement English class will demystify the higher-level courses for students and impact their attitudes and their propensity to take more Honors or Advanced Placement courses. Importantly, giving students the time to practice and become proficient in those academic skills and behaviors over two semesters will prepare them to enter and remain on the advanced literacy track for the remainder of their high school careers. Equally important, creating a cohort of students who take upper-level classes together could diminish the feelings of isolation that many students of color report, feelings that can become a barrier for them to enter or remain in upper-level classes.



## My most essential work is making classrooms spaces where kids can read and write in ways that matter to them.

One foundational piece in my classroom has been student choice for independent reading books and the intentional curation of a classroom library that is diverse and inclusive. I believe in Rudine Sims Bishop's "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" to provide young people with texts that affirm and extend their identities. Far too many students have entered my classroom and exclaimed that they never knew there were books written by authors of similar backgrounds. They never knew. It's not enough to flood them with books of all genres; it's more important to surround them with books that echo their language, their traditions, their ways of being, their ways of dreaming.

Though Ze'Voun never returned, I continue to hold space in my classroom for other young people who have similar needs and desires, who are hungry for the diverse texts that reach them. I continue to hold on to a belief, and a dream, that the work I do must be as diverse as the students—as escapist, as validating, as powerful as the texts they read. As whole, as free, as happy as we all wish, hope, and need to be.

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### Reference

Bishop, R. S. 1990. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6 (3).

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**Kimberly Parker** currently works as English Teacher, Writing Instructor, and Curriculum Consultant in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. She holds a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from

the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. Kim spent the first year of her Heinemann Fellowship studying ways to increase the number of students of color in Honors English classes. Kim received the Marion Gleason Most Promising New Teacher Award from the New England Association of Teachers of English (NEATE) and has spoken widely about the urgent need to ensure that students of color have equal access to challenging curriculum. She also speaks on a range of topics related to high school literacy.

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