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Humes 103

Dr. Bory

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Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors: The Case for Culturally Relevant Reading

The lecture "Culturally Relevant Reading—Important yet Under Siege," led by Davidson College professors Shireen Campbell, Tracy Bailey, and Rebeca Fernandez, alongside student Maddie Wagler '26, commented on the dangers of current legislative efforts to remove material representative of different ethnicities, cultures, and gender and sexual orientations from public educational institutions, both specific to North Carolina and abroad. Lecturers implored those in attendance to resist these misinformed efforts and support those whose identities are disappearing from bookshelves.

Dr. Tracy Bailey from Davidson College's Educational Studies department referenced Ohio State University professor Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's analogy of "books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" in her argument against the withdrawal of culturally relevant materials from North Carolinian public schools and the prevention of local governments and state agencies from promoting DEI policies and initiatives—the very aim of three bills (Senate Bill 227, Senate Bill 558, and House Bill 171) that will be enacted into law if the North Carolina General Assembly is successful in overriding Governor Josh Stein's veto.

Literature's transformative ability to reflect a personal experience and position it within a larger cultural and historical context is uniquely important in a number of ways—first, for its fostering of empathy across different communities. The claim that public-facing content is "divisive" isn't just close-minded—it's counterfactual to the unifying insights culturally relevant

reading provides. Culturally relevant reading makes unfamiliar and underrepresented perspectives more accessible. It affirms and celebrates cultural variety while also making obvious the things everyone, regardless of these differences, has in common. It's ultimately in these commonalities across the cultural gradient that empathy and understanding take hold.

The ability to identify the good and the bad of oneself in another begins with hearing their story. A textbook, for example, does not achieve the same complex response that a personal narrative evokes—a matter observed by student Maddie Wagler '26, in her role as a Servant Leader Intern at one of North Carolina's Freedom Schools, and elaborated on by Dr. Rebeca Fernandez, whose expertise is in the language development and academic socialization of linguistic minorities. Exposing children to literature that is of personal interest and identification offers a reason for them to engage with reading in the first place. Legislation that aims to narrow the representation of cultures and orientations deprives certain groups of that reason. If in the developmental stages of literacy there is nothing of semblance to the reader within the texts to which they are exposed, the reader will likely disengage from the practice of reading altogether, consequently widening comprehension gaps between socioeconomic groups.

This is where I must recognize my privilege in attending educational institutions where books of interest were accessible, fostering more than just a fondness for reading. Unfortunately, the probability of developing an affection for reading is often limited to those with a higher degree of "unrestrained" skill beyond just foundational reading skills. These skills, according to Dr. Fernandez and Dr. Wagler, largely depend on experiential exposure outside of the classroom through independent reading and conversation, which was made accessible to me by my parents and the extracurricular faculties I was afforded.

English professor Dr. Shireen Campbell argued that the previously mentioned legislation furthers this reading crisis, presenting a direct correlation between lower literacy rates and the probability of challenges to socioeconomic stability. “Reluctant reading” by middle schoolers is problematic because this is the critical age where curiosity beyond oneself develops. If availability to culturally relevant works is staunch, opportunities for students to build on their unrestrained skills through informative dialogue become fewer. Discussed by both Dr. Campbell and Wagler, the inclusion of children in “adult” conversations is also imperative in overcoming the reading crisis. In leading her class of first and second graders in conversations rooted in the reading the children had done, Wagler was entreated to the fresh perspectives of her students on issues of cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion. When children are invited to think critically about such issues, it instills in them a sense of duty to understand their own backgrounds better and empathize with those from different upbringings.

Schools, specifically school libraries, are most commonly where this type of thinking happens for children. Libraries should be a safe and representative space for all. Legislation that enforces the destruction of facilities that encourage the having of difficult conversations and the procuring of opportunities for cultural enrichment puts at stake children’s capability for empathy. Thus, viewing culturally relevant material, specifically readings, as “divisive” poses a serious threat to our own humanity. Once I realized this, the urgency with which the panelists at this lecture spoke made sense. Standardizing reading and ignoring the perspectives that paint “the larger picture” induces a certain blindness—one that we are responsible not to succumb to.

Pledge

"On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others." —Mary Ellis Beach