## Cultivating Voice and Agency [5:31]

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### About

Literacy is strongly connected with voice and agency.

### Transcript

Much of the discourse about literacy and Black youth focuses on raising test scores and closing the achievement gap. However, literacy plays a much larger role in the lives of Black youth. It is connected to intellectual growth, identity, resiliency, resolve, and a positive life trajectory. It is also a powerful tool of voice and agency. In this segment, we focus on how cultivating voice and agency is connected to the literacy development of Black youth, and how librarians can create environment where African American students can develop and use their voices in meaningful ways.

Voice has multiple dimensions. One dimension corresponds with how the term voice is used in the teaching of writing, and demonstrates a desire for student engagement, communication, and knowledge creation. This dimension encourages African American youth to use their voices for real purpose and real audiences. Librarians who cultivate this dimension of voice recognize that Black youth have stories to tell, that their stories are important, and that by telling their stories, they can help dismantle mistaken assumptions that are too often made about them.

Another dimension of voice is related to social action. It recognizes that African American youth not only possess expert knowledge about issues facing their school and communities, but that they can also provide unique insight into how these issues should be investigated and addressed. This dimension of voice is a central component of Youth Participatory Action Research or YPAR, which engages youth who are directly affected by a problem in investigating and taking action on the issue. By helping Black youth understand that they can be change agents in their communities, this form of "voice" challenges the dominant, deficit-oriented view of people of color and other marginalized groups.

Agency can be defined as the power to act. In educational settings, the most basic form of agency is the ability of Black youth to influence class topics, activities, and final products, as well as the individual decisions that they make as writers and readers. In school and public libraries, this would also include the ability to influence collection development and programming decisions, as well as the freedom, support, and tools and resources to pursue their personal interests and passions. As with voice, YPAR is one powerful approach to cultivate agency among Black youth.

Research has shown that efforts to increase youth voice and agency make a difference in the attitudes, behaviors, and engagement of all youth. As scholar Jyothi Bathina notes, when African American youth are "allowed to speak and to write their truth, they begin the process of introspection, inquiry, and critical thinking". They develop literacy skills within a context that not only reflects and respects their life experiences, but also recognizes and builds on the linguistic capital and knowledge base of the African American community. So what concrete steps can librarians take to cultivate voice and agency among Black youth?

Writing workshops are one type of programming that many libraries already participate in, but it is especially important that libraries serving African American youth invest in the staff and resources necessary to make these workshops a core part of their strategic plan. A key component of writing workshops must be the opportunity for African American youth to share their stories with their friends, families, and communities. This can be done by building open-mic nights into writing programs or by using print-on-demand publishing tools, cloud-based tools like Storybird, or apps like Bitstrips to publish youths' work. Using traditional web tools like websites, blogs, and wikis is another way that youth can share their work with an authentic audience.

Utilize protocols as part of your programs and instruction. Protocols are structured processes that can guide communication, problem solving, and learning. They can be used to ensure the inclusion of all viewpoints in a discussion. Many protocols can be freely accessed online. Two great places to start are the Teaching Tolerance website and Harvard's Visible Thinking Project website.

Develop programs that allow youth to use their voices to engage with the world. We have already mentioned Youth Participatory Action Research as one approach to

accomplish this. Another is the Connected Learning framework, developed by Mimi Ito and her colleagues at the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub. The Connected Learning model is equity-focused, and provides guidelines for creating media-rich learning environments that lie at the intersection of students' interests, peer culture, and academics.

Finally, make space to talk about race, power, and privilege in the library. Black youth need spaces where they can give voice to their thoughts and feelings about race and racism. Events such as the tragic deaths of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and too many others have affected Black youth deeply and personally. These young people need spaces where they can become part of the national conversation on racial profiling, excessive police force, and flaws in the justice system in authentic ways. We think that libraries can be those spaces. We are not saying that librarians have to have the answers. What we do need to do is give Black youth the chance to see that their anger, fears, and hopes are being recognized by the wider community. In other words, we need to honor their voices.

In the next segment, we'll discuss how librarians can effectively serve Black youth using one of the library's most traditional resources: texts.

**References:**


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Activities

**Utilizing Protocols for Voice and Agency**

**Context:**

Voice and agency are connected to the literacy development of Black youth. Voice has dimensions that include the teaching of writing, wherein Black youth should be encouraged "to use their voices for real purpose and real audiences." Librarians can give Black youth a voice in social action by seeking out their insights as to how to investigate and address school and community issues. Agency, defined as the power to act, means (in the classroom and library setting) that students have power to influence learning activities and programming, as well as collection development.

**Instructions:**

Visit the websites suggested in the Resources to review and learn more about protocols for use in programs and instruction.

**Resources:**

**Teaching Tolerance** (https://www.tolerance.org/)

*Example resources:*

- Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol — http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/sheltered-instruction-observation-protocol-siop
- School Climate Resources — http://www.tolerance.org/school_climate_resources

**Visible Thinking Project** (http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking)

*Example resources:*

Starting the Conversation: High-Quality Discussion Protocols to Prompt Collaborative, Responsive Learning — http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/05/starting-conversation

Looking At Student Thinking (LAST) Protocol — http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/05_SchoolWideCultureOfThinking/05c_StudyGroupMaterials/02_LASTRoutine.html

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Annotated Bibliography.

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