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# Their eyes are watching us: Serving racialized youth in an era of protest.

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*Students are looking for actions, not platitudes, to affirm our commitment to diversity and equality, and to address the daily social injustices they experience.*

## Their Eyes Are Watching Us: Serving Racialized Youth in an Era of Protest

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This themed issue comes at a critical juncture in our nation's history as racialized<sup>1</sup> people continue to fight for protection of their human and civil rights, many of which were legally gained only with passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voter Rights Act. Despite decades of legislative promises to end discrimination in educational opportunities, employment, housing, and the judicial system, racialized youth are more likely to attend schools that lack quality resources, including credentialed teachers, rigorous courses, qualified guidance counselors, and extracurricular activities; to face harsher disciplinary actions; and to drop out of school (U.S. Office for Civil Rights 2015). The unemployment rate for Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans is consistently higher than for whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Discrimination against Blacks, Latinos, and Asians looking for housing persists in subtle forms like being refused an appointment to see a home or being shown fewer available units than whites with similar qualifications (Dewan 2013). African American youth are about 16 percent of the

U.S. youth population, yet they make up 26 percent of juvenile arrests; 37 percent of their cases are moved to criminal court, and 58 percent of convicted African American youth are sent to adult prisons. In the federal system Black offenders receive sentences that are 10 percent longer than white offenders for the same crime (Sentencing Project 2016).

Compounding the inequities represented by these statistics, racialized youth have seen an increase in social injustices as demonstrated by the recent killings of unarmed young Black men and women by police officers, the decision by an oil company to build a pipeline across indigenous people's sacred land, the burning of mosques, and deportation raids that specifically target families who have come to America to escape violence and extreme poverty. All of these actions create the framework through which racialized youth experience and judge their world, including schools and libraries. And they are watching to see how we deal with these civil rights issues as a nation,

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<sup>1</sup> "Racialized" is a term used in place of the more-outdated and inaccurate terms like "racial minority" and "people of color" or "non-white." The term racialized recognizes that race is a social construct initially developed by Europeans during colonialism to mark certain groups for subjugation based on perceived physiological differences and potential for slave labor, and on Europeans' desire to acquire land and resources on other continents. Although these labels were initially imposed onto racialized groups, members of these groups have since adopted these same labels for themselves (e.g., Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, etc.) as a way to build a sense of collective identity.

as institutions, and as individuals. Students are looking for actions, not platitudes, to affirm our commitment to diversity and equality, and to address the daily social injustices they experience.

### What Can We Do?

So what is the role of today's youth services professional in combating these social justice issues and better serving our nation's culturally and linguistically diverse children and youth? Our roles are multifaceted and include theoretical, research-based, and practical responses, each covered in this issue of *Knowledge Quest*.

Theoretically, our feature offers a diverse set of lenses for looking at issues of literacy and identity among youth from racialized backgrounds. We challenge librarians and educators to adopt more-constructive lenses that change how we see (and, consequently, support) the literacy and identity needs of marginalized youth.

On the practical side, Nicole A. Cooke and Renee F. Hill provide an annotated bibliography of recommended resources for helping youth services professionals become culturally competent and equity literate. In

addition to this annotated bibliography, we also recommend that you consult two wikis on cultural competence that have been developed by members of the Young Adult Library Services Association (see "Recommended Resources" at the end of this column).

In two separate articles, Teresa Bunner and Julie Stivers highlight youth programs built upon research-based teaching and learning strategies that have been proven effective with racialized youth. Research is prominently featured in a piece by Crystle Martin that describes experiences and perceptions of participants in a project at eight public libraries that held Scratch coding workshops for a diverse group of Black and Latino youth participants and public librarian facilitators.

Debbie Reese's article discusses recent incidents related to portrayals (in children's and young adult books) of members of a race or of traditional practices of Native Americans. These portrayals have caused several books to be criticized and even recalled or revised due to backlash expressed on social media. Reese offers supplemental resources for librarians looking for book reviews written from perspectives different from those traditional review journals might offer.

Combined, these articles provide a collective response to the youth who are watching how we as a profession are addressing not only their literacy and identity needs, but also their rights as humans to culturally responsive education, library programs, and books. As library and information science professionals, we have an important role to play in making the institutions and people we serve live up to our nation's creed of liberty and justice for all. We hope this issue provides a template for the ways we can work to better serve, understand, and envision the possibilities of success for racialized youth.



**Kafi D. Kumasi** is an associate professor of library and information science (LIS) at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, where she teaches in the areas of school library media, urban librarianship, multicultural services and resources,

and research methods. A Laura Bush 21st Century scholar, she holds a PhD from Indiana University, Bloomington, and a master's degree in LIS from Wayne State. Her research interests revolve around issues of literacy, equity, and diversity, particularly in urban educational environments spanning K–12 and graduate school contexts. She has received numerous awards, including the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity "Exemplary Diversity Scholar Citation" and the Association for Library and Information Science's 2011 Best Conference Paper Award. Her work has been published in numerous journals including (among others) *Library and Information Science Research*, *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, *School Libraries Worldwide*, *School Library Research*, and *Urban Library Journal*. Her service commitments are extensive, ranging from editorial board member of *Library Quarterly* journal to mentor for Project Lilead, an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant-funded project aimed at studying, supporting, and building community among school library supervisors.

### Recommended Resources:

Young Adult Library Services Association. 2016a. "Cultural Competence." <[http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural\\_Competence](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Cultural_Competence)> (accessed August 29, 2016).

—. 2016b. "Serving Diverse Teens @ Your Library." <[http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving\\_Diverse\\_Teens\\_@\\_Your\\_Library](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Serving_Diverse_Teens_@_Your_Library)> (accessed August 29, 2016).

As a bonus, this issue also contains an article by Cassandra Kvenild and colleagues at the University of Wyoming and the UW Lab School. A collection of kits and other hands-on resources has been developed at the UW Lab School, a tuition-free charter school with a diverse student body selected by lottery. The article focuses on how the collection was developed and collaborations leveraged to support STEM learning for all students at the Lab School.



**Sandra Hughes-Hassell, PhD**, is a professor in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is president-elect of the Young Adult Library Services Association. Her research focuses on

social justice issues in youth library services, diverse youth literature, and the role of school librarians in education reform. Her latest book *Libraries, Literacy, and African American Youth: Research and Practice* (Libraries Unlimited 2017), coedited with Pauletta Brown Bracy and Casey H. Rawson, serves as a call to action for the library community to address the literacy and life outcome gaps impacting Black youth. With funding from an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant, she and her team are currently developing a comprehensive research-based professional development curriculum that focuses on cultural competence, culturally relevant pedagogy, and equity literacy. To learn more visit <<http://projectready.web.unc.edu>>. She served on the AASL Underserved Student Population Task Force and currently serves on the School Library Research Editorial Board.

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