

**A Needed Change in Perspective: A Book Review of Fish Out of Water**

by *Tiffany R. Larson*

University of North Texas

Fall 2018

ISBN: 469-223-1286

**Review DOI** [10.1108/JME-11-2019-074](https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-11-2019-074)

Despite decades of advocacy for culturally proficient communities and schools, there are still achievement gaps among the marginalized and exclusionary practices among the dominant. In *Fish Out of Water: Mentoring, Managing, and Self-Monitoring People Who Don't Fit In*, Kikanza Nuri-Robins and Lewis Bundy flip the culturally proficient focus so that the so-called *fish out of water* can advocate for themselves.

**Summary of argument**

While still supporting the need for inclusive and culturally responsive and proficient communities (supported by researchers like Hateley, Singleton, Ladson-Billings and Gay), this book is directed to those who are often marginalized rather than those in dominant positions. [Nuri-Robins and Bundy \(2016, p. 2\)](#) state:

In this book, we speak to members of non-dominant cultures and provide them with tools for functioning effectively- or even thriving- in environments that are not yet ready or able to embrace them.

Based on this declaration, it is important to note the slightly different populations that the book addresses directly: those who are marginalized and those who manage or mentor the marginalized. As noted above, the need for culturally proficient communities is still strongly present, but until those communities can develop cultural proficiency, marginalized populations must be able to survive where they are.

**Summary of content**

The book starts by introducing and defining what creates a fish out of water; dominant members push the non-dominant to the margins or out of the community entirely. The first tool that the book introduces is that of code-switching because “problems occur when it is assumed that everyone knows” the cultural codes of the pond ([Nuri-Robins and Bundy, 2016, p. 30](#)). These are the fish out of water. They must learn the codes of the pond to better participate, which will ideally lead to code-sharing with the dominant fish for a more diverse community. Accordingly, the authors use the culturally proficient framework to establish a foundation for analysis and growth of communities.

The effect on fish out of water depends on the toxicity of the pond. When the pond is toxic, they are subjected to alienation, marginalization, dualism, dissonance and negotiation for acceptance. Nuri-Robins and Bundy note the limitations of code-switching and the danger of living dual lives or assimilating entirely into the dominant culture. Not all fish out of the water is able to code-switch effectively, and a culturally intolerant or reductive



---

community is not inclusive enough to meet the ultimate goal of code-sharing. Accordingly, the authors include several tools that the marginalized can use to move closer toward code-sharing and developing their own power of influence.

Finally, Nuri-Robins and Bundy (2016, p. 131) note the differences between working with children and adults. Young fish out of the water is often not as practiced at code-switching, and thus, find themselves targeted and bullied by both adults and peers. Children are seldom in a position of power with adults no matter the pond that they inhabit, so it is important that they have a variety of mentors who can teach them the codes of each community and how to switch between them. It is important that mentors teach young fish out of water that while “this is neither the ideal situation nor the goal,” it is the culture they must currently survive in. Managing fish out of water means that you are both a coach for marginalized members and an advocate for developing a culturally proficient community.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

Like many other advocates of cultural proficiency and pluralism, Nuri-Robins and Bundy recognize the power and impact of personal stories. They use specific stories of both adults and students in a variety of ways to support their argument. In both cases, the stories are balanced to show either the need, as in Aaron’s story on page 10 or the benefit, as in Kathy’s story told throughout Chapter 2 of self-advocacy.

The book is organized for multiplicity as a book study with specific reflection questions at the end of each chapter. Even more so, the authors include several resources in the book to better support such a book study; including the best way to lead the book study, assessment tools and online resources, videos and teaching segments (such as you would find with TED talks), and fictional literature that continues the powerful use of stories.

As previously noted, the book’s intended aim of supporting the marginalized by teaching the marginalized is what sets it apart from other research in the field. The often-unstated personal nature of what makes someone a fish out of water – whether circumstantial or perpetual – means that they are the ones who need to be able to wield these tools of cultural proficiency.

The only weakness in the book is the few times that the fish out of water metaphor is mixed with other metaphors. The running metaphor of fish out of water is clear and easy to follow, however, when the authors mix this metaphor with others, (such as agents and targets or alphas and betas) they undercut their premise that marginalized people have and should use their own autonomy. This lack of clarity weakens the authors’ overall argument.

### **Conclusions**

The need for cultural transformation in the country has never been greater. With the uncertainty of an ever-changing political realm, policies that support a pluralistic society such as dual-language programs in schools, additional funding for Title I and Title III programs and the deferred action for childhood arrivals are in danger. It is up to those who do not fit in to push for the changes that the communities need, so it is up to the authors who would mentor them to teach them.

**Tiffany R. Larson**

*Department of Teacher Education and Administration, University of North Texas,  
Denton, USA*

**Reference**

Nuri-Robins, K. and Bundy, L. (2016), *Fish out of Water: Mentoring, Managing, and Self-Monitoring People Who Don't Fit In*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA.

**Further reading**

Nuri-Robins, K. (2006), *Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach*, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, CA.

The Robins Group (2016), "The Robins Group: organization development consultants", available at: [www.kikanzanurirobins.com/](http://www.kikanzanurirobins.com/) (accessed 4 April 2018).