

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Expanding the Canon

**How Diverse Literature Can
Transform Literacy Learning**

Literature for children and youth has long played a pivotal role in growing students' literacy lives in schools. Fine literature, whether self-selected by students as choice reading or paired with teachers' thoughtful instruction, can launch students into personally meaningful and intellectually stimulating opportunities to read, respond, comprehend, and inquire. Through pictures and words, students can enter a vibrant process of imagining new worlds that transcend cultural and linguistic barriers while also synthesizing new ideas, negotiating multiple perspectives, and putting their literacy strategies to work in authentic ways.

Extending Our Reach for Literature Beyond the Classics

As educators who teach with literature, we need to reflect constantly on the literature landscape shaping the classroom. Books selected for instructional focus should demonstrate high-quality word craft, the study of which will enhance students' abilities to think, reflect, write, and present with increasing levels of skill and cogency.

We must also consider the narratives found in the classroom library. How does the library shape students' collective memories of their own and others' histories? What do its books say about whose voices are valued and whose are not? Whose stories are absent? With the power to shape the literature classroom, acknowledging how selecting literature can become a method of gatekeeping and censoring whose voices, stories, and histories are valued and whose are not becomes necessary.

With this in mind, books selected for literacy learning should be representative of the diverse streams of culture, history, and language that compose today's increasingly global society. Rich possibilities for pedagogy can emerge from literature collections in which all cultures are encompassed, none are excluded, and the site of cross-connections and nuance become the critical points to drive home. For students to recognize their own communities in the books they are taught or self-select is critical to the personal engagement that drives deeper literacy.

This commitment to a robust literature collection for children and youth may require a classic to be redefined as a title that succeeds to an unusual degree in expressing the shared experiences of humanity through an artistically significant

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creation. From this perspective, the literary canon provides an extended collection of themes that are intimate to the experience of living, feeling, and knowing wherever and whenever life has been and is now lived.

Although many texts in the canon shaping classrooms have themes that are universal, intercultural, and timely, extending our reach for literature beyond the historical scope of the classics to include literature that portrays the vibrant and dynamic lives students bring to today's classrooms remains essential. This is not to suggest an abandonment of all classic literature; rather, we are suggesting a more expansive approach to literature selection that can redesign and ultimately redefine the narratives and literature types that compose the classroom library and support literacy instruction.

Although the characters and settings in many canonical literature texts may not seem familiar to some, many of the themes framing the narratives can be contrasted with current children's literature. For example, in addition to sharing *Charlotte's Web* (1952) by E.B. White, the beloved tale of Wilbur the pig and his unexpected friendship with Charlotte the spider, we suggest teachers also invite students to read *Freedom Summer* (2005) by Deborah Wiles, a historical fiction picturebook that captures the beauty and complexities of an unlikely interracial friendship. Or when reading *Harold and The Purple Crayon* (1955) by Crockett Johnson, teachers might also share *Drawn Together* (2018) by Minh Lê. Together, both picturebooks animate the power of the imagination through visual composition. *Drawn Together* also integrates a more contemporary, multilingual, and culturally specific experience of drawing as an opening for a grandfather and grandson to find one another through art.

Extending our reach for literature beyond the classics does not weaken the quality of literature instruction; doing so can amplify and enrich students' literary experiences while both affirming students' own lives and engaging them in worlds very different from theirs. From this perspective, we can imagine the book stacks in classrooms as organic collections that grow over time as teachers and students add to them. The classroom library can include books from home and other relevant texts such as photographs, video clips, and other multimodal media.

Students' access to contemporary literature collections can contribute relevant and timely narratives and grow students'

pleasure and skill in language arts and across disciplines. Literature response and sharing a vast array of literature for content or skill learning are not incompatible. Regular reading about a range of topics in various genres reflecting a diversity of experiences not only supports students' positive attachment to literacy but also can provide a viable pathway to growing reading comprehension, mentoring writing craft, and supporting inquiry. With well-planned opportunities to respond to literature aesthetically, to read for information, and to practice reading and writing, classroom learning experiences can be richly enhanced.

Integrating Multiple Literature Genres and Formats

Including an array of genres (such as fiction, informational, and poetry) and text formats (such as graphic novel, picturebook, and chapter book) in classroom libraries can also engage and appeal to students who favor them. Access to new genres and formats introduces students to new literature types and forms. Providing access to these literature types also allows students to uncover their unique features and offerings while appreciating the elements of each.

Today, many authors and illustrators are blurring the boundaries between genres, producing visually appealing, engaging, unexpected, and hybrid forms of literature that have been well received among student readers and their teachers. Some literature, like *Ubiquitous: Celebrating Nature's Survivors* (2010) by Joyce Sidman and *Step Gently Out* (2013) by Helen Frost and Rick Lieder, draws on elements of both informational texts and poetry and is published in picturebook format. Students can read informational poetry to savor the pleasure of verse and gather information from both print and visual text.

Recently, a powerful fusion of mysticism, mythology, and magical realism with Afrocentricity has shaped an emerging genre of Afrofuturism for young adult readers. *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) by Tomi Adeyemi, for example, reflects this exciting new genre. Opportunities to read this rising literature type can engage students with social, political, racial, and cultural themes in a heroic landscape.

Whether the focus is on literature as a platform to discuss social issues and concerns or to be mindful of other content areas

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through literature, integrating multiple literature formats, genres, and their hybrid types can support classroom learning and engage interested readers.

Response-Based Approaches

Through careful balance of literature response invitations and student choice, teachers can guide students to authentic reading experiences and provide meaningful occasions to employ the reading skills modeled in class. A response-based approach to teaching literature demands personal meaning making with texts and involves the exploration of many possibilities, including finding connections across texts, asking questions, or making observations. Inviting these possibilities requires questions that welcome students' multiple responses and explorations rather than have one right answer.

In response-based literature classrooms, students respond to literature as art. Students may, for example, be forever transformed by Starr from *The Hate U Give* (2016). In this telling novel, written by Angie Thomas, Starr must decide whether to voice her truth—a relatable dilemma among students who might similarly find themselves at a crossroads. Reconciling tensions alongside characters in books requires more than just identification of story elements. To fully navigate Starr's racial experience and their own, students must “be in and move through the story,” as literacy learning scholar Judith Langer has explained. Literature-response invitations and well-selected diverse literature can create critical openings for students to enter into powerful reading experiences.

Most students will read literature they are interested in and will not be able to step away from characters, topics, and story arcs they can relate to. When students are invested in a self-selected book, they are engaged with reading. Supporting student book choice in the classroom welcomes students' interests, tastes, and preferences. Doing so communicates a value for who students are and what they are interested in learning more about. Encouraging student book choice cultivates a community of mutual respect and reading relationships that demand meaningful book talk.

When reading books students have self-selected, they can transfer and apply reading strategies they have observed in class. Students who attach to any of the four protagonists featured in *Hello, Universe* (2017) by Erin Entrada Kelly, for

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example, infer, make predictions, and negotiate multiple characters and plot turns to appreciate how these four intriguing voices intertwine. Practicing reading strategies with literature students have selected sets them on a path toward reading independence.

Developing Writing Skills Through Text Exposure

All literature is shaped by specific features. Well-crafted books can be incorporated into the curriculum as touchstone texts, which are books that teachers can share to give examples of exceptional writing and illustration style, to study genre, or to explore a related aspect of writing. When teaching with touchstone texts, teachers read like both a writer and an artist. Through think-aloud practices modeled as they read to students, teachers notice literary craft such as use of imagery or literary devices such as metaphor. When reading aloud picture-books, teachers might also notice illustrators' creative uses of color and line as artistic craft and style to explore multimodal composition.

As young writers gain more experience with literature, they can begin to self-select books as their own mentor texts for both illustration and literary craft. Students may collect reflections on the ways illustrators like Dan Santat and Don Tate use color to establish mood. They may look to writers and poets like Kwame Alexander and Jacqueline Woodson as mentors to explore how to achieve voice through verse and different language varieties. What appears to be most important when sharing literature as touchstone or mentor texts is that students' initial encounter with the book selected be one of reading for pleasure. To fully appreciate the effectiveness of the features observed, it seems to make sense that students have experienced and responded to the book first before close inspection.

Supporting Readers and Writers for Social Justice

Books reflecting the diversity of lived human experiences and perspectives are critical to a robust literature collection for children and youth. Diversity in literature reflects a dynamic intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability,

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economic condition, religion, and more. Reading and writing with and against these texts can affirm and inform the narratives students develop about themselves and others. Diverse literature, often oriented toward justice-related themes, affords occasions for students to question, relate to, and analyze important issues and identify a shared human experience.

Establishing a productive context for sharing diverse literature with students is imperative for meaningful literature discussions to occur. Pairing diverse literature portraying different perspectives within a related topic is one way to ensure students' discussions consider social issues without perpetuating a single story. For example, when reading *Shame the Stars* (2016) by Guadalupe García McCall alongside *From North to South/Del Norte Al Sur* (2013) by René Colato Laínez and *Dreamers* (2018) by Yuyi Morales, students will encounter three distinct border and immigration experiences.

In *Shame the Stars*, tensions rise along the U.S.–Mexico border in 1915 as Texas Rangers fight Tejano insurgents, leaving Joaquín and Dulceña caught in the middle as their families take sides, much like the ill-fated relationship between Romeo and Juliet. José, in *From North to South/Del Norte Al Sur*, similarly finds himself separated from someone he loves after his mother is sent to an immigration detention center in Mexico for not having the proper papers to remain in the United States. And in *Dreamers*, readers follow a mother and her child as they encounter the challenges of navigating their new home as immigrants, embrace the promise of their new community, and honor the creativity, languages, and love they bring with them from Mexico.

Interrogating the voices privileged and excluded across all three texts and unpacking the similarities and differences that persist across the three narratives with those unfolding in today's political landscape can elicit a rich discussion on immigration and history while also positioning students to experience multiple border-crossing realities.

Diverse literature can transform students' identities and the narratives they carry about the people they encounter. It also supports students' reading and writing development. When reading diverse literature, students can communicate critically about issues important to their communities and the world at large. By thoughtfully integrating diverse literature as part of everyday literacy learning, students internalize issues of

diversity as part of the human condition, not as adjunct material for certain holidays or topics.

The promise of literature as a pathway into new worlds and as a potentially transformative experience for students cannot be underestimated. Literature can open students to the joys of finding a favorite character to learn from and can offer insight into and great satisfaction from sought-after questions. Literature can also be a tool to support students' literacy lives as readers and writers who can engage not only the complexities of our diverse human condition but also our shared truths and experiences. The literature-based classroom can thrive when it is guided by a desire to ensure a broad literary diet and authentic opportunities for young readers to be in and move through story.

MOVING FORWARD

- Assess your classroom library carefully to determine whose voices, stories, and histories are included and valued and identify areas that may need representation.
- Identify themes in traditional canonical literature that are reflected in contemporary children's literature and pair those in your instruction.
- Introduce multiple literature genres and text formats to classroom libraries to increase student engagement.
- Facilitate students' authentic reading experiences through response-based approaches to teaching books.
- Introduce students to examples of writing devices and illustrator craft.
- Encourage meaningful discussions around social justice books.

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